
A MOMENT OF CONSTANTINIAN HAGIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

In this article, we will try to present the image of Saint Emperor Constantine as it appears in the services of the Church and thus delineating a specific direction of political Christian philosophy. The preoccupation for such an analysis is based on the tension between the products of scientific research concerning Constantine's person and epoch on the one hand, and the manner in which the Church *filtered* the Constantinian moment in worship, on the other hand.

Keywords: hagiography, Constantine the Great, political theology, cult, hymns

1. Introduction

In a contemporaneity marked by an increasing secularization, minimalization and implicitly relativization of values, in the growingly worrying progression of the demythologization trends in favour of the scientist rationalism (*we do not want to believe, we want to know*), it appears as an emergency to identify and operationalize that type of archetypal history of the Church in which the saints, situated on different social positions, from poor to emperors bear witness to the inner force of Christianity. In another reading key, this regards the revealing function of the saint's *relation to history*, attitude expressed in the entire Patristic theology and contained in the words with which Christoph von Schönborn prefaced his work dedicated to Palestinian monachism: *the saints are the revelation of history's deep movement, they are the fruit of those places where people touch the Truth daily...*

In the attempt to approach the epoch and person of Saint Emperor Constantine the Great, the researcher faces the difficulty of choosing a methodology of the research. The difficulty derives from the position of the research according to the object or the subject of the analysis. The same person or event, historical fact can be analysed either from the perspective of truisms or axiomatic value given by hagiography, or from the perspective of the branches of anthropology: cultural, social, linguistic and archaeological. From the perspective of anthropological analysis, we enter that universal capacity of mankind which is to conceive the world in a symbolical way, to teach and learn such symbols in a social way, to change the world according to these symbols. At the same time, it suggests that critical approach of a political model, taking into consideration that each nation has an adaptive strategy which is limited by the nation's ethos. From this point of view, we

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are in a subfield of anthropology which credits the almost unilateral power of representativity of culture for the whole mankind. Actually, we are in the spectrum of the symbolic representation of divinity or of persons related to this sacral-symbolic typology. I consider that such an analysis would be beneficial, putting forward a plus of knowledge or plus value to the research coming de facto from the axiomatic theological milieu [1-3]. Although this is not the object of this presentation, I consider this is a theme to reflect upon the possibility of offering an integrative image as close as possible of the people, places and times which marked the history of Christianity in its beginnings, appealing to projects common to religious, political, symbolical and visual anthropology. In my opinion, constructing an ultra-spiritualized discourse of the realities, be they historical, by ignoring the human aspect is the equivalent or re-editing of a methodology specific to historical *monophysitism*.

Controversial character, qualified by some research directions as having a peculiar historical sense, according to which he decisively contributed to the reconfiguration of the old Roman spirit in Christian perspective, a man with special political qualities, through which he religiously socialised the community of subjects, thus achieving a new spiritual geography of the Roman Empire, considered by the theologians and by the research groups in the Orthodox Church as being *equal to the Apostles*, describing thus a moment of hagiography in which *the saint is an emperor* and *the emperor is a saint*, Constantine the Great does not only create the foundation for the history and chronology of a particular life, but he creates a new paradigm for Christian theology and for the political philosophy of the old Roman world. These considerations start from the importance of the epoch, conventionally called *renovatio constantini*, importance which led to the proclamation of the year 2013 as Homage Year of Saints Emperors Constantine and Helen by the Romanian Patriarchate. This causes a challenge at the level of responsibility towards the archetypal historical memory of the Church we referred to at the beginning, as well as in dimensioning the historical-dogmatic consciousness of the Church from the perspective of the Constantinian epoch. The interests of researchers and theologians, as well as the bibliographic lists concerning the Constantinian epoch are countless and consistent. These analyse the stages in Constantine's life at the level of monographies, the political and religious decisions, or they have a hagiographical approach or present other aspects.

2. Constantinian hymnography

The hymnographic texts which form the service dedicated to the saint emperors are of great importance in outlining the foundations of the Orthodox political theology concerning the person of the Saint Emperor Costantine the Great. I consider that these texts are ultimate in differentiating a profoundly historical, but dogmatic attitude at the same time. The moment calls into question elements of theology of history and sends us beyond the sphere of some cold instruments of research. The Church, understood in its dogmatic structure

of truth depositary, possesses a dogmatic liturgical consciousness, historically proportioned. These three coordinates of the ecclesial consciousness are illumined by the work of grace, achievements of the Church's living tradition. Illumined by the divine grace, this ecclesial consciousness ranked Constantine among the saints. Analysing the hymnography dedicated to the Holy equals of the Apostles, the emperor Constantine and his mother Helen (a selection of texts from the services of Vespers and Matins), we will seek to identify the main elements of political theology specific to the Orthodox Church [4, 5].

The emperor is attached to the intimate consciousness of the faithful in an immediate relation of closeness. He does not belong to everybody, but he is *ours*, thus indicating a special affiliation of the world to the unique emperor and the other way around. The brilliant virtue of the emperor is not generically indicated through *righteousness*, but through *piety*. He reigns the Earth in righteousness through the power of the Cross. Thus, the source of reigning lies in the Cross. "Thou didst give a most mighty weapon to our emperor: Thy precious Cross, whereby he reigned all the earth in righteousness, shining forth in piety, and hath been vouchsafed the kingdom of heaven by Thy loving kindness. And with him do we glorify Thy loving dispensation. O almighty Jesus, Thou Saviour of our souls." [4]

Constantine is presented in a biblical descentance, a pious favourite, having the wisdom of Solomon, the meekness of David and the Orthodoxy of the apostles. At this level is created a veterotestamentary typology referring to the person of the emperor, in which Constantine is integrated, too. The text sends to the typological reading of the Holy Scripture (*the ecclesial reading* of the Scriptures in Saint Athanasius the Great and Gregory of Elvira in *On Faith*, the same technique of the typological reading from the Old Testament). Thus, *wisdom, meekness and orthodoxy* appear as cardinal virtues which legitimate the emperor for a universal acknowledgment as *king of kings* and *lord of lords*. "Thou didst give to thy pious favourite, O Thou Who lovest mankind, the wisdom of Solomon, the meekness of David and the Orthodoxy of the Apostles, in that Thou art the King of Kings and Lord of lords. Wherefore we glorify Thy loving dispensation, O almighty Jesus, Thou saviour of our souls." [4]

What ensures the permanence in eternity of the emperor is *humility* which comes after *acknowledging God*. Actually, these two states are simultaneous, without a relation of anteriority or posteriority of the type – acknowledging God is a fact apriori to humility, as humility itself means acknowledging God. Acknowledging God is not a Gnostic type knowledge, but the source of all virtue: the benefactor of all, the victor of all, transcending all dominion. The call for a universal dominion (the *oikoumene* theme) frequently recurs, through the use of the pronoun all. The kingdom is universal because Its Sovereign is not a simple man, but our Saviour, Jesus Christ. "Thou wast the first to subject the royal purple willingly to Christ, O ever-memorable emperor, acknowledging Him as God, the Benefactor of all Who reigneth over all, the Victor over every principality, Who transcendeth all dominion. Therefore, O thou who lovest

Christ, Jesus Who loveth mankind, the Saviour of our souls, have appointed thee as ruler.”

There is a theology of grace with an internal dynamics. The giver is God Who offers *the highest of rich gifts* which the emperor has the duty to multiply, Constantine is illumined by the grace of baptism, grace which showed him invincible. The theology of the gift is continued by hymnographers, showing that the Giver, Who makes a continuous claim, is hidden in the gift. Therefore, Constantine *gave the Creator his empire as a gift*. “Receiving from God the highest of rich gifts, O most mighty and all-great Constantine, thou didst prosper well therein; for, having been illumined through baptism with the rays of the all-holy Spirit by the holy hierarch Sylvester, thou wast shown to be invincible among kings, and as a gift didst give to thy Creator thine empire and the pious imperial city. Wherefore, as thou hast boldness, cease thou never to pray to Christ God, that He grant forgiveness of offenses and great mercy unto all who keep thy memory.” [4]

Constantine remained in mankind’s ecclesial consciousness as *fons et origo* for the imperial institution. The emperor’s vocation is that of supporting the mission of the Church just as the apostles preached Christ, therefore he is called *equal to the apostles*. His mission is directed not only to the civil sphere, but *illumined by the rays of the Spirit, he illumined the whole Church of Christ*. Eusebius conveys this organic presence of the emperor in the body of the Church as being an absolutely necessary one: “I myself, then, was the instrument whose services He chose, and esteemed suited for the accomplishment of his will... enlightened through my instrumentality, might be recalled to a due observance of the holy laws of God... our most blessed faith might prosper... under the administration of a prince who is His servant.” [6]

Saint Athanasius the Great in *Apologia ad Constantium* uses the same idea of the Church as Body in which the only adornment missing for the Church to have perfect beauty is the person of the emperor. When a church was sanctified in Alexandria, Athanasius mentions this: “The place is ready, having been already sanctified by the prayers which have been offered in it, and requires only the presence of your Piety. This only is wanting to its perfect beauty. Adorned by thy might, O emperor, the Church mystically rejoiceth today, and honoreth thy most precious memory as is meet with all praise...” [7]

Constantine’ call to be an emperor comes not from men, but he was chosen in eternity according to God’s plan [1, p. 487-505]. The finality of the call (*κλησημαρτυρα*) is not changing mankind in an associative context determined only by political, economic or social interests, but raising mankind to a new level of communion, seen as *εκκλησια*, as Church. From this perspective, the interest of the political man is exceeded by the conception of the Church, which calls Constantine *a fervent advocate*. “Thou didst not receive thy name from men, but, like the divine Paul, didst have it from Christ God on high, O all-glorious Constantine. For, beholding the sign of the Cross in the sky, thou wast thereby caught as goodly prey, and therein thou hast been shown to be an invincible victor over enemies visible and invisible. Wherefore, we on earth

entreat thee as a fervent advocate, that in thy boldness thou ask for us enlightenment, cleansing and great mercy.” [4]

The virtues are presented in two directions. Firstly, the virtues of the emperor referring directly to God and secondly, the virtues with special reference to the subjects.

The emperor’s highest virtue of the authentic emperor is *εύσέβεια* (devotion, piety, humility, faith or synthesis of all Christian virtues), a term with varied meanings. In a more detailed explanation starting from the concept of *εύσέβεια*, we distinguish two subcomponents which interact mutually. The first component is acknowledging God, determined by faith, seen as *rationabile obsequium*. The second component is applying in daily life this faith, the virtue that must be embodied. In this *εύσέβεια* lies in fact the quintessence of Christianity. Yet *εύσέβεια* is a virtue or state specific to the emperor. Through it, the emperor becomes a slave of God. Because of this virtue, the emperor received in himself the divine seed and again because of this he received in himself the image of God as Eternal Emperor. God set him as an example for all, a guiding master for others, thus being *εύσέβη βασιλεὺς*, illuminating the whole world with his *εύσέβεια*.

The ecclesial tradition refers explicitly to faith united with acknowledging God in order to make a beginning for *εύσέβεια*. Faith is far more than any wealth, an attitude for which the emperor is rewarded by God with victories over the enemies of the empire, with a long-lasting reign and with heirs.

In the literature of the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea stands apart from the other writers, succeeding to make a portrait of the emperor containing a great deal of essential virtues. Eusebius’ source of inspiration was first of all the Holy Scripture, but he also did not neglect the philosophical heritage of Antiquity. Quoting Plato on the absolutely necessary virtues of a leader of an empire, Eusebius names *thoughtfulness* first. The main virtue is the spiritual perspective manifested through *thoughtfulness*. What follows next is the harmonious condition of the soul: *equilibrium*. Then come *righteousness* and of *bravery*. Wisdom is a feature that distinguishes an emperor from a tyrant.

The virtues referring to subjects are the following: kindness (*άγαθος*), generosity (*μεγαλοψυχία*), philanthropy (*φιλανθρωπία*), caring for the subjects’ problems manifested through *πρόνοια*, compassion (*συμπαθεῖν*), almsgiving (*ελεος*, *αξιολυπήτος*), patience (*άνεξικακία*), benevolence (*ευεργεσία*, *ευποία*). “O Constantine, thou wast the first emperor among Christians to receive thy scepter from God; for the sign of salvation, which was hidden in the earth, was revealed to thee, whereby thou didst subdue all nations beneath the feet of the Romans, in that thou didst have the life-creating Cross as thine invincible weapon, O blessed one, whereby thou wast brought to our God.” [4]

In the Old Testament, kingship needed the confirmation of the prophets. The visible gesture was the anointing with oil, through which the emperor, or the king became *the anointed* or *the elected one*. Anointing equalled the descent of the gifts of the Holy Spirit over the king. This time, in the light of the New Testament, the emperor is anointed by the Word-Logos through the Holy Spirit.

The moment is of great significance as it takes place from the perspective of the Incarnation of Christ the Saviour and His continuous presence in the world through the work of the Holy Spirit. “Thou wast the image of a new David, receiving the horn of royal anointing over thy head; for with the oil of the Spirit hath the transcendent Word and Lord anointed thee, O glorious one. Wherefore, thou hast also received a royal scepter, O all-wise one, asking great mercy for us.” [4]

The historical consciousness of the Church is determined by dogmatic truths, which form the backbone of a living and dynamic tradition. Its consciousness has a dimension of grace, according to which the Church can assert in a synodal way: “*It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*”. The political theology of the Orthodox Church concerning the person of emperor Constantine and his mother, Helen, is founded on this perspective. Constantine’s person is determined by *a special affiliation to mankind* in general and to Church in particular, being constantly referred to as *ours*. He reigns the world with righteousness through the power of the Cross, fighting for the orthodoxy of faith. Not only does he have a special affiliation to mankind, but he also determines it, in that in the ecclesial consciousness he becomes *fons et origo* for the imperial institution.

Constantine is presented in a biblical descendnce, a pious favourite, having the wisdom of Solomon, the meekness of David and the Orthodoxy of the apostles. Just as Moses was the liberator of the people of Israel from the Egyptian slavery, in the same way, Constantine is the one who gives freedom to the people of God.

3. Conclusions

Constantine begins the third period of great transition in which the New Rome was built. Through his own person, Constantine marks a turning point in the history of the Mediterranean area. This is not a simple result of the past, but it represents a new start. As we have seen in what has been presented, the person of Constantine induced historical criticism to considerable efforts, resulting in a very rich literature. After detailed studies from great researchers of the Constantinian period, it was concluded that the key of Constantine’s leadership was Christian faith. He is *the slave of God*, equal to the apostles, the man of God, a man under the sign of mission. The fate that he owes to the Christian God and the relation to a Christian God have placed on his shoulders the task of protecting the Church, of keeping it united against outside and even inside effects. From the perspective of this historiographical direction, Constantine is the one who formulated the Christian theory of sovereignty. The aim of this study was not to analyse exhaustively the foundations of political theology through a varied reference to the elements specific to the Constantinian worship, but only to ascertain a worship mindset which by extension delineates an attitude already expressed politically. The theological frameworks which gave expression to this kind of attitude, subsequently assumed in Byzantine

polity, are expressed in the essential elements of Christianity: the dogmatic and martyrical consciousness of the early Church, the obligatory relation between faith and confession, the mystagogic dimension of Christianity, the Christological context (especially the Incarnation and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ), the transfigurating power of prayer, asserting the prophetic power of the Church, the apocalyptic vision, the eucharistic site of defining the relation between faith and confession as revealing space, generator of concept and attitude.

These are, at the level of a microsynthesis, the powerful ideas taken from the Constantinian worship which modulate the political expression of Christianity, expression completed in political extracts from dogmatic concepts.

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