



The Edict of Milan

St Mary's Byzantine Catholic Church

Adult Education Series

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The "Edict of Milan " (313 A. D.)

The Edict of Milan was adopted by two of the three Roman Emperors shortly after the decisive Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. Constantine the Great had defeated the usurper Maxentius, his brother-in-law, who controlled Italy and the Civil Diocese of Africa. Constantine fought under the standard of the Chi-Rho, and was victorious. In recognition for the help the Christian God had given him, and in order to keep the civil peace, Constantine and Licinius declared toleration for Christians throughout the Empire. This did not end persecution, as the third Emperor was a severe persecutor of Christians. Indeed, Licinius also later persecuted Christians as well. However, this truly was the beginning of the end of Christian persecution in the Empire. In 2013, Europe celebrated the Edict of Milan for its enlightened view of religious toleration. The Edict of Milan is often not recognized for what it was: a first step in true liberty. The contents of this Edict, with footnotes, follows.

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When I, Constantine Augustus¹, as well as I Licinius Augustus² fortunately met near Mediolanum (Milan)³, and were considering everything that pertained to the public welfare and security, we thought, among other things which we saw would be for the good of many, those regulations pertaining to the reverence of the Divinity⁴ ought certainly to be made first, so that we might grant to the Christians and others full authority to observe that religion which each preferred⁵; whence any Divinity whatsoever in the seat of the heavens may be propitious and kindly disposed to us and all who are placed under our rule. And thus by this wholesome counsel and most upright provision we thought to arrange that no one whatsoever should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion

¹ The title Augustus denoted a senior Emperor. The title Caesar denoted a junior Emperor. Under the Emperor Diocletian, the Roman Empire had been split into quadrants, with an Augustus and a Caesar stationed in the East and the West. The civil war that just occurred was a result of the breakdown of that system.

² This edict was issued at the time there was still a third Emperor, Maximin Daia, who controlled the Eastern part of the Empire—Egypt, Turkey, and the Middle East. Maximin was a persecutor of Christians, and the Edict was one way to slow down the persecution. He did not want to give either Constantine, Licinius, or both an opportunity to attack.

³ Milan had long since surpassed Rome as the imperial capital in that region of the empire. The emperors stayed near the borders of the empire and near their armies.

⁴ Notice the Edict does not specify which Divinity.

⁵ Contrary to popular belief, the Edict does not make Christianity the state religion. That would come much later under a different Emperor.

⁶, of that religion which he should think best for himself, so that the Supreme Deity⁷, to whose worship we freely yield our hearts may show in all things His usual favor and benevolence⁸. Therefore, your Worship⁹ should know that it has pleased us to remove all conditions whatsoever, which were in the rescripts formerly given to you officially, concerning the Christians and now any one of these who wishes to observe Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without molestation. We thought it fit to commend these things most fully to your care that you may know that we have given to those Christians free and unrestricted opportunity of religious worship. When you see that this has been granted to them by us, your Worship will know that we have also conceded to other religions the right of open and free observance of their worship for

⁶ The Edict proclaims toleration of Christian worship, and doesn't proclaim Christianity to be the state religion. Christians were the minority in the Empire. Various estimates calculate the number of Christians as being anywhere from 10% to one-half of the empire's population. The latter estimate seems very high though.

⁷ The old gods of the Empire were losing their sway over the elites of the population and of the army. Mithraism was very much in vogue, and indeed could have threatened Christianity. Popular religion looked for the Supreme God to worship. It did not deny the existence of other gods, but believed in a supreme, or all powerful god. This is known as henotheism. It is often argued the Israelites under Moses were henotheistic initially.

⁸ The belief was proper worship of the proper god would ensure success. Constantine fought under the symbol of the Chi-Rho, a Christian symbol. However, he knew the majority of the empire was not Christian.

⁹ The Edict was sent to the officials of each region of the empire.

the sake of the peace of our times¹⁰, that each one may have the free opportunity to worship as he pleases; this regulation is made that we may not seem to detract from any dignity or any religion.

Moreover, in the case of the Christians especially we esteemed it best to order that if it happens anyone heretofore has bought from our treasury from anyone whatsoever, those places where they were previously accustomed to assemble, concerning which a certain decree had been made and a letter sent to you officially, the same shall be restored to the Christians¹¹ without payment or any claim of recompense and without any kind of fraud or deception, Those, moreover, who have obtained the same by gift, are likewise to return them at once to the Christians. Besides, both those who have purchased and those who have secured them by gift, are to appeal to the vicar¹² if they seek any recompense from our bounty, that they may be cared for through our clemency. All this property ought to be delivered at once to the community of the Christians through your intercession, and without delay. And since these Christians are known to have possessed not only those places in which they were accustomed to assemble, but also other property, namely the churches, belonging to them as a corporation and not as individuals, all these things which we have included under the above law, you

¹⁰ Constantine prized peace above all. He believed a good emperor ensured the peace of his realm.

¹¹ The Edict restores all confiscated Church property.

¹² Vicar was a Roman official in charge of a diocese, a group of provinces. The Roman Empire was divided into over one hundred provinces, aggregated into twelve to fourteen dioceses, further aggregated into four praetorian prefectures.

will order to be restored, without any hesitation or controversy at all, to these Christians, that is to say to the corporations and their conventicles: providing, of course, that the above arrangements be followed so that those who return the same without payment, as we have said, may hope for an indemnity from our bounty¹³. In all these circumstances you ought to tender your most efficacious intervention to the community of the Christians, that our command may be carried into effect as quickly as possible, whereby, moreover, through our clemency, public order may be secured¹⁴. Let this be done so that, as we have said above, Divine favor towards us, which, under the most important circumstances we have already experienced¹⁵, may, for all time, preserve and prosper our successes together with the good of the state. Moreover, in order that the statement of this decree of our good will may come to the notice of all, this rescript, published by your decree, shall be announced everywhere and brought to the knowledge of all, so that the decree of this, our benevolence, cannot be concealed¹⁶.

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The translation of the Edict of Milan can be found at <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/edict-milan.asp>,

¹³ The Empire would make restitution for any property returned to the Christians.

¹⁴ Again, note the concern for public order and harmony in this edict.

¹⁵ Constantine had just triumphed over Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. This battle made Constantine the sole Emperor of the Western Empire. He fought under the Christian symbol of the Chi-Rho.

¹⁶ Put another way, the world ought to know who is responsible for this clemency.

and was adapted for this presentation. We are deeply indebted to University for this translation.

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This article does not represent the official position of the pastor of St. Mary Byzantine Catholic Church or the Bishop of the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Passaic. The footnoted are the sole responsibility. If there are any errors, it is solely due to him.