

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM TODAY - EMPEROR CONSTANTINE'S EDICT OF MILAN: 1700 YEARS LATER

This year therefore marks the 17th centenary of the official recognition of Christianity, which was accorded the same rights as all other religions throughout the Roman Empire, thus instituting the concept of religious tolerance. It is exactly 1700 years since the Emperor Constantine gave official



recognition to Christianity. 1700 years have passed since 313 when, through the Milan Edict of Toleration, Emperor Constantine granted freedom of conscience and freedom of worship to all cults, thus putting an end to centuries of persecution against Christians in the Roman Empire. Since then, Christians have enjoyed religious freedom, which has allowed the development of current European society.

“In ... 313 ... Licinius (the eastern Roman emperor) and Constantine (the western emperor) had met in Milan. The occasion was the marriage of Licinius to Constantine’s half-sister, Constantia. But the two emperors used the occasion to discuss matters of state and agreed on a policy concerning the practice of religion. During the summer of 313 Licinius sent letters to provincial governors...in the East, in Asia Minor and Syria, granting Christians the rights they had already acquired in the West and restoring their property. This letter has often been called the “Edict of Milan” but the term is a misnomer. It was not an edict but a letter posted by Licinius from several cities in the East, such as Nicomedia, the residence of the emperor. Like other official correspondence, however, it was written in the name of both emperors and its content reflects the hand of Constantine”. Licinius’s letter, involved all religions, not just Christianity; it went beyond mere toleration and embodied a more robust idea of religious freedom, based on the conviction that true faith and true worship cannot be compelled; and it treated the Church as a corporate body with legal rights, including property-owning rights. Thus the not-really-an-Edict of Nicomedia and Elsewhere cemented into the foundations of the West ideas first sketched by the Christian philosopher Lactantius: that coercion and true religious faith don’t mix because “God wishes to be adored by people who are free”. The rather humane provisions of the mis-named “Edict of Milan” were not infrequently ignored in subsequent western history; but that doesn’t alter the fact that the “Edict” had a profound and, in many respects, beneficial influence on the future of the West. The Edict of Milan marked not only the legalization of Christianity but the birth of the concept of religious tolerance in the western world, granting freedom of expression to all faiths and religions, that has endured to the present day. The ensuing 1700 years have seen Christianity implanted in every nation on earth, though not without sporadic persecutions, bloody and bloodless, that continue to the present day. In his Edict which we celebrate today, Saint Constantine was “*more modern*” and more noble than many of the rulers who came after him, or who govern today, when millions of Christians suffer throughout the world.

Here are some of the major points that the Edict stressed:

- 1) Freedom in worship is “*of profit to all*”

mankind". Man's relationship with God is his "*first and chiefest care*", and in order for everyone to flourish in this pursuit, the State shouldn't interfere.

2) Freedom of religion is beneficial to the State. The authors stated that the purpose of the Edict was for "*establishing public tranquility*". Religious oppression facilitates violence and strife among citizens of the same society.

3) Civil equality belongs to all people regardless of one's religion. In many areas of the empire, Christians were not allowed to own land and many churches were dispossessed of their properties. This Edict restored land to Christians and condemned any such civil discrimination based on religion.

4) The Emperors believed that this Edict would win divine favor, resulting in success and happiness in their realm.

What led to such a historic decision? In the turbulent year 312 AD, while preparing for a decisive battle, Constantine received a vision: *In hoc signo vinces* – By this sign you shall conquer. Profoundly struck by the message, Constantine took the Christian symbol of the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ (X and P, the one superimposed on the other, known as the Chi-Rho symbol) and ordered his soldiers to mark their standards with this sign before going into battle. He and his troops marched to victory against the army of rival emperor, Maxentius, at Rome's Milvian Bridge – where even today tourists can stroll across the River Tiber.

Subsequently, Constantine gave orders for the construction of a basilica over the burial ground of St Peter himself. After many changes over the centuries, today a magnificent and imposing St Peter's Basilica and Square inspire reverential awe and welcome pilgrims from across the globe. To further commemorate the emperor's victory, the Arch of Constantine was erected near the Coliseum where his predecessors had amused themselves with the blood of Christian martyrs - a sharp contrast, indeed. Patient observers can follow the battles and conquests of the emperor on the numerous panels comprising the arch. Constantine, though considered the first Christian emperor, and while appreciative of divine intervention and victory in battle, did not always live or rule by Christian virtue. History tells us that he executed his son by his first wife, and somehow his second wife disappeared one day and soon was found dead. Constantine did become baptized shortly before he died in 337 AD.

All Christians can jointly celebrate this anniversary of Christianity. The Ecumenical

Patriarchate of Constantinople, in conjunction with the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE), is commemorating the 1700th anniversary of the Edict of Milan by hosting a conference devoted to religious freedom. The following are the main ideas from the Patriarchal and synodal encyclical on the 1700th anniversary since the edict of Milan (the Patriarch Bartholomew, May 19, 2013, Constantinople).



„By the Mercy of God Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch!

To the Plentitude of the Church: Grace and Peace from God.

“Blessed is our God, who so deemed”

and orders all things for all people, who has led us to “this day of the Resurrection” when “all has been filled with light, heaven and earth alike.”

This year marks the 1700th anniversary since the issue of the Edict of Milan about religious freedom. Therefore, we are communicating to the Church in all places and times in order to address a message of hope, love, peace and optimism from the most holy Apostolic and Patriarchal Ecumenical Throne in as much as the Church is the continual presence of God. “Whoever has seen the Son has seen the Father” (John 4:9), and whoever has seen the institution of the Church has seen the divine-human Lord and the Holy Spirit, who are with us.

The Church is precisely such an institution in freedom. “Such is Christianity: it grants freedom to those in slavery.” (St. John Chrysostom, Homily IX on I Corinthians 193).

As a result of the Edict of Milan, the persecutions against Church and religion, previously licit, ceased; and for the first time in human form, freedom of religious conscience was instituted in the world. However, the freedom that Christ granted us (see Gal. 5:1) is not mere “form” and “letter”. It is genuine freedom, which we are always seeking in order that all things may become “new.” Otherwise, how can we possibly expect a new heaven and a new earth?

Until the time of Constantine the Great, the history of the world, namely the period of “Old Israel” before Christ, and after the divinely incarnate presence of the “New Israel,” the free expression of conscious faith is replete with problems and persecutions to the point of martyrdom by blood for the sake of truth.

History recounts the persecution of individuals who shared a different perspective and faith about God from that proclaimed by the worldly authorities or the society, which they inhabited.

The captive children, who refused to worship the irrational and arrogant human ruler claiming the features of God, cried out aloud in the pit: "let all God's works praise the Lord." In so doing, they prefigured the freedom brought by the Lord, "who became as one under the law so that he might win those under the law." (see 1 Cor. 9:20)

In ancient Athens, the Philosopher Socrates was condemned to death on the charge that he accepted the gods worshipped by the city. Similarly, there are many individual persecutions recorded by the classical Greek authors about those who supported different beliefs, such as the example of the persecution of Anaxagoras of Clazomene, who claimed that the sun is a fiery rock, or Diagoras of Milos, who criticized the ancient idolatrous mysteries and discouraged citizens in these. There is not doubt that physical or ideological persecutions through the centuries, which sometimes led and continued to lead to death by martyrdom, nevertheless did not abolish religious tolerance among people, as this was formally proclaimed in the Edict of Milan.

The Roman emperors had an absolutist mentality, rendering themselves leaders even of religion. Indeed, they reached the point of demanding recognition for their divine status, which required equivalent honor.

The rejection of Christians of such imperial demands provoked anger in as much as it questioned imperial authority. The result anthropocentric worldview was the well-known merciless persecutions, which filled many shrines with martyrs who "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb." (Rev. 7:14)

Ultimately, the persecutions against religion affirmed the words of St. John Chrysostom: "One who fights against God can never destroy good to the end; instead, such a person may perhaps not feel that he is doing something terrible at the outset of his daring act. However, if he persists in his madness he can never lay a warring hand on God, because he will never avoid the hand of the invincible God." (To those Opposed to the Monastic Life I, PG 47.319)

Emperors Constantine the Great in the East and Licinius in the West accepted the fact that, after

three centuries of harsh persecution against the Christians, religious hatred and constant oppression resulted in no benefit for the empire. Therefore, they decided to allow Christians the freedom to practice their faith and worship of God. The content of the ever-relevant Edict of Milan in the 313 AD, which reflects the will of Constantine the Great, "who understood the craft of bitter warfare," constituted the basis of the freedom of religious conscience that was recognized many centuries later.

The Edict of Milan contains advanced positions on religious freedom, expressed in thirteen sections. It institutes principles which are foreign for that period of the fourth century but which still remain principles and signposts, even if some claim that these principles can also be fully applied in a world that lies in evil and in justice, where darkness prevails instead of righteousness and light.

The Edict confesses and declares: respect for the thought and will of every person to care for the divine affairs as he wills; regard and respect for the divine and freedom of choice in religious matters to Christians and all people without discrimination; the return without delay to the community of Christians, the Church and the Synod of places of worship and other assets which were seized and taken from them; and all these things in order that "the divine care, which protects us and which we have already experienced in many situations, may remain securely with us forever."

This Edict and the consequent reformations of Constantine the Great introduced to the world the concept of human rights. For the first time the above-mentioned values were established: respect of religious tolerance, freedom of expression of religious conscience – values of human life – and all such values, which comprise the basis of the relevant legislation that is valid today and the various contents of occasional declarations by international organizations and state bodies.

Constantine the Great, who received his vocation from above, embraced all people, citizens and faithful, believers and unbelievers, thereby becoming a servant of the peaceful welfare and the salvation of all humanity. From his time onward, the Church of Christ transfigures institutions and regenerates the world, precisely as the burning bush on Mt. Sinai that was not consumed, the Womb that contained the uncontainable, namely Life in order that we may have life. (see John 10:10)

If we carefully observe the history of the world since that time, especially today, after 1700 years from the declaration of the Edict of Milan by Constantine the Great, we sadly ascertain that the various regulations about religious freedom have unfortunately been violated on numerous occasions in the past, not only against Christians, but sometimes even by Christians themselves against their fellow Christians and against the adherence of other religions.

Regretfully, when Christians became the majority within society, there were some instances of overzealous tendencies. One of the more contemptible instances of such spiteful conduct among Christians was the great schism and division of the One Church, which ignored in later generations that "Christ is not divided" (1 Cor. 1:13) and that we humans are "earth and ashes." (Sir. 10:9) We overlooked and continue to overlook the anguish of the division of the seamless garment of the Lord, the Church, both locally and in every parish as One, Catholic, and Apostolic. Thus, as another "furnace of evil" (Prov. 16:30), we no longer enjoy love, peace, and tolerance; nor do we ask ourselves and one another the crucial question: "shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just" (Gen. 18:25) for us as well?

Last century, the Orthodox Church in particular was persecuted relentlessly by the atheist regime and other states, which depended on this regime ideologically, especially in the countries of Eastern Europe. In some countries, Christians are still, to this day, treated with great disfavor, despite the fact that many international treaties have now been universally recognize the right to religious freedom. The relevant reports on religious oppressions by the appropriate international organizations are replete with specific examples of religious oppression against Christian religious minorities in particular as well as individual Christians.

To this very day, unfortunately, we must emphasize that religious tolerance and freedom of worship are an achievement of civilization. There are vast regions of the world that are inhabited by people, who do not tolerate a different religious faith from theirs. Religious persecutions continue to exist, even if they do not assume the same form as persecutions of the early Christians. Various unfavorable discriminations against adherents of several religious faiths still persist and are sometimes intensely oppressive. In many cases, religious fanaticism and fundamentalism prevail, so that the Edict of Milan is still relevant in our times and

addresses those people, who, despite the passing of 1700 years since its declaration, have yet to apply it completely.

As we observe the journey of humanity from this sacred Center of Orthodoxy, we can freely admit that, despite the rapid progress of science and human discoveries, unfortunately the world as a whole has not yet reached the noble concept and perception of religious freedom and that we still need a collaborative effort to achieve this goal.

Nonetheless, contemporary religious persecutions against Christians once again reveal the power of faith and the grace of sanctity.

Fathers, Brothers, and Children in the Risen Lord,

The anniversary that we celebrate is a crucial sign. It signifies that, when man loses his unity with the Church, whose constitution lies in the Trinitarian unity, he also loses his freedom. For one loses oneself when one loses all others. Everything in the Church is illumined by the Trinitarian unity, particularly the Eucharistic sacrament, which comprises the very heart of the Church as a gift from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. If man preserves the Trinitarian unity, man is preserved as person and communion. If we preserve and experience this unity, the divine – human unity, then we preserve the unconfused and undivided unity of the two natures in Christ, which are extended to us as a blessing in the unity of truth and life, institution and grace, law and freedom. Those things that appear antithetical in fact interpenetrate without change and without alteration in accordance with the model of the Theotokos, who brought the opposites into the same. At the same time, this interpenetration reveals the constant presence at all times and in all places of Christ, divine and human, who continues to journey in the field of history with another form. He journeys with every person who struggles searches and despairs not in order to grant "magical solutions" as some sensory narcotic but in order to open his eyes, grant new senses and lift him toward heaven, while bringing down to earth the Holy Spirit which enters our earthly knead as a Trinitarian leaven.

No human institution, even if labeled ecclesiastical, can contain, tolerate, and satisfy the man, who breathe God within and desires what lies beyond, namely ongoing perfection in Christ. Nor is it possible for such a man to be satisfied with any promise or worldly perspective when he thirsts for the inconceivable and humanly inaccessible. All human existence cries "No!" to every secular

institution, which supposedly claims that it leads to the mystery of life and salvation.

Every mechanical and seemingly "good" spiritual institution is "only" ready is frail, dissolved and non-existent. Therefore, the Lord, who knows all things and guides human hearts, came to shatter these "prisons" so he was persecuted and continues to be persecuted. However, in the end He was victorious in His Resurrection. He destroyed deceit. He overthrew the bankers' tables and the merchants' benches, namely those who had converted God's temple into "a house of commerce." (John 2:17) He liberated humanity from the "curse" of the law. (Gal. 3:13) Through His descent into hades, "chains were broken, gates were shattered, tombs were open, and the dead were brought to life." (Aposticha, Great Vespers, Holy Friday)

Thus, all those who were "dead" from love, freedom, human rights, faith, hope, expectation, light, righteousness, truth, life, passed over into light: "and none was left dead and buried." (Catechetical Homily of St. John Chrysostom)

And thus was constituted the holy Church, which through the ages, the martyrs, the ascetics and the righteous, despite persecutions and human temptations, is no "prison," but freedom and, like death, powerful love. As the herald of this truth through the centuries, the Church is the continuation and consequence of the womb of another Mother, "wider than the heavens," which gives birth to freedom. Thanks to the Church, all of us are children of the free woman (Gal. 4:31), children of freedom, which is acquired through obedience to the divine truth and love. If human institutions are afraid of human freedom, either dispelling, or disregarding, or even abolishing it, the institution of the Church, generates free persons in the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit constitutes the entire institution of the Church in as much as it "breathes where it wills but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8) The indefinable nature of freedom is the rock of our faith.

The Wisdom of God, the Lady Theotokos our Pammakaristos and Conciliation, St. Demetrios Kanavis, St. George the Trophy-bearer of the Phanar, and all the saints of our Church are not keepers of the law but legislators according to St. Symeon the New Theologian. The institution of the Church is charismatic, and the charismata of the saints function as institutional signposts for the faithful of the Church.

One can truly and experientially say that charismatics do not exist but in fact become and are continually born for charisma is not granted as a static quality, but as a blessing, which is granted perpetually. Charismatics are those who are truly free because they are aware of the ultimate weakness of humanity and goodness of God. Such is the teaching that has trickled down to us from the Edict of Saint Constantine.

Those who see everyone else good and pure, regarding themselves as being "beneath all creation," possess the grace of compunction and humility. They recognize the gifts of inner rest and illumination, they regard nothing as their own achievement, nor do they exploit any opportunity to expand their "authority" by "undermining" others, namely by limiting the freedom of others. The saints marvel at God's ineffable love and spontaneously return this love directly to the Giver of all gifts. This is precisely what renders the saints worthy of continually receiving gifts that are new, greater, spotless, spiritual, a blessing for all creation, general achievements. In turn, they continue to reserve to have no high regard for themselves. Their highest regard is God.

As soon as they become aware that the world honors them, the saints are surprised, worry, and withdraw. They retire behind the curtain of feigned foolishness or ignorance, which in fact is true freedom. They are comfortable because they live, follow, and contribute to the flow of divine blood and grace within the body of the Church community.

Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

Human rights and the freedom of religious conscience are gifts which were "once given to the saints" (Jude 1:3), but which are constantly acquired along the journey of life. They are acquired through the experience of communion in Christ within the harmonious cosmic liturgy. We have been talking for 1700 years about the freedom of human conscience. However, the Orthodox Church always – and particularly in the recent years of global changes within the last tragic century – foresees and discerns in its entirety the "prevalence in the world of peace, righteousness, freedom, fraternity and love among all peoples, and the elimination of all racial and other distinctions," as would be decided by the coming Holy and Great Synod.

These sacred gifts are experienced through grace in the Divine Liturgy, where the creation of the world is revealed. It is humanly impossible to comprehend the magnitude of our freedom because we do not

respect human beings as the image of God. And if we do not love our neighbor, we do not truly love God.

In this world, people naively imagine that "all things are fluid and nothing is permanent and it is not possible to cross the same river twice" (Heraclitus), namely that all things come and go and are forgotten, while human stones and graves cover them.

The Lord granted us the mystery of memory in freedom, when he proclaimed that "nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered" (Luke 12:2) and that all things culminate in the truth of freedom in Him and in the sense of doxological gratitude "for all that we know and do not know."

Therefore, beyond external differences and distances, beyond worldly changes and exchanges, beyond the "rational" West and East, from the creation of the world we have seen God's love, which dispels the falsehood of deceit like an irruption in silence, granting us the truth of life as a blessing of freedom and unity, as a journey of surprises leading to the endless journey toward Pascha, which is Jesus Christ Himself. "It was no messenger or angel but His presence that saved" (Is. 63:9) us in freedom and for freedom. He is with us after His ascension, "neither separated nor distant from us." (Kontakion of the Feast of the Ascension) He stands beside us even when it appears that He abandoned us. Finally, He grants us the assurance that He is always present manifesting His glory in love and kenosis, depicted in icons as the king of glory in His resurrection, delivering Adam and Eve from hell, even while hanging peacefully on the wood of the Cross in ultimate humiliation.

"Great are you, O Lord, and wondrous are your works, and no word suffices to Hymn your wonders." In any case, "every hymn is inadequate, hastening to describe the multitude of Christ's great compassion."

Our Modesty, together with our brothers in the Holy Spirit and concelebrants in the Lord, stand before the "empty tomb" with the myrrh-bearing women and behold that "the stone has been moved." We witness in ecstasy and awe the Risen Lord, who trampled down death by death, liberating us from the bonds of flesh and consuming hades, while granting us life.

Thus, on the occasion of our commemoration of the granting to Christians of the right to freedom of faith and worship, from this sacred Center of Orthodoxy, which has served in captivity the true freedom of humanity in Christ and of the

ecclesiastical body, we express our intense concern, anxiety and protest for the ongoing persecutions throughout the world. In particular, today we fervently pray for the Christian populations of the geographical regions of the Middle East, who experience frequent murders, kidnappings, persecutions and threats, which have culminated in the kidnapping of two brother Hierarchs, whose whereabouts are still unknown, namely the distinguished and most reverend Metropolitan Paul of Aleppo, well-known for his spirituality and significant ecclesiastical, social and educational ministry, as well as the Syrian Jacobite Metropolitan Yohanna Ibrahim of Aleppo.

We wholeheartedly share in the pain, sorrow and challenges faced by Christians in the Middle East and Egypt, and especially in the ancient and senior Patriarchate of Antioch. Beyond any political stance, we categorically condemn once again the use of all forms of violence, appealing to the rulers of this world to respect the fundamental human rights of life, honor, dignity and property, recognizing and praising the peaceful lifestyle of Christians as well as their constant effort to remain far from turmoil and trouble.

We express our concern as the Church of Constantinople that, 1700 years after the issue of the Edict of Milan, people continue to be persecuted for their faith, religion and conscientious choices.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate will never cease, through all the spiritual means and truth at its disposal, to support the efforts for peaceful dialogue among the various religions, the peaceful solution to every difference, and a prevailing atmosphere of toleration, reconciliation and cooperation among all people irrespective of religion and grace.

In condemning every form of violence as contrary to religion, we proclaim from the Ecumenical Patriarchate that truly great is "the mystery of our religion; God was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among gentiles, believed in the world, taken up in glory" (1 Tim. 3:16), governs the world and the affairs of the world in accordance with His incomprehensible will and judgment, and will come again in glory as the righteous judge of the entire world.

To Him be glory, might, power, honor, worship, and the kingdom to the endless ages of ages. Amen"

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