

GOD BLESS LACTANTIUS!

- Part One -

by

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It was an idea that was way ahead of its time. Saint Constantine the Great's monumental "Edict of Milan," published in the year 312, has been hailed as one of mankind's greatest achievements.

As someone has written, "the conversion of Saint Constantine to Christianity introduced the most marvelous revolution in human history, in practical thought, and in the laws and manners of mankind ever known in the annals of civilization. Who can describe the emotions Christians must have felt when, on the morning after the Roman emperors published the Edict, the disciples of Christ first found themselves free at last from fiery persecutions. What a day that Pascha was when, emerging from the catacombs and other dens and caves of the earth, the Church herself seemed to be risen from the dead!

"We may be sure there were tears of joy and warm embraces among the Christians long torn asunder by their common exposure to the instruments of torture. Indeed, we cannot imagine all that was in the hearts of those Christian families that now kept their holy day together openly, and fearlessly chanted in their places of assembly their anthem, "Christ is risen from the dead."*

The centuries of persecution were over! The wild beasts, the crucifixions, the red hot irons, the maimings and dismemberments, the hangman's noose, the exiles and imprisonments, the bonfires, the iron shackles, the cruel laughter of their tormenters – all gone and consigned to oblivion! Forever!

"Not so fast, Your Eminence" (someone will say to me).

* Slightly edited from A. Cleveland Cox's *Introductory Notice* to the writings of Lactantius, in the Ante-Nicene Series.

We said at the beginning of this article that this was an idea that was way ahead of its time.

It was an idea that had been taught to Saint Constantine the Great by his instructor, Lactantius, the "Christian Cicero." Lactantius taught the young Constantine that a man's freedom is to be found *especially* in religion – indeed, *only* in religion.

"It is a matter which, above all others, is voluntary, and cannot be imposed by necessity on any man, so that he should be forced to worship that which he does not wish to worship" (*The Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, 54).

"Yes, you may still adore your crocodile if you wish, or, if you prefer, hug your tree, or you may even worship the True God, the Creator of heaven and earth" (I am paraphrasing Lactantius).

"Indeed, you may use words to persuade people to change their minds about their faith, but you may *not*, repeat, may *not* use force or violence."

It was a beautiful idea, but it did not sink in.

It is too tempting to look the other way when people you disagree with are being persecuted. "Yes, people should not be persecuted for their religious beliefs –especially if their views agree with mine," is the general feeling that still seems to prevail in our society *down to our own days*.

"It is wrong to harass people because of their religion – especially if they belong to *my* religion. If they are, say, Jews or Jehovah's Witnesses, well... it's sad, but bad things happen." These are sentiments that we still hear, centuries after the Edict of Milan (which, by the way, gave freedom of religion to *all* men, not just to Christians).

A member of our Church recently approached me and wanted to tell me that he disagreed with me about a Petition we recently made on behalf of a group of Orthodox Christians in Russia who are being harassed and threatened by the Russian government and the State Church (the Moscow Patriarchate). "They are not *really* True Orthodox Christians," he said to me.

So, is it okay to persecute them?

Since I know that this individual has Jewish ancestry, I asked him, "If I saw a Jewish man being harassed and chased down the street by some Fascist thugs, are you saying it would be wrong for me to protest and to try to stop the persecutors from what they were doing?"

The person looked at me silently.

It is shameful to expect and demand freedom of religion *for ourselves*, and to be unconcerned when it is denied to others.

Thank God, the founding fathers of the United States of America offered freedom of religion to *everyone*, and thank God, they did not stipulate that this freedom is to be granted to all people, *except Orthodox Christians!*

There are quite a number of nations (including many nominally Orthodox Christian nations) that have yet to adopt the Edict of Milan. It is long overdue and about time.

It was, after all, an Orthodox Christian teacher who gave this idea to the Roman world.**

God bless Lactantius! May his memory be eternal!

** In all fairness, it should be mentioned that, in Old Testament times, another great sovereign, Cyrus the Great of Persia (6th century B.C.), also decreed that all his subjects should have freedom of religion. The Prophet Esaias calls Cyrus "anointed of God" though "he had not known" the God of Israel (see Esaias 45:1-7). Through Cyrus, Babylon was destroyed, and the Jewish people were allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple (see the Book of Ezra).