

symbol of civic rank was instituted. The emperor made gifts of fine clothes to clergy, encouraging them to wear these at celebrations of the eucharist to display their dignity.

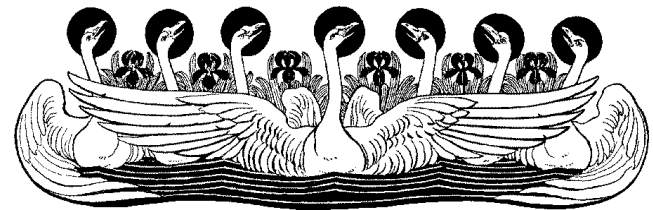
In this liturgy, we can see some of the changes in the church that influenced the conduct of Christian worship. The service will be chanted in its entirety. During the prayers, the congregation joins the priest in adopting the “*orans*” position of lifted hands in supplication. A choir would chant or sing Psalm 34 during communion. The catechumens (learners) and penitents (recovering sinners) would be dismissed after the Liturgy of the Word. Only the “Faithful” would remain for the “mysteries” to which the catechumens were admitted after being baptized.

So, tonight try to imagine yourself an early Christian of the 4th century. In the last 15 years you have gone from being a cautious, wary person reluctant to discuss your faith with any but close friends, to a point where you now begin to think of yourself as “special”. Around you, hundreds of ordinary Roman citizens are flocking to the Church that you have already been a part of, for motives that seem very different from your own. How do you feel about all these “johnny-come-latelies”, who haven’t experienced the fear and loss that you have witnessed in earlier persecutions of the Church? What do you think brought them here? Do you like these bigger fancier buildings and this more elaborate liturgy? Do you feel gratitude, or suspicion, of the emperor who has made your faith popular and “official”?

The Church/State connection that was forged by Constantine in the 4th century was, for all practical purposes, the only expression of Christianity for some 14 centuries . . . until 1776.

A COMMENTARY ON THE EARLY EASTERN LITURGY OF THE 4TH CENTURY

IN WHICH WE ATTEMPT TO DESCRIBE
SOME OF THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF
THE EUCHARISTIC LITURGY THAT IS
FAMILIAR TO US IN THE BOOK OF
COMMON PRAYER



In the beginning of the 4th century the Christian church was illegal, had no official scriptures, used a simple statement of belief that was attributed to the apostles (the Apostles Creed), and met cautiously in private homes to celebrate and deepen their devotion to Jesus.

It is almost impossible to imagine the change that the Christian Church underwent in the first years of the 4th century. As the four sections of the Roman Empire were forced to unite under the rule of the ambitious Emperor Constantine, the church went from the status of being illegal and persecuted to becoming the officially established church of the emperor . . . and all that within about 10 or 12 years.

At the time, most thought of that as a good thing. Christians could come out of the closet and were given more freedom to proclaim their faith. They no longer lived in fear of arrest or property loss, but this change also changed the character of the church in some unfortunate ways as well.

Constantine had his own personal agenda, which was aimed at unifying the life of the empire under his domination. For him, the church replaced the “Emperor Cult”, which put the emperor in the place of God (heresy and treason were one crime), and he promoted the idea of “one God, one empire, one church, and one emperor.” He promoted the Christian Church to further his ambition, built large churches, gave government contracts to Christian businessmen, and, in time, largely made the church dependent on the emperor. Where the church was once persecuted, now it became a *smart move* to become a Christian.

The emperor also became uncomfortable with Christianity’s internal disagreements and conflicts. Although these were natural enough as the church grew and prospered in different cultures, Constantine preferred more uniformity.

To this end he called a Christian council in the resort city of Nicaea and ordered the assembled bishops, priests, and deacons to settle their differences and come to an agreed upon faith. The emperor himself chaired the meetings and pushed his agenda. We use the result today as the Nicene

Creed, although it was completed at the Council of Constantinople a few years later. While Constantine did all this, he himself refused to be baptized until he was on his deathbed, since he had no intention of living a Christ-like life as the emperor.

There were lots of Christian writings circulating at the time, and the emperor pushed for an “official” set. The representatives to the council settled on what we call today The New Testament, although this was not without a good deal of controversy.

While “unity” is neat and tidy, the church lost a lot of valuable insight, freedom, and breadth in the ferment of discussion that so troubled the emperor. Additionally, since the church was now part of the government, it adopted the administrative structure of the government, which was based on a hierarchy of authority. In the early church, responsibility and authority were role-based and bishops, presbyters, deacons, lay folk . . . none of them were seen to be more important than others except as their roles gave them specific authority. In the established church of Constantine, bishops were raised to positions of power, presbyters less so, and deacons, sub-deacons, and the like even less. Now, one might become ambitious to *rise* to become bishop and to acquire the wealth and perks and connections that came with that.

Worship also changed. The buildings were bigger. The congregations were bigger. The liturgy became more consistent and more formal. Both ritual and ceremonial adapted to this change in size. We see more elaboration in both, and an infusion of “pomp and circumstance”, as befits an important state-funded religious institution. With the ranking of clergy came symbols of rank. The “stole” as a