**Christianity within the Roman World**

Christianity drew many of its first converts from the urban “middle classes” – merchants, artisans (trade workers), business owners – but it also appealed to socially marginalized groups, such as women, noncitizens, and slaves. Indeed, Jesus’s message was revolutionary in the way it overturned boundaries of class, gender, and ethnicity. After Jesus’s death, Paul encouraged a communal life in which all followers of Jesus were equal in the eyes of God. As he wrote to a small Christian community in Galatia in Anatolia, “For in Christ Jesus… there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” *Be prepared to discuss your answers*

**1. Why did Christianity appeal to marginalized groups in the Roman world?**

**2. What do you think the higher class thought of Christianity? Were they for or against?**

Until the mid-third century, persecution of Christians tended to be local affairs, sparked by the hostility of a city magistrate or provincial governor. In 64 AD, a major fire broke out in Rome burning for 3 days killing hundreds and leaving thousands homeless. Some legends say that Nero started the fire himself so he could beautify and rebuild Rome. Most likely it was a cooking fire in a wooden dwelling that got out of control. Emperor Nero blamed Christians saying they started the fire. Nero had hundreds of Christians killed as a result.

**3. Regardless of who started the fire, why would Nero blame Christians?**

Christians called those who died rather than renounce their beliefs **martyrs**, or witnesses for their faith. The early Christian leader Tertullian (ca. 160-240) chided his Roman persecutors, “We multiply whenever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is [like] seed.”

Many were suspicious of the way the Christians refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods (polytheism). This was an insult to the gods as Romans thought the gods protected the Empire. The Christians also refused to offer sacrifices to the Emperor, who often proclaimed himself to be a living god. Christianity firmly rejected the existence of multiple gods and only believed in one God (monotheism).

Rumors spread of Christians being cannibals as they held secretive meetings eating the flesh and drinking the blood of humans. This rumor was based on a misunderstanding about a symbolic tradition known as communion which the Christians practiced. They would break bread and drink wine just as Jesus did with the disciples before he died on the cross during the Jewish Passover. The bread was symbolic of Jesus’ body and the wine was symbolic of Jesus’ blood and by taking communion they were doing this act to remember what Jesus did on the cross as his body died and his blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins.

**4. Define monotheism**

**5. Define polytheism**

**6. Why were Christian martyred?**

*Teacher Read Out Loud – Students Follow Along*

The Battle of Milvian Bridge took place on October 28, 312 between the Roman Emperors Constantine the Great and Maxentius. The underlying cause of the battle was a five-year long dispute between Constantine and Maxentius over control of the western half of the empire. In the summer of 312, Constantine gathered his forces and decided to settle the dispute by force. He easily overran northern Italy, and stood less than 10 miles from Rome when Maxentius chose to make his stand in front of the Milvian Bridge, a stone bridge (still standing today) which carries the Via Flaminia road across the Tiber River into Rome.

Constantine, after arriving, realized he had made a miscalculation and that Maxentius had many more soldiers available than he did. Some sources say the advantage was 10-to-1 in Maxentius' favor, but it was probably more like 4-to-1. In any case, Constantine had a tough challenge ahead of him.

On the evening of October 27, 312, with the armies preparing for battle Constantine reportedly had a vision as he looked toward the setting sun. The Greek letter 'Chi-Ro' (Christ) intertwined along with a cross appeared emblazoned on the sun, along with the inscription, "By this sign you will conquer." Constantine, who was a pagan at the time, put the symbol on his solders' shields.

The next day, the two armies clashed, and Constantine emerged victorious. Already known as a skillful general, Constantine began to push Maxentius' army back toward the Tiber River, and Maxentius decided to retreat and make another stand at Rome itself. But there was only one escape route, via the bridge, and Constantine's men inflicted heavy losses on the retreating army. Finally, a bridge of boats set up alongside the Milvian Bridge, over which many of the troops were escaping, collapsed and these men stranded on the north bank of the Tiber were either taken prisoner or killed, with Maxentius numbered among the dead.

Constantine entered Rome not long afterwards and was acclaimed as sole western Augustus. He credited his victory at Milvian Bridge to the God of the Christians, the One True God, and ordered that their persecution be stopped. With the emperor’s influence Christianity exploded in popularity. In 313 Constantine issued the "Edict of Milan," which commanded official toleration of Christianity and other religions. Contrary to popular belief, however, Constantine did not make Christianity the official religion of the empire. This was to be accomplished by Emperor Theodosius in 380.

A major turning point in Christian history occurred when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Whether this conversion was sincere or politically motivated, historians can only speculate. But the result was the end of persecution of Christians and the beginning of Christendom. Constantine's platform was one of toleration only, and he continued to support both Christianity and paganism. In 314, the cross appeared on Constantine's coins, but so did the figures of Sol Invictus and Mars Convervator.

**6. What symbol did Constantine put on the shields before battle?**

**7. Does this symbols still exist in society today? Where do you see it and what does it represent?**

**8. How did Constantine and the Roman Empire influence Christianity? How is it still affecting our lives and society in Canada today?**

**Adapted From**:

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