

# *The Edict of Milan*

Constantine and Licinius



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## **OVERVIEW**

In A.D. 313, Constantine, emperor of the Western Roman Empire, and Licinius, emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, issued this edict affirming religious toleration of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. By then, Constantine himself was personally committed to Christianity, and this edict gave full legal status to the Christians and their church. Property that had been confiscated from Christians was also returned by this order.

## **GUIDED READING**

As you read, consider the following: Constantine and Licinius demand that the former Christian places of worship be returned to the Christians.

- How do Constantine and Licinius benefit from the return of previously confiscated buildings?
  - How does this reveal their own corruption?
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**W**e have long considered that freedom of worship should not be denied, but that every man's thought and will should be granted the right to take care for spiritual things according as each man may personally choose; and therefore we have already issued orders that both Christians should hold and maintain the faith of their own confession and worship. But inasmuch as in those orders, by which that right was conceded to the persons aforesaid, many and divers conditions clearly appeared to have been added, it may perhaps be the case that some of these persons in a little while became reluctant to practise their religious observances.

[Accordingly] when I, Constantine Augustus, and I, Licinius Augustus, by good fortune met one another at Milan, and there took occasion to review all matters tending to the advantage and welfare of the commonwealth, we came to the resolution that—with other matters which seemed to us to be beneficial to the great majority, and indeed as the first and foremost among such matters—we ought to regulate the conditions on which respect and reverence for the Deity depend; our purpose, to wit, being this, that we should grant both to Christians and to all men freedom of choice in following such form of worship as they wish, to the end that whatever there be of divinity and heavenly things may be able to show favour to us and to all persons living under our authority. Wherefore by sound and strictest reasoning we resolved upon this policy: that to no man whatsoever should there be denied the right to follow and choose the observance or form of worship which the Christians use, but that every man be given the right to give his own mind to that form of worship which he himself thinks suitable to himself; to the end that the

divinity [to whose worship we freely pay our service] may be able to afford us his wonted care and goodness in all things.

'It was proper to signify by a rescript that this was our pleasure, so that, with the complete removal of all the conditions which were contained in our former letters sent to Your Excellency concerning the Christians, there should also be removed whatever seemed to be entirely amiss and alien from our clemency, and in order that now and henceforth, freely and unconditionally, all who have been of one mind and purpose—to keep the Christians' form of worship—should do so without any let or hindrance. Which things we have resolved to signify as fully as possibly to you our trusty servant [literally, 'Your Carefulness'], in order that you might know that we have given to these same Christians the full and absolute right to take care for their own form of worship. Further, when you see that this grant has been made to them unconditionally by us, Your Excellency will understand that the same right has also been granted to others who wish to follow their own form of observance and worship—such grant being clearly fitting to the peace of our times—so that all alike may have the right to choose and cherish such forms as they please. This has been done by us to the end that no rite or form of worship should seem to have suffered any diminution at our hands.

'This too, in addition, we also resolve in regard to the Christians, and as concerning the places [buildings] in which it was formerly their wont to meet. These places were the subject of a different rule laid down in the former letter sent to Your Excellency on a previous occasion; but we now lay it down that if any persons should appear to have purchased such places, either from our treasury or from elsewhere, these persons shall restore them to the aforesaid Christians without receiving payment or making any demand for compensation, putting away all negligence and quibbles. Moreover, if any persons have chanced to come into possession of such places by gift, they shall restore them as speedily as possible to the aforesaid Christians; with this proviso [in both the cases aforesaid] that if either the purchasers of these same places, or those who have received them by gift, proffer any petition to our generosity, they shall approach the prefect of the district in which the places lie, so that through our kindness they too may receive consideration. All which properties must be handed over immediately to the body concerned [the *corpus*, or corporation?] by your efforts, with no delay.

'Moreover, since these same Christians not only possessed the places in which it was their wont to meet, but are also known to have had other places, not belonging to individuals among them, but forming part of the rights of their—that is to say the Christian—body corporate [in the Latin of Lactantius, *ad ius corporis eorum, id est ecclesiarum ... pertinentia*], you are to give orders, in execution of the law which we have set forth above, that all such places should be restored without any question whatsoever to these same Christians—that is to say to their body corporate and congregation; provided, of course, that the method heretofore mentioned be here again observed, and

that accordingly those who restore these same places without receiving payment may, as we have heretofore mentioned, hope for indemnification to be given them by our liberality.

'In all which things you must use your efforts, to the best of your power, for the aforesaid body corporate of the Christians, that our orders may be executed as quickly as possible, to the end that here also [as well as in other matters] consideration may be given to keeping the common and public peace... For by this policy, as indeed we have said before, the divine favour towards us, of which we have already had experience in many matters, may remain with us no less steadfastly at all times. Wherefore, in order that the form of our enactment and its liberality may be brought to the notice of all, it is proper that what we have written should be set forth by your edict, and published everywhere and brought to the notice of all, to the end that the enactment which proceeds from our liberality may not go unnoticed by any.'

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1. The motives behind Constantine's acceptance of a new religion have been widely disputed. What in the article makes you suspicious of Constantine's motives behind the acceptance of Christianity in the Roman Empire? What are some of other possible motives behind the acceptance of the new religion not mentioned in the article?

2. How do Constantine and Licinius benefit from the return of previously confiscated buildings?

3. Why is it important for a leader of any era to issue a written statement such as the Edict of Milan when making decisions? When is it not necessary to issue such a statement?