

Sts. Constantine and Helen

“By this sign, you shall conquer.” These words that appeared in a vision along with the sign of the Cross to St. Constantine changed not only the lives of Sts. Constantine and Helen, but also changed the very course of history itself. The following night after this vision, Jesus Christ appeared in another vision to St. Constantine and explained to him the significance of the Cross and its power. St. Constantine when he woke up immediately had a military banner made in the shape of the Cross with the letters Chi-Rho which stood for Jesus Christ imprinted on it. And indeed the power of the Cross helped St. Constantine gain victory over Maxentius, his chief rival in the Western Roman Empire, at the battle of Milvian bridge. From this time forward, Saint Constantine stopped the persecution of Christians in the Western Roman Empire and eventually throughout the whole Roman Empire with his defeat of Licinius for control of the entire Roman Empire. In fact, Saint Constantine would not only legalize Christianity in the empire, but he would actually make it the new religion of the empire.

With Christianity as the new religion of the empire, Saint Constantine started the building of a new capital of the Roman Empire at Byzantium, which would be removed from the pagan celebrations associated with old Rome and instead dedicated to being the center of a Christian empire. He also would call together the first ecumenical council of the Church in which the bishops would proclaim the true teaching that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. After a life of helping Christianity to spread throughout the empire, Saint Constantine would fall asleep in the Lord on the day of Pentecost after having been baptized and receiving the Holy Mysteries of the Church in the year 337 AD.

Saint Constantine’s mother, Helen, who had introduced St. Constantine to Christianity with her own conversion earlier in life, now went on pilgrimage to the holy sites in and around Jerusalem after her son had legalized Christianity in the empire. She had churches erected at the site of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, as well as at His birthplace in Bethlehem, and on the Mount of Olives where He ascended into Heaven. She also discovered the true Cross, and had it raised up out of the earth where it was buried, giving us the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross.

It was the Cross that guided both Saints Constantine and Helen in their lives. Through St. Constantine’s vision of the Cross and his mother’s finding of the true Cross, the image of the Cross was transformed from being a gruesome means of capital punishment into a symbol of the triumph of life over death and of the eternal life that Christ offers to all who pick up their Cross and follow after Him. The cross is now proudly displayed on the top of all Orthodox churches holding high Christ’s triumph over death for all to see, and as a reminder to all Orthodox Christians by this sign, you shall conquer.