Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* X.8.1

Copy of an Epistle in which the emperor commands that the rulers of the churches be exempted from all public services

**Name of the author:** Eusebius of Caesarea  
**Date:** 313 CE to 325 CE  
**Place:** Caesarea Maritima  
**Language:** Greek

**Category:** Christian  
**Literary genre:** History

**Title of work:** Ecclesiastical History  
**Reference:** X.8.1  
**Commentary:** For a general introduction to Eusebius and the *Ecclesiastical History*, please see the commentary on X.6.6-11.

Eusebius preserves here a letter from the emperor Constantine to the proconsul of Africa, Anulinus (or Anullinus), stating that the church clergy in his province be exempted from leitourgia (munera in Latin), meaning "public services," in order that they might entirely devote themselves to their duties to God (see *Theodosian Code* XVI.2.2). As David Gwynn states, this shows the public prestige that the church now possessed, with privileges granted to the Christian clergy that had thus far only been held by the officiates of traditional Roman religion and other groups (see *Theodosian Code* VI.26.1-7) (Gwynn, *Christianity in the Later Roman Empire*, p. 42). Charles Odahl goes so far as to state that Constantine effectively "wanted to make Catholic clergy salaried priests of the Roman Empire, and wished to assist them in carrying out their functions" (*Constantine and the Christian Empire*, p. 114). However, this is a very strong statement indeed, and possibly overstates the emperor's intentions (on Constantine's exemptions for clergy, see also Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership*, p. 29-30, who highlights the fact while Constantine's tax exemptions clearly marked out the status of clergy, it remains unclear precisely to which grades of the clergy they applied).

Compulsory public offices were an integral part of the economic reforms instituted under Diocletian. This system, however, drew on models which had previously operated. For instance, during the Hellenistic and imperial period, Greek city elites had competed with each other to spend their fortunes on public buildings and other forms of evergetism, in order to receive social honour. Under Diocletian's reforms, the government could impose upon people certain public services, such as offices in the municipality, which had to be carried out at their own expense, and were often referred to as "honours." In each municipality, leading citizens were appointed as decurions on the municipal council, and required to serve in central government at substantial personal expense and inconvenience, such as paying for public works and meeting tax shortfalls. Property owners could be compelled to freely house soldiers or others in imperial service, and provide resources such as wood and other building materials. Those in the lower classes were conscripted into manual labour in state armouries, mines, and quarries, and for construction and repair of public buildings and roads (see Pharr, *The Theodosian Code*, p. 577).

The significance of the fact that Constantine only specifies immunity for those falling under the authority of Caecilian (Caecilianus), the bishop of Carthage, has been debated. In 313 CE, the famous "Edict of Milan" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* X.5.2-14; Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* XLVIII.2-12) ordered the restoration of church property that had been taken during the Diocletianic persecution, and this was reemphasised in another letter to Anullinus (Ecclesiastical History X.5.15-17). Constantine also wrote to Caecilian, informing him that Ursus, the finance minister of Africa, had been instructed to pay 3,000 folles to the bishop for his use in the churches within Africa, Numidia, and Mauritania. The emperor also mentions in this letter that he is aware of certain Christians who have become "corrupt," and are seeking to turn others away from the Catholic Church, and specifies that they should be reported to Anullinus the proconsul if they do not desist (Ecclesiastical History X.6.1-5). When Caecilian had become bishop, a schism—which would become known as the Donatist Controversy—began to form in the African church, as Caecilian had taken a stand during his time as archdeacon against the revelling among Christians in martyrdom during the "Great Persecution," which angered many in the North African church. For some, Constantine's words here indicate him firmly taking the side of Caecilian in the schism (see Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 56; Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 145). However, it is unlikely...
that Constantine would want to become involved in ecclesiastical politics so early in his reign, especially in an area of the empire which he had only recently gained control of. We also cannot be certain that he had any detailed knowledge about it beyond that there was unrest among the church leaders. His decision to give money to Caecilian, therefore, may simply have been due to the fact that the bishop was a largely recognised authority in the African church, making him simply the most logical person to entrust funds to. In the case of our text, then, the fact that only those under Caecilian are mentioned as exempted from public service might not indicate any particular prejudice on the part of Constantine, but rather simply that logistically, it made sense for the emperor to give the proconsul a specific name in order to guide him towards which clergy he was exempting (rather than having to identify them all individually) (see Simon Corcoran, The Empire of the Tetrarchs, p. 155, who suggests that perhaps a single edict on this topic was first issued, and then subsequently disseminated through different letters such as this one).

Particularly important for our purposes, is that Constantine’s “devout belief in divine providence” is particularly apparent in this letter: “For it seems that when they show greatest reverence to the Deity, the greatest benefits accrue to the state (??????, koinos).” In addition, we also see the emperor’s contention that the Christian clergy and their work within the church was absolutely integral to the health of the empire and its ability to function successfully on a social level (see Gwynn, Christianity in the Later Roman Empire, p. 42). These laws therefore indicate that Christianity was beginning to hold a relatively high status within the empire. As Jonathan Bardill highlights, a comparison can be drawn between the views expressed here by Constantine, and those of the emperor Galerius just a couple of years earlier (Constantine, p. 133-134). In book VIII.17 of the Ecclesiastical History, Eusebius quotes the so-called “Edict of Toleration” issued by Galerius in 311 CE, ordering the ceasing of the persecution of Christians and the restoration of their property and rights to practice their own religion (as long as they do not disturb public discipline) (Lactantius also quotes the edict in his On the Deaths of the Persecutors XXXIV-XXV). Galerius claims that the attempts to force the Christians to sacrifice to the Roman gods have largely been unsuccessful due to the stubbornness of the Christians, who would sooner become martyrs. It is better, therefore, that they return to the worship of their own God, but under the proviso that they pray to him for the safety of the empire and its people. The implication is that no divine supplication at all is worse than the rejection of the traditional gods, and it seems that Galerius, like Constantine in the present source, was willing to accept that the Christian god might be able to be positively invoked on behalf of the empire. Indeed, the benefits of Christianity for the empire were something which Christian authors had been emphasising for a long time (see, for instance, Tertullian, Apology XXX; To Scapula IV.5-6; Melito of Sardis, Apology; Origen, Against Celsus VIII.70).

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Thematic keywords in English:

- Africa
- Anullinus
- bishop
- Caecilian
- church leaders
- clergy
- Constantine
- divine law
- epistle
- municipal office
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- Roman emperor
- Roman state

Bibliographical references: Lawlor, Hugh J.; Oulton, John E. L., Eusebius: Ecclesiastical History and Martyrs of Palestine: Translated with Introduction and Notes, 2 Volumes (London: SPCK, 1927)

- Odahl, Charles M., Constantine and the Christian Empire (London: Routledge, 2004)
- Gwynn, David, Christianity in the Later Roman Empire: A Sourcebook (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)

Other sources connected with this document: Text

Tertullian, Apology XXX

The nature of Christian prayer for the emperor

- Read more about Tertullian, Apology XXX

Text
Tertullian, *To Scapula IV.5-6*

Examples of Christianity’s aid of the Romans, and imperial recognition of this

- Read more about Tertullian, *To Scapula IV.5-6*

Text


Christianity has benefitted the Roman empire

- Read more about Melito of Sardis, *Apology* (preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History IV.26.7-11*)

Text

Origen, *Against Celsus VIII.70*

The benefits if the Roman empire were to embrace Christianity

- Read more about Origen, *Against Celsus VIII.70*

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