

## The Growth of Christianity in the Roman Empire

Why did Christianity become so quickly popular in the Roman Empire? Especially at a time when it was illegal? Hundreds of thousands of Christians were tortured and killed by the Roman government, yet more people kept freely choosing to join the new religion. Why did they so easily let go of the polytheistic paganism which was typical of the early Romans?

By the time Constantine legalized the practice of Christianity in 313, the empire was already heavily Christianized. By the year 300 perhaps 10 percent of the people were Christians, and by the middle of the century, Christians may well have been a majority of the citizens, 33 million Christians in an empire of 60 million people. So Constantine did not so much ensure Christianity's success as acknowledge it.

These were not 33 million "nominal" Christians. In the decade before Constantine's edict, the Church had suffered its most ruthless and systematic persecution ever under the emperor Diocletian and his successors. The practice of the faith was, in many places, punished by torture and death. In many places, to live as a Christian meant, at the least, to accept social stigma and humiliation. What is more, the Christian way itself was characterized by voluntarily engaging in demanding disciplines in the life of prayer and in the moral life.

To be a Christian was not easy in the year 300. Christians were laying their lives on the line every time they met to discuss the New Testament, and they continued to do so through the course of every day.

Yet the rate of conversion throughout the empire — beginning with the first Christians, long before Constantine — was most remarkable.

In the first Christian centuries there was an astonishing growth rate of 40 percent per decade. Again, Constantine gets no credit for this growth. Most of it happened in the years before he was born.

Most growth came from individual conversions, and not only from the poor, but also from the merchant and upper classes. Most converts were women; women benefited greatly from conversion; and some women were influential leaders. The Christian population grew by 40 percent a decade, from about 1,000 Christians in the year 40 to 7,530 in 100 to a little over six million in 300 and 33 million in 350

— growing, in the hundred years between 250 and 350, from about two percent of the population to slightly over half.

Epidemics were among the great terrors of life in the ancient world. The physicians in those days knew that the diseases were communicable, but they knew nothing about bacteria or viruses, never mind antibiotics or antiseptics. Once the diseases hit your hometown, there was really no stopping them. Several major epidemics ravaged the empire during the rise of Christianity, and each of them reduced the empire's population by about one-third.

How did that happen? Look at what ordinarily happened when an epidemic hit your ancient hometown. The first people to leave were usually the doctors. They knew what was coming, and they knew they could do little to prevent it. The second-century pagan physician Galen admits that he fled, in his description of the worldwide epidemic during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The next ones to leave were the pagan priests, because they had the means and the freedom to do so.

Ordinary pagan families were encouraged to abandon their homes when family members contracted the plague. Again, they knew no other way to isolate the disease than to leave the afflicted family member behind to die, perhaps slowly.

Christians were duty-bound not to abandon the sick. Jesus had said that, in caring for the sick, Christians were caring for him. So, even though Christians knew little more about medicine than the pagans did, they stayed with their family members, friends, and neighbors who were suffering. Consider this account of the great epidemic of the year 260, left to us by Dionysius of Alexandria:

*Most of the Christians in our city showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of others. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending their every need, helping and comforting them — and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pain.*

We also possess pagan accounts of that epidemic, and all of them are characterized by despair. Yet the Christians were “serenely happy.” Nor was this an extraordinary event. Syrian Antioch, considered the second city of the empire, experienced 41 natural and social catastrophes of this order during the years when Christianity was on the rise. That is an average of one cataclysmic disaster every fifteen years.

Christianity had the same effect in other ways. It offered cities filled with strangers, orphans, widows, the homeless, and the poor a new family and community and a new way of life that freed them from many of the fears that tortured their pagan neighbors.

Amid the havoc, Christian charity brought church growth. Christians were much more likely to survive epidemics because they cared for one another. Mere comfort care cut the Christian mortality rate by two-thirds when compared with the pagans. What is more, the Christian families cared for their pagan neighbors as well. Thus, the pagans who received Christian care were more likely to survive and, in turn, to become Christians themselves. Thus, in times of epidemic, when populations as a whole plummeted, church growth soared, even when Roman soldiers were executed Christians by the thousands.

The pagans tended only to take care of those in their group. While pagans would only help their brothers, Christians treated all men as their brothers. And the pagans took notice. The emperor Julian, who despised all Christians and led the charge to re-paganize the empire, still had to grudgingly admire their charity: “The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well. Everyone can see that our poor lack aid from us.”

A document of the early second century, the *Letter to Diognetus*, describes the process. The writer points out that Christians are not distinguished from other people by anything external: not their country or language, not their food or clothing, but by what he calls the Christians “way of life.”

*They marry, as do all others; they have children; but they do not commit infanticide. They invite strangers to their table, but not into their bed ... they obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death ... to sum it up: As the soul is in the body, so Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world ... the invisible soul is guarded by the visible body, and Christians are known indeed to be in the world, but their godliness remains invisible.*

Gradually, invisibly, but inexorably, Christian doctrine, hope, and charity transformed the Roman Empire. Christianity transformed the way neighbors treated the sick, the way parents treated their children, and the way husbands and

wives loved each other. It was this lifestyle, in addition to the promise of freely-given eternal salvation, which attracted so many new believers.

Christianity addressed people's needs, both in this life, and in the next life, in contrast to paganism, which didn't satisfactorily address the next life, and in contrast to Egyptian mythology, which didn't offer practical guidance for this life.

[adapted from Mike Aquilina and Rodney Stark, at the University of Washington]