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The Role of Bishops in Late Antiquity: Constantine's Legacy

Rezumat: (Rolul episcopilor în Antichitatea târzie: mo tenirea constantinian) Între a a-numitul Edict de la Milano (313 d.H) și legislația anti-păgână a lui Teodosie, Biserica creștină și episcopii și-au câștigat o poziție puternică în societatea romană. Cei mai mulți istorici par a fi de acord asupra faptului că creștinismul în sine a fost un factor important în societatea mai largă din această perioadă, chiar dacă el a fost încă departe de a fi adoptat pe scară largă. Un accent pe creștinare în toate formele sale – credință, practică și organizare socială – face parte într-o mare măsură din conceptul modern de „Antichitate târzie”.

În primul rând, în perioada post-constantiniană, bisericile au devenit pur și simplu mult mai vizibile, însă ele nu au fost doar clișee de cult, ci multe dintre ele au fost locul prin intermediul căruia episcopii locali și-au furnizat învătura lor religioasă. Influența episcopilor s-a extins înspre mult dincolo de jurisdicția ecleziastică. În această privință, Sf. Constantin cel Mare a stabilit un precedent în a le da episcopilor o jurisdicție laică.

În al doilea rând, nicio altă figură nu pare să fi întruchipat mai bine schimbările și transformările Antichității târzii decât episcopul creștin. Episcopii ocupă un loc central în literatura de specialitate dedicată acestei perioade. Ipoteza comună care stă la baza acestor studii se referă la faptul că ascensiunea creștinismului merge mână în mână cu creșterea rolului politic al episcopului. Autoritatea episcopului este un construct cu multiple fațete și în continuă mișcare, deoarece statutul episcopului a continuat să se schimbe în funcție de diverse circumstanțe și necesități.

Legile imperiale ale Sf. Constantin, prin care se acordau episcopilor drepturi extinse și diverse obligații administrative, sunt considerate în mod tradițional ca fiind piatra de temelie în ceea ce privește relațiile dintre stat și biserică din această perioadă. În acest sens absorbirea episcopilor în aparatul administrației imperiale a permis o supraveghere episcopală accentuată asupra problemelor practice și cotidiene ale creștinilor, fapt care a permis identificarea rolului episcopului cu cel al beneficiarului public (*patronus*).

Cuvinte cheie: autoritate spirituală, episcop, legislație imperială, Constantin cel Mare, Biserică

Abstract: In the eighty or so years that elapsed between the so-called Edict of Milan (313 A.D.) and the anti-pagan legislation of Theodosius I, the Christian church and its bishops had gained a strong position within the Roman state. Most historians would also agree that Christianity itself was by now a powerful factor in society at large, even though it was still very far from universally embraced. An emphasis on Christianization in all its forms – belief, practice, art and architecture, social organization – is very much part of the modern concept of ‘late antiquity’. In the first place, in the post-Constantinian period churches themselves were simply more visible. Once persecution officially ended, the way was opened for the development of ecclesiastical architecture as such. Constantine himself had been a great church-builder, and later emperors followed his example. However, the new churches were not just decorative or cultic buildings; many were the preserve of local bishops, and provided the setting for the moral, social and religious teaching that was a central part of the bishop’s role. We know of many powerful bishops during this period. Their influence extended well beyond what in modern terms would be purely church matters. Constantine had set a precedent in giving them secular jurisdiction. Secondly, no single figure seems to encapsulate the changes and transformations of late antiquity better than the Christian bishop does. Bishops figure prominently in the scholarly literature about this period. The common underlying assumption of such studies tends to be that the rise of Christianity goes hand in hand with the rise of the bishop to political prominence, a rise whose lasting consequences reverberate into the Middle Ages. The authority of the bishop is a multifaceted and ever-mutating construct that continued to change as individuals adapted, necessity dictated, and circumstances permitted. Constantine’s laws granting bishops extensive administrative rights and obligations are traditionally regarded as the touchstone of church-state relations in this formative period. This study proposes a critical reassessment of Constantine’s measures in order to show that, rather than absorbing the bishops into the apparatus of imperial administration, they merely confirmed the existing episcopal oversight over practical matters that were considered to be of particular concern to Christians in general. A more significant change that was heralded by the reign of Constantine was the open access to the imperial court that the bishops now enjoyed.

Keywords: spiritual authority, bishop, imperial legislation, Constantine the Great, Church

The most powerful and evocative figures in Late Antiquity were the emperor, the holy man, and the bishop. They provided practical leadership, moral guidance, and the dispensation of favors. From the modern perspective, the emperor and the holy man embody the contrasting principles of secular and religious leadership. The Enlightenment and its heritage, from the ideals of the French Revolution to the work of Edward Gibbon¹, have taught us to make a sharp distinction between the secular and the religious, but also to consider this distinction as an essential precondition for modern statehood.

Yet the notion of the association of imperial authority with the divine that guided, protected, and guaranteed the emperor's rule was pervasive in the Roman Empire. Just as imperial authority was intricately linked to the divine, the religious authority of holy men had overtones of secular power. Therefore, it is more fruitful to conceive of secular and religious authority as the opposing ends of a sliding scale, where each individual, whether emperor, holy man, or bishop, has his own place, depending on his role within the city and his own personal conduct. In fact, as noted by Claudia Rapp, "the bishop who occupies the middle ground between the two poles of secular and religious leadership"².

The administrative and cultural bedrock of Roman society was its cities. After Constantine a bishop would have been consecrated for almost every city and for some of the villages too. Most of these bishops were as humble and ordinary as the cities and villages they served.

Thus the responsibilities of the bishop as administrator of a diocese involved him in very mundane matters. Bishops had many official duties, including the selection and supervision of clerics, the administration of finances, and the management of charitable foundations. As local patrons, they represented their cities and individual citizens before imperial magistrates. Their primary task, however, was their spiritual ministry, in particular the celebration of the liturgy and preaching.

The role of the bishop during the third to sixth centuries is the central theme of this paper. This is the formative period during which the church was propelled to assume an ever-increasing role in the public life of the later Roman Empire, and its representatives, the bishops, were saddled with ever-increasing public duties.

Thus, a proper understanding of the role of the bishops can be accomplished only once we rid ourselves of the anachronistic baggage of a supposed secular-religious dichotomy. No single figure seems to encapsulate the changes and transformations of Late Antiquity better than the Christian bishop. Bishops are often invoked in overview treatments of church history, social structure, and urbanism as the focal point on which significant transformations hinge.

Therefore, the rise of Christianity goes hand in hand with the rise of the bishop to political prominence.

In other words, the patronage of Constantine and subsequent emperors during Late Antiquity transformed bishops and their roles in totally unforeseen ways. In earlier centuries the number of bishops had been limited; now almost every city in the empire had a bishop, and classical cities survived as episcopal sees: "In earlier centuries bishops and their

¹ E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Modern Library, 2003.

² Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops. The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005, p. 6.

congregations had been marginalized in Roman society; now Christian emperors were ready to use churchmen as judges and envoys. As their financial resources increased, bishops founded charitable institutions, constructed churches and shrines, and presided at festivals. Eventually bishops became the peers of the emperors at Constantinople and rivals to the barbarian kings in the West. During late antiquity Christianity became not just the leading religion in the old Roman world. As its bishops appropriated or sanctioned more and more nominally secular activities, Christian spirituality also became the dominant worldview³.

Thus, bishops were actively involved in the defense of their cities, acted as judges in civil cases, amassed great wealth, and became important building patrons. Peter Brown studies the rising power of the bishop against the background of the transformation of urban culture in Late Antiquity. In the post-Diocletianic empire, he argues, the bishops gained greater prominence as part of a tighter administrative web that extended a closer grip on cities and individuals than ever before. In this context, the bishop's ability to become an advocate for his community, including its poor, is explained as having its basis in the common cultural "language" of *paideia* – a mode of comportment and a form of expression based on a thorough education in the classical tradition – that is shared by bishops and prominent town councilors, provincial governors, and imperial administrators alike⁴. According to this model, the power of bishops has the same root and is measured by their late antique contemporaries with the same yardstick as that of other prominent men. There is much to be said for this approach, as the city was the primary stage on which the bishop's role was played out⁵.

More recent studies of the transformation of cities in Asia Minor have emphasized the stabilizing role of bishops in up-holding and perpetuating the existing social order as they operated in conjunction with the people and the leading men of their cities⁶. The writings of the Cappadocian fathers, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, have generated several scholarly treatments of their views of the episcopate and their own exercise of this office⁷.

Previous studies of bishops in Late Antiquity thus fall into three distinct groups: histories of the development of the episcopal office within the church, which usually end with the reign of Constantine; investigations of the public role of bishops within their urban or regional context, which usually begin with Constantine's legislation⁸ in favor of the clergy and biographies of important men of the church, based to no small extent on their own literary record. As noted by Ch. Matson Odahl, "since his conversion, Constantine had associated with Catholic clergy, had studied Christian literature, and had intervened in Church affairs. He had

³ Raymond van Dam, „Bishops and society” in A. Casiday, F.W. Norris (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 343-344.

⁴ P. L. R. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire*, Madison, 1992.

⁵ See, for example, E. Rebillard and C. Sotinel, (eds.), *L'évêque dans la cité du IV^e au Ve siècle: Image et autorité*, Collection de l'École Française de Rome 248, Rome 1998.

⁶ In this sense, see A. Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church. The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

⁷ P. Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994; R. van Dam, *Kingdom of Snow: Roman Rule and Greek Culture in Cappadocia*, Philadelphia, 2002.

⁸ For Constantine early' legislation in favor of Western Church, see Charles Matson Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004.

come to think that the Christian God had entrusted him with his imperial position, and had elected him to propagate the Christian religion. As the years of his imperial reign progressed, his commitment to his personal faith increased, and his religious beliefs increasingly affected his public policies. Some of the legislation Constantine enacted in these years reflected his growing desire to promote Christianity⁹. Shortly, Constantine elevated the status of the Catholic clergy in the empire. As noted Ch. Odahl there is a “partnership which was emerging between the emperor and the bishops, and the Roman Empire and the Christian Church”¹⁰.

Also, the monograph by Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, focuses on the role of the bishop in his city as the “patronus”, with all the social and political consequences: “Altogether, the conversion of Constantine brought a Christian church, previously characterized by well-organized but essentially inward looking charitable endeavors, into a world in which the more outward-going “civic” ideal of public benefaction was still alive...The emperor remained a towering example of old-fashioned euergetism”¹¹.

In the work cited above, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, Peter Brown describes the finding of recent scholarship that the traditional “civic” definition of the community was largely maintained throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, as “one of the most challenging discoveries of recent scholarship”¹². It does indeed pose a challenge to the scholarship of Patlagean, who first posited the move in the Late Antique period (400–600 CE) from a civic model of societal relations to an economic model¹³. Patlagean identified a shift in Late Antiquity from a classical Greco-Roman model where the rich were only obliged to act as patron to other citizens within their clientele, which was limited to an urban setting, to a Christian one where the web of obligations was considerably broadened to include the unknown poor, who may not be either citizens or city dwellers.

In this context, we highlight that once cities became dependent on the public resources of state officials and the private generosity of wealthy local patrons the rise of bishops hence cannot be separated from this fundamental transformation of classical cities, even if the exact nature of this interaction is difficult to determine.

In light of these considerations, we admit together with Cl. Rapp that “the authority of the bishop is a multifaceted and ever-mutating construct that continued to change as individuals adapted, necessity dictated, and circumstances permitted. The office itself underwent a process of growth and change over time during which certain aspects and tasks gained in importance, while others receded into the shadows”¹⁴.

Furthermore, in order to facilitate the understanding of the role of bishops in Late Antiquity, we follow the model introduced by Claudia Rapp, namely the model of three categories: spiritual authority, ascetic authority, and pragmatic authority.

Thus, as noted by Cl. Rapp, “spiritual authority indicates that its bearer has received the *pneuma*, the Spirit from God. Spiritual authority has its source outside the individual. It is

⁹ Charles Matson Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, p. 147.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

¹¹ P. Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, Hanover-London 2002, p. 27.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ E. Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance, 4e–7e siècles*, Paris 1977.

¹⁴ Claudia Rapp, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

given by God, as a gift. Spiritual authority is personal. It is given directly to a specific individual, without personal participation or preparation by its recipient”¹⁵.

The ascetic authority meaning “practice” (gr. *askesis*) and it has its source in the personal efforts of the person. In the other words it is “achieved by subduing the body and by practicing virtuous behavior. These efforts are centered on the self, in the hopes of attaining a certain ideal of personal perfection”¹⁶.

The third member of this model, pragmatic authority, is based on actions (gr. *pratto* – „to do”). The pragmatic authority arises from the actions of the person, but in distinction from ascetic authority, it is always public because to the benefit of others. Access to pragmatic authority is restricted because its achievement depends on the individual’s wherewithal, in terms of social position and wealth, to perform these actions.

The ascetic authority is the motivation and legitimation of pragmatic authority and this feature is essential to the understanding of the public activities of bishops in Late Antiquity. It allows us to perceive a crucial distinction between bishops and civic leaders. Bishops are always held to a higher way of life, and their ability to exercise leadership is conditional on their adherence to that way of life. In contrast to civic leaders, as noted by Cl. Rapp, “the bishops’ pragmatic actions on behalf of the community are considered to be a manifestation of their ascetic authority, so much so that the successful exercise of the former is believed to be a direct consequence of the latter”¹⁷.

The average bishop of a large city in the later Roman Empire fulfilled a number of different roles: he was a preacher to his community; a teacher to the catechumens; administered baptism to neophytes; celebrated the Eucharist and other liturgical occasions; and admonished and, if necessary, reprimanded Christians who had stumbled. But Constantine and subsequent Christian emperors were quick to endorse the involvement of bishops in secular affairs.

Once Christianity had gained a stronger foothold in society, beginning with the fourth century, bishops also gradually became involved on a hitherto unknown scale in the administration of their cities and in regional politics. As a consequence of the process of Christianization set in motion by Constantine, bishops would eventually enjoy unrivalled power in their cities in the European Middle Ages.

Therefore, we wish to draw attention to the fluidity of the definition of the episcopal role in Late Antiquity. Thus, the episcopal office, as it developed over the first three centuries, was in essence a hybrid creation the original administrative function of which was uncomfortably juxtaposed to the demand for spiritual leadership that was added to it by the second century¹⁸. These two components of the office could be held together only by adding a third: ascetic authority.

In Chrysostom’s view, the proper exercise of the priesthood is a much greater accomplishment than the pursuit of the ascetic life can ever be, for there are many men and

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹⁸ For a well-documented study of the development of ecclesiastical offices in the first six centuries, see A. Faivre, *Naissance d’une hiérarchie*, *Théologie Historique* 40, Paris 1977.

women who can perform feats of asceticism, but only very few who are qualified to become shepherds of their flock¹⁹. Moreover, it is much more difficult to uphold a life of Christian virtues under the scrutiny of one's congregation and in the face of daily administrative and personal challenges than it is to live a life of austerity in the seclusion of a hermitage²⁰. The priesthood, and not the ascetic life of the monk, is in John's eyes the pinnacle of Christian perfection. Spiritual and ascetic authority may be valuable in them, but for those who have been elected to office, they are merely qualifications that assist them in their calling: "It behooves one who undertakes this care to have much understanding, and, before understanding, great grace from God, and uprightness of conduct, and purity of life and superhuman virtue"²¹. John Chrysostom's work draws attention to the necessity for priests and bishops to be exemplars of the holy life.

Moving on from theory to practice and from the religious to the secular, we now take pragmatic authority as our focus and explore the bishop's role in his city. At this juncture, it is useful to turn to the categories introduced by Peter Brown to describe the role of holy men in late antique society. In an article in 1983, Brown drew attention to the role of the holy man as "exemplar," representing a model of ideal behavior that others are encouraged to imitate²². What we have discussed so far is the analogous role of the bishop as exemplar. In his city, the bishop was expected to perform manifold tasks and activities for the physical well-being of his congregation, activities that only indirectly contributed to its spiritual nourishment. Here, the concept of the holy man as *patronus*, namely as protector, advocate and intercessor on behalf of the population becomes relevant.

From this perspective, the bishop's role in practical matters was analogous to that of public benefactor. Bishops provided food in times of famine, helped Christians in distress, and pleaded with authorities for tax remission and other favors. In contrast to the activities of holy men, episcopal activities covered a wider range of concerns, to a large extent because bishops had greater access to steady financial resources. Also, the means by which bishops intervened were different. In this sense, the bishop's public activities overlapped not only with those of holy men, but also with those of civic leaders and public benefactors.

Thus, the public role of the bishop was greatly augmented as Christianity gained in importance and the church grew in numbers. The favors showered by Constantine and his successors on the Christian church contributed to making the new religion attractive to prospective converts²³. The church soon became a considerable economic force as a result of the acquisition of property and income through regular contributions, imperial donations, and pious bequests, first allowed by Constantine in 321. Ecclesiastical finances were put to use in providing charity to the needy and in the creation of a permanent ecclesiastical infrastructure, including building projects. Thus the bishop held a unique position of influence and power within his city, the distinction between the episcopate and a civil magistracy could become blurry.

¹⁹ St. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 2.2.1–7, 6.5–7.

²⁰ St. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 3.10, 176–268; 6.5–6.

²¹ St. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 3.8.11–15.

²² P. Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity", *Representations* 1 (1983), pp. 1–25.

²³ The relevant laws are listed by P.-P. Joannou, *La législation impériale et la christianisation de l'Empire romain*, OCA 192 (Rome, 1972). For an English translation of laws regarding the church until 535, see P. R. Coleman-Norton, *Roman State and Christian Church: A Collection of Legal Documents to A.D. 535*, 3 vols., London, 1966.

Most bishops in Late Antiquity came from the municipal elite in the cities of the Roman Empire: the *curiales* (town councilors)²⁴. The place of the bishop in this expansion of networks of obligation at first seems quite obvious. The bishop was required to step in and fill the role of patron where the powers of the senate or municipal governor left off, supplying the very poor with food and clothing, and often some sort of shelter. But upon closer analysis, it becomes evident that Late Antique bishops had to fill competing philanthropic roles, and eventually took over some of the roles previously managed by the imperial office.

Anyway, the syllogism is the following: (1) *Curiales* were the most upwardly mobile class in the fourth century and later. (2) Most bishops at that time came from a curial background. Therefore (3), the episcopate was desired by ambitious *curiales* as a step up on the social ladder²⁵.

Shortly, the bishop of the latter ancient city came to belong to the urban elite. In this sense, Raymond van Dam said that “as service as a bishop became more prestigious, however, and as more local notables acquired senatorial rank, more senators became bishops”²⁶.

Finally, there was the right of the Christian clergy to be tried in internal matters before an ecclesiastical, rather than a civil, court. This measure merely placed the Christian church on the same level as the *collegia*, the pagan cult associations, and the Jews, who also were allowed to take recourse to internal jurisdiction in matters that concerned violations of their own code of conduct or disputes between members. It is important to note that Constantine’s laws on internal jurisdiction and on the exemption from *munera* are addressed to *sacerdotes*. Their relevance in establishing the specific status of bishops must therefore remain doubtful.

In conclusion, we can say that in the two centuries after Constantine, a new understanding of the episcopate developed that privileged the bishop’s pragmatic authority over his ascetic authority. This was the outcome of a gradual process in which a variety of factors coalesced. The accelerated progress of Christianization and the recruitment of bishops predominantly from among the *curiales* combined to bring about the increasing identification of church and empire, on the one hand, and the bishop’s de facto patronage of his city, on the other. Justinian’s declaration, in 545, that canon law had the same legal force as imperial law is evidence of the extent to which Christianity came to permeate all aspects of civic life. As noted Raymond van Dam “just as the roles of bishops developed within the context of traditional classical cities, so the church’s organization corresponded to the structure of the imperial administration”²⁷.

In this paper we have concentrated on the theory and practice of the episcopate within its late antique context. The bishops’ interaction with imperial power, and the bishops’ position and activities in their cities reveal a gradual development in the role of bishops from model Christians to model citizens. The involvement of the bishops in civic matters was set into motion by the reign of Constantine but became a legislative reality only under the Theodosian dynasty. The pivotal moment may be identified as Theodosius’s law of 408, in which bishops

²⁴ D. Hunt, “The Church as a Public Institution”, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 13, in A. Cameron, P. Garnsey (eds.), *The Late Empire, A.D. 337–425*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 264.

²⁵ Claudia Rapp, *op.cit.*, p. 185.

²⁶ Raymond van Dam, “Bishops and society” in A. Casiday, F.W. Norris (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, p. 348.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 351.

were charged with a task – participation in the election of the *defensor civitatis* – that they had not performed before and that was only indirectly connected with their pastoral duties, inasmuch as the concerns of the growing Christian community increasingly became one with those of the city. The process was completed during the reign of Justinian, which showed the bishop acting alongside the magistrates as a regular participant in municipal administration.

Finally, Constantine's legislation did not bring about a radical change but rather gave the imperial stamp of approval, as it were, to the existing episcopal activities that affected the lives of the faithful. Through his support of Christianity, Constantine set into motion the process that came to into full view only at the turn of the fifth century with the house of Theodosius. By the time of Justinian, the transformation of the bishop in public view from model Christian to model citizen was complete.

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