

Sailing to Byzantium:

A History of the Byzantine Empire and the Quest for Eternal Life

Frederick E. Hasecke

April 19, 2013

There is in many if not all of us an innate longing to transcend our dust to dust and ashes to ashes mortality and become part of an eternal glory, in which the lion and the lamb lie down together and the peoples of every time and place come before the throne of God and sing God's praises. So it was to a greater or lesser degree for Irish poet William Butler Yeats in writing *Sailing to Byzantium* and for the peoples of the Byzantine Empire. Consequently, sailing to Byzantium is not just a voyage to and through the Byzantine Empire, its history of 1,123 years and 18 days (practically an eternity for nations), but it is also a quest for eternal life.

Yeats's poem reads in part:

An aged man is but a paltry thing...;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall...;  
Consume my heart away; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake,  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Though Yeats never went to the city Byzantium (present-day Istanbul), he was as enamored by its beauty as those who saw it during its imperial days. After all, it was the "New Rome," the capital of the Roman and then Byzantine Empire that looked to the heavens for salvation, its emperors for righteousness, clergy for truth, and people for faithfulness. Consequently, it was to be an earthly image of God's eternal home,

adorned with heavenly splendor and glory, so that everyone could have a foretaste of what awaits them there.

Before Constantine I (the Great) ever decided to move the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Byzantium, Byzantium had existed for some 1,000 years as a small town on the eastern tip of a peninsular bounded by the Golden Horn to the north, the Bosphorus to the east and the Sea of Marmara to the south. It was where east met west--the epicenter of the Roman/Byzantine Empire that at its territorial height surrounded the Mediterranean Sea, going from Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine to the Atlantic Ocean and from northern Africa into Britain.

It is said that God directed Constantine to Byzantium when eagles came and took the builders' tools by mouth and talons from Chalcedon to Byzantium. By the time of its consecration in 328, the city was already showing signs of glory with its four triumphal arches and the cross of Jesus at its first milestone, the Hippodrome about a mile away, and the Palace that consisted of reception halls, government offices, apartments, baths, barracks and parade grounds. Then, at the close of Constantine's silver jubilee, on May 11, 330, the city was dedicated to the Triune God of Christianity and renamed Constantinople at a high mass in the newly constructed Church of Saint Irene. With this, the Byzantine Empire began and remained one with the Roman Empire until Rome fell in 476.

Even after the fall of Rome, honorific titles were granted to the German leaders in the West and the ideal of Roman unity remained until Pope Leo III rejected Irene as the emperor and Charlemagne was given the throne on Christmas Day 800. A semblance of unity was then restored with the ratification of a peace treaty in 815, but only a

semblance since Emperors Charlemagne and Michael I ruled completely independent of each other. Some might contend that the West was always part of the Byzantine Empire, because the Byzantines never legally recognized the loss of any of their territory, believing that it was given to them by God and, thus, was sacred and always theirs. But differences did exist, territory was gained and lost, and in the end there was a schism between the East and the West.

Under Constantine the Great, the Byzantine Empire set out to be an earthly reflection of God's heavenly kingdom. Patterned after God's reign in heaven, there would be one ruler on earth to rule with divine authority and in accordance with God's will. He would be God's king on earth, standing above other mortals, equal to the apostles and elected by Christ. The people, then, were to live like the saints and the heavenly host; thus, properly preparing themselves for eternity.

Constantine's conversion to Christianity started with a vision he had of a cross while being told to "conquer by this sign." This took place the day before he was to go into battle against his brother-in-law, Maxentius, at the Milvian Bridge on October 28, 312. Constantine had his soldiers put the sign of the cross on their shields and they were victorious. After that, he felt called to establish God's kingdom on earth.

In 313, Constantine was declared Supreme Augustus by the Roman Senate. In that year, he and his fellow Emperor, Licinius, issued the Edict of Milan, granting to "Christians and to all others the right freely to follow whatever form of worship might please them, to the intent that whatsoever Divinity dwells in heaven might be favorable to us and to all those living under our authority." (1)

Constantine turned more and more to Christianity and upon overthrowing Licinius and becoming the sole Emperor of the Empire, he openly proclaimed his faith while at the same time remaining open to others, saying, "Let no man molest another in this matter.... For it is one thing voluntarily to undertake the struggle for immortality, another to compel others to do likewise from fear of punishment." (2)

Unfortunately, Constantine, his successors, and the empire as a whole did not always abide by Constantine's words to not molest others for their faith. Often they resorted to intolerance, abuse, cruelty, murder and war over faith and other matters; thus, falling short of the eternal realm they were to emulate.

The Jews, for example, were given the right of protection by the law; however, they always were considered inferior and Judaism was subject to expressions of hatred and contempt. Emperors Phocas I and Heraclius went as far as to persecute all Jews and force them to convert to Christianity.

Doctrine was of great concern to the Byzantines, since their faith was a critical part of their identity. They saw God as their divine ruler and salvation. Therefore, they wanted to please God and be holy in God's sight. This led Constantine to be intolerant of Christian heresy and so, he stood against the Donatists and Meletians for refusing to accept the authority and sacraments from certain bishops and priests.

Constantine also entered the church's debate with Arius, who was a presbyter of Alexandria and who taught that Jesus was created by God for the salvation of the world; therefore, he was not co-eternal with God. A synod council led by Archbishop Athanasius in 320 excommunicated Arius for being a heretic, but this did not quell the dispute. Therefore, Constantine declared that from then on only universal councils

could determine doctrine and so he called for the First Ecumenical Council to take place in Nicea in 325. There, Constantine proposed a solution to the controversy, using the word *homoousios*, consubstantial. This was accepted and Arius was condemned and exiled, but he never lost support and so, he was allowed to return in 327 and a form of Arianism still exists today even though it was condemned again at the Second Ecumenical Council in 381.

The Arian controversy gave rise to the *filioque* controversy. *Filioque* means “and from the Son.” It was added to the Nicene Creed in 587 by the local council of Toledo, Spain; thus, changing the creed to read, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*.” The Orthodox Christians objected to any additions to the Nicene Creed of 381 and at the Council of Constantinople in 879-880, it was decided that all additions were invalid. Still, the *filioque* continued to be used in the West and the controversy continues to this day.

Hoping to reunite the church, Pope Gregory invited Emperor Michael VIII to the Council of Lyon, which took place in 1274. Michael, also wanting church unity, sent a delegation with a letter that included the *filioque* and recognized the pope’s primacy. On July 6, the two churches were officially reunited for the first time in 220 years. But the Byzantines felt betrayed by this reunification, because they felt that it offended the Virgin Mary and failed to recognize the emperor as an equal to the apostles. Then when Pope Nicholas III demanded that they must use the *filioque* and accept the primacy of the Roman Church, the Byzantines were beside themselves. According to them, Michael died a heretic and so, when his son, Andronicus, took the throne, he freed the Orthodox Church of Rome by abrogating the Union of Lyon.

But why did Michael want the church to be reunited, especially since he just had recovered Constantinople from Rome in 1261? The answer is that religious and political issues were always inseparably bound in Byzantium. Michael needed the support of the West to deal with the forces that sought to overcome the East. Why, then, did the people not see this? Many probably did, but their firm belief in the orthodoxy of their faith and their bitter resentment towards the West for especially the Fourth Crusade kept them from ascribing to reunification.

The Fourth Crusade was a bitter pill for the Byzantines to swallow, for the crusaders attacked and plundered Constantinople, bringing it under Western rule and leaving historian Nicetas Choniates to write of the invasion, saying:

I know not how to put any order into my account, how to begin, continue or end. They smashed the holy images and hurled the sacred relics of the Martyrs into places I am ashamed to mention, scattering everywhere the body and blood of the Savior. These heralds of Anti-Christ seized the chalices and the patens, tore out the jewels and used them as drinking cups.... As for their profanation of the Great Church, it cannot be thought of without horror. (3)

After Constantinople fell to the crusaders, the Byzantine Empire was divided up and placed under Latin rule from 1204 to 1261. During this time, Byzantium was in exile and the division between the East and West was complete in that now it was not just theological reasons dividing them, but also an assault that left the East thinking that it would be "better to be under the Sultan's turban than the cardinal's hat." (4)

Other heresies, conflicts, scandals, wars and atrocities also troubled the Empire. Monophysitism, which stated that Jesus had but one nature and it was divine; Monothelism, which contended that Jesus had two natures but one will; Iconoclasm, which pursued the destruction of all religious pictures so as not to disobey God's

command to have no other gods; the Moechian controversy which had to do with marriage; and Hesychasm, which taught that a person could, by following certain ways, envision the light surrounding Jesus at his transfiguration, were among the doctrinal issues contested and for which some lost their lives.

In 726, for example, Leo III had the golden icon of Jesus that was above the main entrance to the Imperial Palace in Constantinople destroyed and four years later declared that anyone who failed to destroy their holy pictures would be arrested and punished. Iconoclasm, however, came to an end in 843 with the Seventh Ecumenical Council when Theodora was Regent for her son Michael III. A service of thanksgiving was held on the First Sunday in Lent of that year and to this day, the Orthodox Church celebrates the Feast or Triumph of Orthodoxy on the First Sunday in Lent with its dominant theme being the victory of the icons.

In 795, it became known that Emperor Constantine VI had divorced his wife and remarried. This brought about the Moechian controversy, which grew to such importance that his mother Irene was able to have Constantine arrested and then in 797 have his eyes put out in such a vicious way that he soon died. In 920, this issue was resolved by revising the canon law to say that a man could remarry a third and fourth time if childless and under forty with penance, but otherwise a fourth marriage was forbidden and punished by excommunication until the marriage was ended.

Popes and Patriarchs also excommunicated each other and emperors. Circus parties and demes fought one another. There were civil wars, indiscriminate killings, and violent takeovers of the throne. In 484, Pope Felix III excommunicated Patriarch Acacius and Patriarch Acacius returned the favor; thereby, elevating the see of



Constantinople to that of Rome and confirming an open schism. Bishop Ambrose withheld Communion from Emperor Theodosius I until he repented publicly for the death of some 7,000 innocent persons. This was the first time that the church exercised its spiritual authority over the throne's temporal power. Before the reign of Phocas I, torture was rare, but he was a cruel theocrat, introducing the gallows, rack, blindings and mutilations to the Empire and readily using them.

Two circus parties, the Blues and the Greens (named after the colors of the chariot teams they supported) were often rioting and fighting with each other over the games, politics and religion; however, on January 13, 532, they cried out together "Nika" against Justinian, forcing him and his family to flee the Hippodrome. Justinian then wanted to give up the throne and leave Constantinople, but his wife, Theodora, insisted on staying and said, "I stand by the ancient saying: the purple is the noblest winding-sheet." (5) The army then went out to contain the revolt and Byzantine historians put the death toll at about 30,000 innocent and guilty Blues and Greens.

At first the Roman Emperors were acclaimed by their army and elected by the senate. However, family dynasties also came about and the emperor could name his successor. Basil I rose from being a stable boy to the throne, because the Empire enjoyed wide social mobility. Unfortunately, the machinations to obtain the throne were often brutal and unsavory. Constantine the Great had Licinius killed in order to become the sole emperor. Likewise, his son, Constantius, put to death all the other possible claimants of the throne when he and his brothers were crowned Augusti in 337. When Maurice was replaced by Phocas I, Maurice was made to watch the beheading of his

sons before he was beheaded. Then their bodies were thrown into the sea and his wife, Constantina, and their three daughters were either slain or sent to a monastery.

Butchery, war, plundering, abuse and torture were very much a part of the world at the time of the Byzantine Empire. It was the Dark Ages in the West and these were among the means of gaining power, protecting and advancing the Empire, and in the minds of some, establishing God's kingdom on earth. Some of the Empire's foes were the Slaves, Lombards, Franks, Huns, Ottomans, Bulgars, Russians, Persians, Arabs, Mongols and Turks. Among the weapons of war were siege towers, catapults, scaling ladders, battering rams, bows and arrows, spears, swords, gunpowder, fleets of ships, thousands of military men, and mercenaries. The Byzantine Empire had what was called Greek fire, which would spread over water and set vessels afire, and a triple land wall with 192 towers to protect the capital.

When the Ottoman Turks brought an end to the Empire and conquered Constantinople on May 29, 1453, they had some 80,000 troops attacking by land from Thrace and over two hundred ships in the Golden Horn, Bosphorus and Sea of Marmara. The Turks also had a canon some twenty-seven feet long that was capable of sending a 1,340 pound ball over a mile to break down the land wall. By this time, the Byzantine Empire was no more than a small city-state with a fighting force of only about 5,000 Greeks and 2,000 foreigners. But in its imperial days, its armies also numbered in the tens of thousands and fleets in the hundreds.

In times of war, the Byzantines looked to the cross and sought aid from their divine protectress, Mary, the mother of Jesus, attributing victory to God and defeat to the people's sins. The day before the fall of Constantinople, the church bells rang, and

the most sacred icons and relics were carried in a procession through the streets and along the walls. As the sun set, the people then went into the Church of Saint Sophia where Cardinal Isidore intoned the Orthodox liturgies and administered the Eucharist. Roman and Orthodox differences were put aside. Emperor Constantine XI joined them and he first asked for forgiveness from the Orthodox and Roman bishops, then took communion, and afterwards returned to his palace. Before the service, he had called his commanders together and told them that there were four great causes for which to die--faith, country, family and sovereign. Then, when the city's walls were breached, he removed his royal emblems and joined the fight, never to be seen again.

The cost of war in lost lives was great and the promise of spoils filled the defeated with fear. The custom of the day for the Byzantines and everyone else was to allow the victorious soldiers three days of looting, ransacking and pillaging, which often included raping women and children and murder. Many who were not killed were taken to be slaves and some were then forced to be soldiers. Towns, cities, monasteries, churches and homes were reduced to smoldering heaps of ashes. Farm land was laid waste, merchants and peasants were left penniless because of the taxes levied on them.

In spite of all of these conflicts and hardships, the Empire still was able to reflect to some degree the glory of God's eternal reign. About a century after Constantinople was founded, it was described as a city having:

a school of learning, a circus, 2 theaters, 8 public and 133 private baths, 52 porticoes, 5 granaries, 8 reservoirs of water, 4 spacious halls for the meetings of the senate or courts of justice, 14 churches, 14 palaces, and 4,388 houses which for their size or beauty, deserved to be distinguished from the multitude of plebeian habitations." (6)

Most of these structures no longer stand, but one, the Church of Holy Wisdom, Hagia Sophia, Saint Sophia, does and it exemplifies the artistic splendor of the empire.

Conceived by Constantine, built by Constantius II in 360, and then reconstructed in 415 by Theodosius II and again in 532 by Justinian, the present square building looks nothing like the first two. It features a central dome that is 107 feet across and 160 feet above the ground. It was filled with classical remains from the Empire, mosaics, works of art, and relics. In 563, Paul of Silentiary wrote of the church's beauty, saying:

You may see an emerald green from Sparta, and the glittering marble with the undulating veins which the tool has worked with the deep bosom of the lassian hills, showing slanting streaks of blood-red and livid white... Stone too there is that the Libyan sun, warming with his golden light, has nurtured from the dark clefts of the Moorish hills, of crocus color sparkling like gold; and that product of the Celtic crags, a wealth of crystals, like milk splashed over a surface of shining black. (7)

Byzantine art sought to reveal the spirit of God and help one sense the mystery and glory of life. Icons, mosaics, ivory objects, silver vessels, bound manuscripts, works in cloisonne enamel, and furnishings were popular. Regarding literature, the Byzantines' high regard for the Greek and Latin writings of antiquity moved them to study and preserve them. In some ways, this may have inhibited their own writing, leaving them content with imitating their forebears.

The Empire lived under a rule of law, preserving the legal practicality of Roman administration, the philosophical nuances of Greek equity, the mystical soul of the Orient, and the heritage of slavery. The Senate was consulted and the circus parties and demes could speak out, but the Emperor usually had the final say.

A large educated civil service developed under the Emperors. Though often plagued by corruption and excessive bureaucracy, it functioned well in administering

justice, raising armies, collecting taxes, and carrying out other state duties. It also provided administrative stability during internal and external unrest.

Major trade routes were established and maintained throughout the Empire. By 527, Constantinople was the foremost trade center between Europe and Asia. Silverware and glassware were manufacture there. Silk worms were smuggled to Constantinople during Justinian's reign and it became the first major silk-weaving center in Europe. To Constantinople came "linen cloth from Syria, wine from Gaza, papyrus from Egypt, furs from Cappadocia, slaves and salt from the Black Sea area, and from the Far East, spices *and* precious stones." (8) The Byzantine government monopolized some items and Byzantine gold became the standard gold coin in much of the world.

Byzantium was made up of a commercial middle class along with nobles and peasants from Greece and other parts of the world. Greek became the official language. Eunuchs often held a special place in the state, military and church, largely because they posed little threat to the Emperor and had no family to support. Emperor Heraclius divided Asia Minor into four themes, which were overseen by a military governor and gave rise to a new class of soldier-farmer. In the ninth century, the themes began to be threatened by powerful families, which by the mid-eleventh century were sequestering land from the peasants and by the late thirteenth century were keeping the emperor from collecting taxes and dispensing justice on their lands.

Efforts were made to rectify wrongs and address the needs of the common person. Emperor Romanus I, following the custom of Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid, went into the streets and markets dressed as a peasant to hear the concerns of the people.

The Empire's well-being also was dependent upon the church and a good relationship between the Emperor and the Patriarch. Though not accepted by all, Basil I's revision of Roman law states that "the Empire is a single polity headed jointly by Emperor and Patriarch, working together in parallel for the material and spiritual well-being of their subjects." (9) In practice, the Emperor symbolized the union of church and state, who in addition to his secular duties, appointed the patriarchs, was responsible for calling the Ecumenical Councils, and could offer them his counsel. But the Emperor could not make theological judgments and he was subject to the patriarch's discipline.

Missionaries such as Cyril and Methodius, who went to Moravia, were sent to convert the world to Christianity. Monks, seeking a more ascetic, less worldly life, cultivated infertile land, served urban neighborhoods with schools and social services, and being more among the people, were a force to be reckoned with in civic and ecclesiastical matters. Monasteries became places to which Emperors retired, or were exiled and some, like the landowners, became very prosperous.

Wanting to celebrate their achievements and show off their power and riches, the Byzantines were entertained by performers, wild animals and chariot races in the Hippodrome. Victory parades included the Emperor, his army, the spoils of war, the defeated soldiers and their leaders, and especially icons of the Virgin Mary and the cross. Emperors would host sumptuous feasts where guests would recline at table and eat from vessels made of gold.

In the Palace of the Magnaura, Emperor Theophilus had built a scene around the imperial throne that led to Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium". Guests would come to the

throne that was under a golden tree with branches full of jeweled birds. Some of the birds seemed to jump off the tree and onto the throne. The trunk of the tree was surrounded by golden lions and griffins. When activated, the lions would roar, the animals would stand and the birds sang their songs. A call from the organ silenced the chorus, allowing the emperor and guests to talk. Then, as the guests were leaving, the emperor was lifted up through the roof and the chorus would resume till they were gone.

The heart of Byzantium was expressed in the Orthodox liturgy, which, as I experienced it at St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, is centered in Word and Sacrament and filled with music and ritual that can transpose the worshipper into sensing the eternal realm. Following a special service that was held for Vladimir I's emissaries, they returned to him saying, "we went to Greece (Byzantium) and the Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we know not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty." (10)

Though the Byzantines made strides in reflecting the glory of God's eternal kingdom, they were costly and not always just. Julian the Apostate, who rejected Christianity and was the only Byzantine Emperor to make a concerted effort to return the Empire to the Roman gods of old, found the government to be inefficient and corrupt when he took the throne. He blamed this on Christianity, claiming that its values of love and forgiveness, justice and mercy had stripped the Empire of its Roman values of "reason and duty, honor and integrity." (11) In light of all of the greed, jealousy, intolerance, sheer brutality and war (of which the Empire was hardly ever free), it could be argued that the Empire hardly ever subscribed to the values of the Christian and for

that matter Jewish and Muslim faiths, in that its glory rested more in wealth and power than in love for God and neighbor.

One could say that not much has changed since the Byzantine Empire. Wealth and power, doctrine and liturgy, marriage, inter-faith as well as religious and government relationships, the right to land deemed God-given by some, intolerance and terrorism, Christian unity and spirituality, pluralism, torture, taxation, indebtedness, war, and much more still challenge us and probably will continue to do so as we sail to Byzantium, for we are mortals torn between selfish interests and the common good. Yet, not all is in vain.

Shortly before Constantine the Great died in 337, he was baptized and said, "The long-awaited time has finally come, when I have hoped and prayed to obtain the salvation of God.... Now I too may have the blessing of that seal which confers immortality, the seal of salvation itself." (12) The seal of salvation may vary from faith to faith and belief to belief, but whatever it may be for us, striving to live by God's eternal glory of love and mercy, peace and justice, can bring hope to a struggling, but redeemable world.



### Footnotes

- (1) Norwich, John Julius, *Byzantium, The Early Centuries*, p. 46
- (2) *Ibid.*, p. 52
- (3) Norwich, John Julius, *Byzantium--Decline and Fall*, p. 179
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 214
- (5) Norwich, John Julius, *Byzantium, The Early Centuries*, p. 199
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 68
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 202
- (8) Geanakoplos, Deno J., *Medieval Western Civilization and the Byzantine and Islamic Worlds*, p. 136
- (9) Norwich, John Julius, *Byzantium--The Apogee*, p. 9
- (10) Geanakoplos, Deno J., *Medieval Western Civilization and the Byzantine and Islamic Worlds*, p. 397
- (11) Norwich, John Julius, *A Short History of Byzantium*, p. 25
- (12) Norwich, John Julius, *Byzantium, The Early Centuries*, p. 76

### Bibliography

- Brooks, Sarah. "Byzantium (ca. 330–1453)", Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/byza/hd\\_byza.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/byza/hd_byza.htm) (originally published October 2001, last revised October 2009)
- Geanakoplos, Deno J., *Medieval Western Civilization and the Byzantine and Islamic Worlds*, D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1979
- Norwich, John Julius, *A Short History of Byzantium*, Vintage Books, New York, NY, 1999
- Norwich, John Julius, *Byzantium--The Apogee*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 1992
- Norwich, John Julius, *Byzantium--Decline and Fall*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY 1996
- Norwich, John Julius, *Byzantium, The Early Centuries*, Alfred A. Knopf, NY, New York, March 25, 1989
- Runciman, Steven, *The Byzantine Theocracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977
- Sharf, Andrew, *Byzantine Jewry from Justinian to the Fourth Crusade*, Schocken Books, New York, NY, 1971
- Wells, Colin, *Sailing from Byzantium: How a Lost Empire Shaped the World*, Delacorte Press Book, Bantam Dell, Random House, New York, NY, August 2006