



18. August 2023

Flavia Helena Augusta

Today's meditation is dedicated to St. Helena, Empress and mother of Emperor Constantine. The 18th of August is considered to be the day of her death, which is why her memory is celebrated on this date in some parts of the Catholic Church.

Instead of taking a biblical reading, we will begin this meditation with a few words from the Magnificat canticle:

The Lord *"has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly"* (Lk 1:52).

Helen, the great empress who played such an important role in the spread of Christianity, was born into a poor, pagan family in Bithynia (Asia Minor) around the middle of the 3rd century.

In her adolescence and youth she worked as an innkeeper, and it was there that she met a famous Roman army general named Constantius, who took her as his wife, despite their difference in rank. Helen remained simple and modest, despite the high position she enjoyed thereafter. Around 274, Helen gave birth to her only son, whom we know as Constantine the Great.

But a time of suffering was soon to come for her, for her husband Constantius Chlorus was chosen by Maximian, the Emperor of the Western Roman Empire, to be his co-regent, making him Caesar of the provinces of Gaul and England. As a condition, Maximian demanded that he repudiate his wife Helen, marry his own stepdaughter and send his son Constantine to the court of the Emperor of the East, Diocletian, as a "pledge" of his loyalty.

Thereafter, Helen lived in solitude and silence. However, after Constantius' death, her son Constantine became Caesar and conferred on his mother the title of Augusta, taking her with him to court.

It is said that on the eve of the famous Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine saw a cross in the sky, accompanied by this inscription: "With this sign you will conquer". Having received the interpretation of this vision in a dream, the Emperor had a cross painted on all his banners, and indeed, on 28 October 312, he won the victory and defeated the pagan Maxentius, thus becoming the only Emperor.

This event was of paramount importance for Christianity, because, in gratitude for the victory won under the protection of Christ, Constantine promulgated the Edict of Milan, which put an end to the bloody persecutions of Christians and allowed their expansion throughout the Roman Empire.

We can assume that St. Helena had a great influence on her son. She herself had received baptism after seeing with what joy the Christian martyrs went to death in times of persecution. With great fervour she served her Redeemer. And now, having been appointed Augusta, her high position enabled her to do many charitable works for the poor, for she could dispose of the imperial treasury as she saw fit. But all these honours did not make her heart proud. On the contrary! Her love for her neighbour was not only manifested in her generous alms, but also in her efforts to free prisoners from the mines and from exile. Thus, her faith became concrete in numerous works of mercy.

Although she had already reached an advanced age, Helen decided to set out on a journey to Palestine to venerate the footsteps of her Redeemer. She built churches in the holy places and had excavations made at the site of Calvary, where she finally found the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The two most important churches whose foundations date back to our Empress are the Church of the Nativity, built over the grotto where the Redeemer was born, and the Church of the Resurrection or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

In view of all this, one wonders to what extent Saint Helena may have influenced the conversion of her son Constantine and the promulgation of the Edict of Milan. Thus, this simple woman of Bithynia was called by God to one of the highest civil offices of that time, from where she was able to serve as a tireless and devoted promoter of our holy faith.

We feel especially close to St. Helena because of our frequent stays in Jerusalem. For a long time, we sang daily Lauds and Vespers in the Chapel commemorating the place

where she found the Cross of our Lord, inside the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. We consider her patroness of Harpa Dei and entrust in a special way our apostolic ministry to her. Indeed, the mission of the saints does not end when they reach eternity, but continues.

If St. Helena was so important for the spread of the Christian faith, which today is fading so much in the Western world which formerly used to be called "Christendom", to such an extent that we can almost speak of an "apostasy", then certainly a burning concern of hers would be that this faith should not die out completely.

Before his son Constantine ruled the Empire, most of the Roman Emperors had been very hostile to the Christian faith and many of them cruelly persecuted those who had adhered to it. Unfortunately, this cruelty has been repeated again and again throughout history.

If we do not close our eyes, we will have to realise that many of today's "emperors", i.e. the rulers of this time, are also hostile to the Christian faith. We, as the faithful, must be very attentive and watch carefully for the appearance of a "supreme emperor" with the intention of seizing power over people. Such a one we would have to identify as the "Antichrist".

In any case, we are very grateful to St. Helen, who in many ways has proved to be a generous and trustworthy patroness. May she, as "co-regent" in heaven, obtain for us many graces from God's treasure chamber, so that the incomparable gift of faith will not only not be lost, but will spread throughout the world and lead people back to the house of our Heavenly Father.