

APPENDIX B

The Donation of Constantine

THE SO-CALLED DONATION OF CONSTANTINE is “a forged Roman imperial edict, purportedly issued by the Roman Emperor Constantine I in AD 324, and granting Pope Sylvester I and his successors sovereignty and spiritual authority over Rome, Italy, and the entire Western Roman Empire” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donation_of_Constantine). The deception was not always obvious to everyone, for the detail from the fresco “The Donation of Constantine” (1524) that is still displayed in the Hall of Constantine in the Vatican clearly depicts the Emperor Constantine handing the “donation” to Pope Sylvester. Since the supposed event occurred 1,200 years before the artists put brush to plaster, they had no idea what Sylvester looked like. Therefore they settled for a readily available and politically convenient substitute: the features of the Pope who reigned at the time (Clement VII, 1523-1534). [NOTE: *The celebrated Renaissance painter Raphael designed the entire Hall of Constantine, but his sudden death enabled him to escape the ignominy of actually painting the fresco. After Raphael died on his 37th birthday (April 6, 1520), his assistants completed the work on his behalf.*]

The assertion that Constantine accorded civil authority to the Pope would have astounded the emperor himself, who was fond of intervening in church affairs and certainly had no interest in granting political power to anyone except a Roman official who reported to him. After all, Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) on his own authority, and the Pope did not attend. [NOTE: *Participants in the*



Council of Nicaea adopted the Nicene Creed, which remains accepted as “a Christian statement of faith that is the only ecumenical creed because it is accepted as authoritative by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and major Protestant churches” [Encyclopedia Britannica DVD 2002]. The Council of Nicaea is equally famous for other reasons, as the Midwayer Commission explains on page 2070 of The Urantia Book: “It was a Greek, from Egypt, who so bravely stood up at Nicaea and so fearlessly challenged this assembly that it dared not so obscure the concept of the nature of Jesus that the real truth of his bestowal might have been in danger of being lost to the world. This Greek’s name was Athanasius, and but for the eloquence and the logic of this believer, the persuasions of Arius would have triumphed.”]

The claim that Constantine accorded civil authority to the Pope would also have astounded the entire series of emperors who reigned in the West until the year 476 (i.e., for about 150 years from the time that Constantine relocated his imperial court to the East). In addition, the fraudulent assertion would have seemed utterly laughable to the Germanic chieftain Odoacer (who deposed the last Western emperor), to Theodoric the Ostrogoth

(who defeated Odoacer and ruled Italy from 493 to 526), and to the celebrated Roman general Belisarius (who reconquered Italy in 540 on behalf of the Emperor Justinian). Nowhere did the Pope figure in any of these political events.

The fraudulent document appears to have originated in the 8th or 9th century — somewhere between 750 and 850 — at a time when the knowledge of history was at a low ebb and when the Roman Catholic Church maintained an effective monopoly on education throughout Western Europe. The Midwayer Commission describes the era as follows:

The church, being an adjunct to society and the ally of politics, was doomed to share in the intellectual and spiritual decline of the so-called European “dark ages.” During this time, religion became more and more monasticized, asceticized, and legalized. In a spiritual sense, Christianity was hibernating. Throughout this period there existed, alongside this slumbering and secularized religion, a continuous stream of mysticism, a fantastic spiritual experience bordering on unreality and philosophically akin to pantheism.

During these dark and despairing centuries, religion became virtually second-handed again. The individual was almost lost before the overshadowing authority, tradition, and dictation of the church. A new spiritual menace arose in the creation of a galaxy of “saints” who were assumed to have special influence at the divine courts, and who, therefore, if effectively appealed to, would be able to intercede in man’s behalf before the Gods. [2074:7-8]

The forgers who perpetrated the fraud are lost to history. Leo IX (1049-1054) appears to have been the first Pope who cited “The Donation of Constantine” in an official document. By an interesting coincidence, that text happened to have been a letter he sent in 1054 to Michael Cerularius, the Patriarch of Constantinople. In effect, Leo used “The Donation of Constantine” as evidence that the Pope’s authority extended to civil matters as well as religious affairs. Soon thereafter the Pope excommunicated the Patriarch, who was pleased to return the compliment. Their exchange of mutual regards started the schism that still divides Western Christians from their Eastern orthodox brothers and sisters.

The bottom line. Since we are reviewing actions and events that occurred in centuries that were neither enlightened nor progressive, we may be wise to refrain from expressing outright astonishment at the fraud and ensuing claims of political authority inherited from the Emperor Constantine. On the other hand, I find it surprising that in 1524, the Pope of that rather late date saw fit to display a new fresco in the Vatican depicting the supposed “Donation of Constantine.” This, after all, was over 80 years after the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla had used linguistic analysis to prove that the Latin text of the supposed imperial edict amounted to an utter falsehood (1440). It was also three years after Martin Luther had vigorously contested papal authority at the Diet of Worms (1521).

The Vatican Museums website displays a small image of the fresco “The Donation of Constantine,” plus a three-sentence description (http://mv.vatican.va/3_EN/pages/x-Schede/SDRs/SDRs_01_04_006.html). In that description, the second sentence reads as follows:

The foundation of the state of the church and justification of the temporal power of the Popes was based on this episode (subsequently proved to be legendary).

Some analysts may consider the sentence an adroit evasion, for the word “legendary” effectively sidesteps the legal term “forgery” and the technical term “lie.” Now if Richard could just get through to the mansion worlds and persuade the Emperor Constantine to pledge a drachma a day for the Latin translation, perhaps the Foundation would decide to call that “the donation of Constantine.” Then again, perhaps not.

This appendix was attached to a memorandum dated July 26, 2005 in which I maintained quite strenuously that Urantia Foundation — the sponsor and chief publisher of *The Urantia Book* — should not use images or symbols drawn from the traditions of Christianity, for in my view this would leave an inaccurate and misleading impression.