

Rarely does an emperor come alone: the essence of “Gerolstein – Jerusalem”

The significance of the connections between the Church of the Redeemer in Gerolstein and the three imperial churches in Bethlehem and Jerusalem cannot be fully deduced from the fact that the pictorial programme of the Gerolstein church refers to these Wilhelmine churches in Palestine.

In the context of the church's unquestionably rich iconography, the ‘pictorial programme’ here refers in the narrower sense to the triad of mosaic images in the choir: the symbolic representation of a church in Bethlehem in the south-east, the symbolic representation of a church in Jerusalem in the south-west and the largely realistic representation of the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives in the building of the Auguste-Viktoria-Stiftung, also known as the ‘Ölbergstiftung’ for short, on the west side. The full significance of these connections only becomes apparent when one realises that Wilhelm II repeated Emperor Constantine's church building programme with these three churches! Jürgen Krüger explained this in detail in his “Blaues Buch” (“Blue Book”) about the Church of the Ascension. This is also the reason why I gave the second part of my trilogy in “Die Eifel” the title: “Emperor Constantine in Gerolstein?”.

The Constantinian churches were/are:

- the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem,
- the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (or Resurrection) in Jerusalem and
- the Church of the Ascension (‘Himmelfahrtskirche’ with an ‘s’) on the Mount of Olives, where the Paternoster Church stands today.

The Wilhelmine churches are:

- the Christmas Church in Bethlehem,
- the Church of the Redeemer next to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and
- the Church of the Ascension (‘Himmelfahrtkirche’ without ‘s’) in the north of the Mount of Olives.

Both church building programmes represent the core of the Christian faith: Jesus Christ's birth, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension. This theological triad was first formulated at the Council of Nicaea and has remained an integral part of the ecumenical creed ever since.’ (J. Krüger in the “Blaues Buch” about the Church of the Redeemer in Gerolstein, p. 26).

In 325 AD, 1700 years ago, Constantine (not yet baptised) convened the very first church council in Nicaea. At Constantine's insistence, the council adopted a creed, the ‘Nicene Creed’. The council also had to decide on the ‘nature’ of the Son of God: Christ is of one essence with the Father. Jesus is not a second God: he is of one substance with the Absolute. The dogma of the unity of essence between God the Father and the Son is published as imperial law. From then on, Christians in the Roman Empire were obliged to profess only this creed. By unifying the Christian religion, Constantine pursued the goal of forging a bond that would unite and strengthen his empire; it was therefore also a question of power.

Constantine was proclaimed regent of the western Roman provinces in 306; at that time, Licinius was still co-regent in the eastern Roman provinces. In 324, Constantine defeated Licinius at Adrianople and became sole ruler until his death in 337. He was only baptised on his deathbed. In 313, the Edict of Milan granted freedom of religion to Christianity and other religions. Constantine himself saw himself as ‘episkopos ton ektos’, as bishop for all people outside the Church.

Back to the Rhine province; the first Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre were built around the time of the Council of Nicaea. Also in Trier, a building from the same period bears witness to Constantine: a palace basilica, a construction of imperial representation. This Constantine Basilica is now the Protestant Church of the Redeemer. The name was given by the Prussians. Wilhelm II was not only Emperor of all Germans, but also, as King of Prussia, the 'summus episcopus', the supreme bishop of the Prussian state church. Naming churches after the Redeemer was a popular patronage of the Prussian kings.

In the Church of the Redeemer in Gerolstein, the imagery of the churches of both emperors in Palestine bears witness to the creed of Christianity set in stone – and indirectly to nothing less than Constantine's demand that the Church Fathers establish a binding theology of Christianity.