

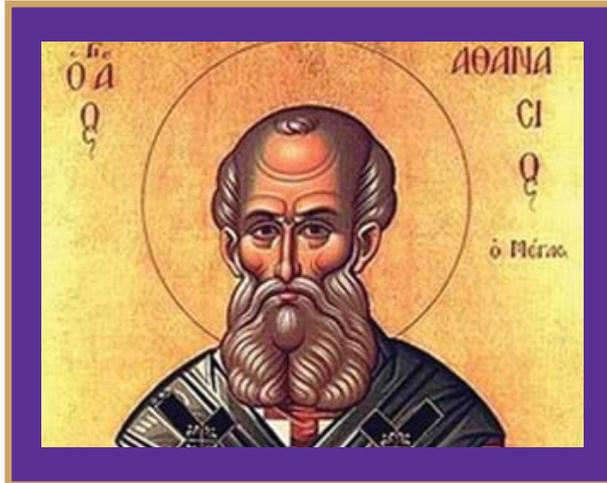
St. Athanasius- Defender of the Divinity of Christ

Almighty ever-living God, who raised up Bishop Saint Athanasius as an outstanding champion of your Son's divinity, mercifully grant, that, rejoicing in his teaching and his protection, we may never cease to grow in knowledge and love of you.

On May 2nd, in both the Maronite and Roman liturgical calendars, the Church celebrates the feast of the great defender of the divinity of Jesus Christ, Saint Athanasius. As we live in times when the Church is experiencing assault from secular powers from without and division within, we recall the life of one of her greatest saints who suffered greatly because of his loyalty to the Church of Jesus Christ.

Of Athanasius' early life and family we know virtually nothing except that he was born in Egypt into a Christian family about the year 297 A.D. He first appears on the scene as a deacon in the Church in Alexandria and secretary to its saintly bishop and Patriarch, Alexander. At this time the see of Alexandria was second in precedence after the see of Rome: the Church in Alexandria having been founded by St. Mark, disciple of St. Peter. Also at this time – the early 4th century – the Church flourished in North Africa having several hundred bishops. Today there are less than ten.

Athanasius makes his appearance when a vicious heresy appears, threatening to destroy Christianity itself: the Arian heresy. One cannot understand the life of Athanasius apart from his role in defeating this heresy. Another deacon of the Church in Alexandria named Arius began teaching a “new theology.” This “new theology” stated



that Jesus Christ was not the incarnate Son of God but a creature. An exulted man to be sure, but still a creature. As Arius argued, how could a father not exist before his son? (Note the appeal to rationalism). According to Arius, “*God has not always been Father; there was a moment when he was alone, and was not yet Father: later*

he became so. The Son is not from eternity; he came from nothing.” In essence, if Jesus were of a different substance from God, he was like all creation, subject to change and decay, capable of committing sin, then he would be better described as a prophet than as God.

Bishop Alexander of Alexandria tried to convince Arius – through private, personal appeals – to cease preaching what was obviously heresy. Arius refused so bishop Alexander, as Patriarch, convened a regional council of North African bishops. At this council one of the Egyptian bishops asked the Arians regarding Christ: “*Can Christ then change from good to evil, as Satan did?*” An Arian answered: “*Since he is a creature, such a change is not impossible.*” The battle lines were clearly drawn. The council then promptly excommunicated Arius and his followers.

But Arius was not about to accept the council's authority: he had powerful backers, particularly Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia. Arius was tall and

lean, of distinguished appearance and polished address. In a word he was SMOOTH. Today's media would have loved him. Women doted on him, especially some seven hundred women, self-proclaimed holy virgins, who campaigned on his behalf. He particularly impressed many Eastern clerics with his aura of intellectual superiority.

With this heresy causing havoc throughout the eastern part of the empire, emperor Constantine calls for a church council to resolve this problem. Athanasius accompanies bishop Alexander and at the First Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., Arius is excommunicated and his heresy condemned by the overwhelming majority of bishops. Pope Liberius, through his papal legates, ratifies the council's decree which declares that Jesus Christ is **consubstantial** (of the same substance) with the Father.

Once again, Arius has no intention of repenting or abiding by the council's decision. Shortly after the council, bishop Alexander dies and the bishops of Egypt, spurred on in part by the enthusiastic cries of the people: "*Give us Athanasius! He will be a bishop indeed!*" elected the youthful Athanasius to be the Bishop of Alexandria.

Because of Athanasius' impassioned teaching of Christ's divinity, the Arians focused their hostility on him and became convinced that if he could be removed, they would be victorious. Arius' greatest ecclesiastical supporter, bishop Eusebius, managed to ingratiate himself with emperor Constantine and became the tutor to Constantine's son and successor, Constantius. Now the Arians had imperial support and they used the power of the Roman state to force their heresy on the Church. Throughout the Church's existence to this day, heretics would seek to use the power of the state to force the Church to conform to their will.

With the accession of Constantius, Athanasius' agony begins. In all he would be deposed and sent into exile 5 different times (one with a death sentence on him) by 4 different Roman emperors (all Arian). During two of these exiles, Athanasius would be given refuge by the monks of Egypt and

would subsequently help introduce monasticism to the West when he took refuge with the Pope. Arianism swept the eastern half of the empire and virtually every important eastern bishop succumbed to this heresy and excommunicated Athanasius. However, Athanasius had an ace up his sleeve: the Rock of Peter.

In resolving the Arian dispute, ecclesiastical councils were of no use because they could not agree. Some synods confirmed Arianism and others repudiated it. The only institution that stood firmly against Arianism was the PAPACY. Pope Liberius twice gave refuge to Athanasius and supported him so strongly that emperor Constantius in a towering rage went to Pope Liberius and exclaimed, "*Who are you to stand up for Athanasius against the world?*" From this encounter comes the phrase "*Athanasius contra mundum*" (Athanasius against the world). A more modern repeat of this occurred when Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and many of the secular powers, the media, other denominations, and in the Church, entire national conferences, exclaimed to him, "*Who are you to stand against the world?*"

To fast forward to the end: it appeared that Arius had won when the Roman emperor ordered that he be re-admitted to the Church and given Holy Communion. The bishop of Constantinople, also named Alexander, secluded himself in prayer, begging God to preserve the sanctity of the Church from the heretic and to bring his divine will down upon Arius. On Sunday, as Arius strolled happily toward the church, accompanied by an entourage, he was suddenly doubled over with pain. He died, on gore-slicked tiles, in a public restroom. Athanasius would finally return to his see and died in peace on May 2, 373.

So what was all the fuss about? It's quite elementary. If Christ is not God but a mere creature e.g., a prophet, a great moral teacher, a superstar, then there is no Incarnation. If there is no Incarnation then there is no Resurrection. If there is no Resurrection (the real event: not a resurrection "experience") then there is no Salvation. If there is no

Salvation then there is no Hope and our faith is in vain and we are the most “pitiable” of all people as St. Paul says.

St. Athanasius teaches us some important truths much needed by us at this particular time. First: our Faith is the TRUTH. Most people in the Western world, including many in the Church, no longer believe that there is objective truth and that it can be known. Instead they have adopted an evolutionary view of all reality, or what Pope Benedict calls the “Dictatorship of Relativism.” Our faith is not a private form of “spirituality” but the TRUTH revealed by Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God.

Second: like St. Athanasius, we should expect to suffer the TRUTH. Remember, his biggest persecutors came from WITHIN the Church. Fr. Robert Barron in an article articulated well why our current cultural and political leadership prefers

the Arian Jesus – the mere harmless creature and vigorously rails against Jesus Christ the Incarnate Son of God whom St. Athanasius championed.

“Again and again, [they say] that they want a Jesus who is ‘apolitical.’ Quite right – and that’s why the cultural and political leaders of the contemporary West will be perfectly at home with [this Jesus]. A defanged, privatized, spiritual teacher poses little threat to the status quo. It is precisely the bland and harmless version of Christianity with which the regnant culture is comfortable. But the Son of God, crucified under Pontius Pilate and risen from the dead through the power of the Holy Spirit, is a permanent and very dangerous threat which is why they are terrified of Him.”

May the example of St. Athanasius inspire us to remain loyal to Christ and His Church, even to the point of suffering. ✠