

SAINT ATHANASIUS



Saint Athanasius (293-373 AD), bishop of Alexandria, and one of the most illustrious defenders of the Christian faith, was born probably at Alexandria in the year 293. Of his family and of his early education nothing can be said to be known. According to the legend, the boy is said to have once baptized some of his playmates and thereupon to have been taken into his house by Bishop Alexander, who recognized the validity of this proceeding.

It is certain that Athanasius was young when he took orders, and that he must soon have entered into close relations with his bishop, whom, after the outbreak of the Arian controversy, he accompanied as archdeacon to the Council of Nicaea. In the sessions and discussions of the council he could take no part; but in unofficial conferences he took sides vigorously, according to his own evidence, against the Arians, and was certainly not without influence. He had already, before the opening of the Council, defined his personal attitude towards the dogmatic problem in two essays, *Against the Gentiles* and *On the Incarnation*, without, however, any special relation to the Arian controversy.

The essay *On the Incarnation* is the *locus classicus* for the presentation of the teaching of the ancient church on the subject of salvation. In this the great idea that God himself had entered into humanity becomes dominant. The doom of death under which humankind had suffered since Adam's fall could only then be averted, when the immortal Word of God assumed a mortal body, and, by yielding this to death for the sake of all, abrogated once for all the law of death, of which the power had been spent on the body of the Lord.

Thus was rendered possible the leading back of humankind to God, of which the sure pledge lies in the grace of the resurrection of Christ. Athanasius would hear of no questioning of this religious mystery. In the catchword *Homousios* (*of the same substance or being*), which had been added to the creed at Nicaea, he too recognized the best formula for the expression of the mystery, although in his own

writings he made but sparing use of it. He was in fact less concerned with the formula than with the content.

Arians and Semi-Arians seemed to him to be pagans, who worship the creature, instead of the God who created all things, since they teach two gods, one having no beginning (the Father), the other (the Son) having a beginning in Time and therefore of the same nature as the heathen gods, since, like them, he is a creature.

Athanasius has no terms for the definition of the Persons in the one "Divine," which are in their substance one; and yet he is certain that this "Divine" is not a mere abstraction, but something truly personal: "They are One," so he wrote later in his *Discourses against the Arians*, "not as though the unity were torn into two parts, which outside the unity would be nothing, nor as though the unity bore two, names, so that one and the same is at one time Father and then his own Son, as the heretic Sabellius imagined. But they are two, for the Father is Father, and the Son is not the same, but, again, the Son is Son, and not the Father himself. But their Nature is one, for the Begotten is not dissimilar to the Begetter, but his image, and everything that is the Father's is also the Son's."

Five months after the return from the Council of Nicaea Bishop Alexander died; and on the 8th of February 326 Athanasius, at the age of thirty-three, became his successor. The first years of his episcopate were tranquil; then the storms in which the remainder of his life was passed began to gather round him. The council had by no means composed the divisions in the Church which the Arian controversy had provoked. Arius himself still lived, and his friend Eusebius of Nicomedia rapidly regained influence over the Emperor Constantine. The result was a demand made by the Emperor that Arius should be readmitted to communion.

Athanasius stood firm, but many accusers soon rose up against the one who was known to be under the frown of the imperial displeasure. Athanasius was charged with cruelty, even with sorcery and murder. It was reported that a bishop of the Meletian party of the name of Arsenius, had been unlawfully put to death by him. He was easily able to clear himself of these charges

Nonetheless, the hatred of his enemies was not relaxed, and in the summer of 335 he was peremptorily ordered to appear at Tyre, where a council had been summoned to sit in judgment upon his conduct. There appeared plainly a predetermination to condemn him, and he fled from Tyre to Constantinople to appeal to the Emperor himself. Refused at first a hearing, his perseverance was at length rewarded by the emperor's assent to his reasonable request that his accusers should be brought face to face with him in the imperial presence.

Accordingly the leaders of the council, the most conspicuous of whom were Eusebius of Nicomedia and his namesake of Caesarea, were summoned to Constantinople. Here they did not attempt to repeat their old charges, but found a more effective weapon to their hands in a new charge of a political kind - that Athanasius had threatened to stop the Alexandrian grain-ships bound for Constantinople.

It is very difficult to understand how far there was truth in the persistent accusations made against the prince-bishop of Alexandria. Probably there was in the very greatness of his character and the extent of his popular influence a certain species of dominance which lent a color of truth to some of the things said against him.

On the present occasion his accusers succeeded at once in arousing the imperial jealousy. Without obtaining a hearing, Athanasius was banished at the end of 335 to Treves in Gaul. This was the first banishment of Athanasius, which lasted about one year and a half. It was brought to a close by the death of Constantine, and the accession as emperor of the West of Constantine II, who, in June 337, allowed Athanasius to return to Alexandria.

He reached his see on the 23rd of November 337, and, as he himself has told us, " the people ran in crowds to see his face; the churches were full of rejoicing; thanksgivings were everywhere offered up; the ministers and clergy thought the day the happiest in their lives." But this period of happiness was destined to be short-lived. His position as bishop of Alexandria placed him, not under his patron Constantine II, but under Constantius, another son of the elder Constantine, who had succeeded to the throne of the East. He in his turn fell, as his father had done in later years, under the influence of Eusebius of

Nicomedia, who in the latter half of 339 was transferred to the see of Constantinople, the new seat of the imperial court.

A second expulsion of Athanasius was accordingly resolved upon. The old accusations against him were revived, and he was further charged with having set at naught the decision of a council. On the 18th of March 339 the Exarch of Egypt suddenly confronted Athanasius with an imperial edict, by which he was deposed and a Cappadocian named Gregory was nominated bishop in his place. On the following day, after tumultuous scenes, Athanasius fled, and four days later Gregory was installed by the aid of the military.

On the first opportunity, Athanasius went to Rome, to "lay his case before the church." A synod assembled at Rome in the autumn of 340, and the great council - probably that which met at Sardica in 342 or 343, where the Orientals refused to meet the representatives of the Western church - declared him guiltless. This decision, however, had no immediate effect in favor of Athanasius. Constantius continued for some time implacable, and the bold action of the Western bishops only incited the Arian party in Alexandria to fresh severities.

The death of the intruder Gregory, on the 26th of June 345, opened up a way of reconciliation. Constantius decided to yield to the importunity of his brother Constans, who had succeeded Constantine II in the West. The result was the restoration of Athanasius for the second time as the bishop of Alexandria on the 21st of October 346. Again he returned to Alexandria amid the enthusiastic demonstrations of the populace, which is described by Gregory of Nazianzus, in his panegyric on Athanasius, as streaming forth like "another Nile" to meet him afar off as he approached the city.

The six years of his residence in the West had given Athanasius the opportunity of displaying a momentous activity. He made long journeys in Italy, in Gaul, and as far as Belgium. Everywhere he labored for the Nicene faith, and the impression made by his personality was so great that to hold fast the orthodox faith and to defend Athanasius were for many people one and the same thing.

After the death of the emperor Constans, Constantius became sole ruler of East and West. With the help of counselors more subtle than

discerning, the emperor, with the object of uniting the various parties in the Church at any cost, sought for the most colorless possible formula of belief, which he hoped to persuade all the bishops to accept.

As his efforts remained for years fruitless, he used force. "My will is your guiding-line," he exclaimed in the summer of 355 to the bishops who had assembled at Milan in response to his orders. A series of his most defiant opponents had to go into banishment, Liberius of Rome, Hilarius of Poitiers and Hosius of Corduba, the last-named once the confidant of Constantine and the actual originator of the *Homousios*, and now nearly a hundred years old.

At length came the turn of Athanasius, now almost the sole upholder of the banner of the Nicene creed in the East. Several attempts to expel him failed owing to the attitude of the populace. On the night of the 8th of February 356, however, when the bishop was holding the Vigils, soldiers and police broke into the church of Theonas. Athanasius himself has described the scene for us: " I was seated upon my chair, the deacon was about to read the psalm, the people to answer, ' For his mercy endures for ever.' The solemn act was interrupted; a panic arose."

The bishop, who was at first unwilling to save himself, until he knew that his faithful followers were in safety, succeeded in escaping, leaving the town and finding a hiding-place in the country. The solitudes of Upper Egypt, where numerous monasteries and hermitages had been planted, seem at this time to have been his chief shelter. In this case, benefit was repayed by benefit, for Athanasius during his episcopate had been a zealous promoter of asceticism and monasticism. With Anthony the hermit and Pachomius the founder of monasteries, he had maintained personal relations, and the former he had commemorated in his *Life of Anthony*.

During his exile his time was occupied in writing on behalf of his cause, and to this period belong some of his most important works, above all the great *Orations* or *Discourses against the Arians*, which furnish the best exposition of his theological principles.

During his absence the see of Alexandria was left without a pastor. It is true that George of Cappadocia had taken his place; but he could only maintain himself for a short while (February 357 - October 358). The great majority of the population remained faithful to the exile. At length, in November 361, the way was opened to him for his return to his see by the death of Constantius. Julian, who succeeded to the imperial throne, professed himself indifferent to the contentions of the Church, and gave permission to the bishops exiled in the late reign to return home. Among others, Athanasius availed himself of this permission, and in February 362 once more seated himself upon his throne, amid the rejoicings of the people.

He had begun his episcopal labors with renewed ardor, and assembled his bishops in Alexandria to decide various important questions, when an imperial mandate again - for the fourth time - drove him from his place of power. The faithful gathered around him weeping. " **Be** of good heart," he said, " it is but a cloud. It will pass." His forecast proved true; for within a few months Julian had closed his brief career of pagan revival.

In early September 363, Athanasius was able to travel to Jovian, the new emperor, who had sent him a letter praising his Christian fidelity and encouraging him to resume his work. He returned to Alexandria on the 10th of February 364. With the emperor he continued to maintain friendly relations; but the period of repose was short. In the spring of 365, after the accession of Valens to the imperial throne, troubles again arose.

Athanasius was once more compelled to seek safety from his persecutors in concealment (October 365), which lasted, however, only for four months. In February 366 he resumed his episcopal labors, in which he henceforth remained undisturbed. On the 2nd of May 373, having consecrated one of his presbyters (priests) as his successor, he died quietly in his own house.

Athanasius was a man of action, but he also knew how to use his pen for the furtherance of his cause. He left a large number of writings, which cannot of course be compared with those of an Origen, a Basil, or a Gregory of Nyssa. Athanasius was no systematic theologian. All his treatises are occasional pieces, born of controversy and intended

for controversial ends. The interest in abstract exposition of clearly formulated theological ideas is everywhere subordinate to the polemical purpose. But all these writings are instinct with a living personal faith, and serve for the defence of the cause; for it was not about words that he was contending.

Even those who do not sympathize with the cause which Athanasius steadfastly defended cannot but admire his magnanimous and heroic character. If he was imperious in temper and inflexible in his conception of the Christian faith, he possessed a great heart and a great intellect, inspired with an enthusiastic devotion to Christ. As a theologian, his main distinction was his zealous advocacy of the essential divinity of Christ.

Christianity in its Arian conception would have evaporated in a new polytheism. To have set a dam against this process with the whole force of a mighty personality constitutes the importance of Athanasius in the world's history. It is with good reason that the Church honors him as the "Great," and as the "Father of Orthodoxy."