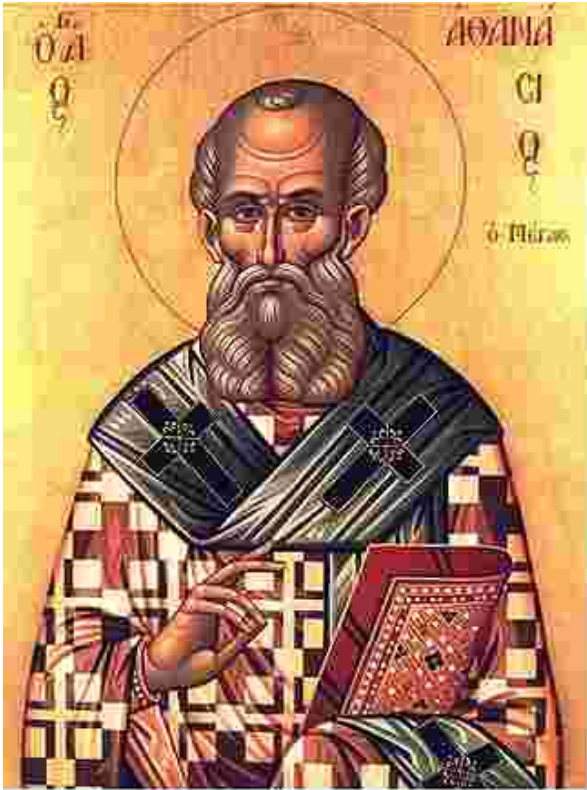


# Who Was St. Athanasius?

By John La Boone

“Jesus became what we are that he might make us what he is.” – *St. Athanasius of Alexandria*



Last time, I wrote about the Feed My Sheep food bank that is a mission of our sister church, St. Athanasius Episcopal, in Brunswick. Among other things, that got me to wondering about the saint for whom that church is named, so I did a little research and found out that he had quite a life and career.

He is most often referred to as St. Athanasius of Alexandria but is sometimes called Athanasius the Great or Athanasius the Confessor. In the Coptic Orthodox Church he is known as Athanasius the Apostolic. During his lifetime he was called *Athanasius Contro Mundum*, which is Latin for “Athanasius against the world” because he had so many adversaries and he was not shy at all about standing up to them and championing what he believed was the truth. That included four different emperors

of Rome who exiled him on five occasions. Some of his enemies called him “the black pigmy.” It seems that he was short and dark skinned. Just shows that then, as now, church people sometimes give in to the temptation to personally malign those with whom they disagree.

Athanasius was born into a Christian family in the Egyptian city of Alexandria sometime between 296 and 298 in the Common Era (C.E.). His parents had means and they provided a very good classical education for him. He became a scholar with considerable knowledge of the Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle. He was well versed in grammar and rhetoric and fluent in Greek, which was the language he most often used for his extensive religious writings. But he also knew the Coptic language, in which he sometimes wrote and preached. He did not know Hebrew, though, and had to rely on Greek translations for his study of the Old Testament. He had a strong religious education as well.

He was a young student during the last set of Roman government persecutions of the Church right before Christianity was made legal and became the official religion

of the Empire in 312 C.E. In that year, Bishop Alexander of Alexandria invited Athanasius to be his personal secretary. Athanasius served the bishop as his chief deacon during the historic First Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. when, under the direction of the Roman Emperor Constantine, many of Christianity's bishops tried to officially hammer out a set of uniform statements of belief and canons of doctrinal orthodoxy. Constantine once said, "Division in the Church is worse than war." He didn't mind much what they came up with to believe in, as long as there was a reliable, uniform system of belief and practice. He just wanted the Church to perform like a well oiled, trouble-free machine in the interests of having a stabile, well functioning society.

Of the 1,800 bishops who were invited to the council, about 300 showed up. Each was allowed to bring two priests and three deacons along. It was a big gathering. The council tackled several important issues but its main focus was to define the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God the Father. Up until then, there had been widespread disagreement that had built up into a raging controversy.

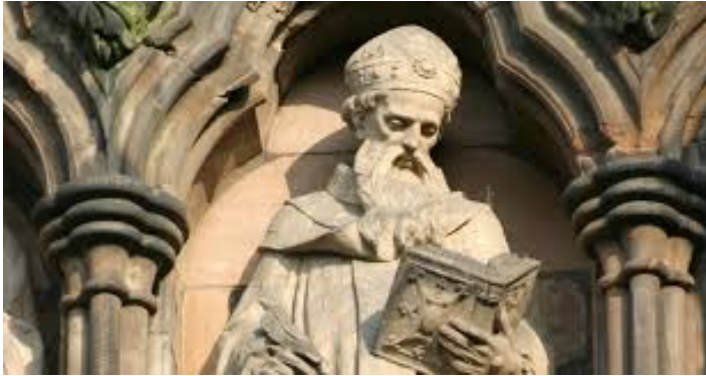


For the first time, the Church felt it was necessary to have an official orthodoxy (meaning "right belief") because Christianity, unlike most other religions of that time, required its adherents to believe certain things in order to receive salvation and avoid damnation. Most other religions required proper actions but did not stress proper beliefs.

Today we pray for Christian unity, often believing that in the early period of the Church we had unity and somehow lost it over the centuries that followed. Actually in the early period of Christianity there were enormous differences from one church to another concerning ritual, teachings, sacred texts, and roles for leadership – and there was some significant dispute over certain basic beliefs. Church leaders disagreed passionately with each other. People looked back to Jesus as the original authority of what was right and true. After the crucifixion, they looked to his disciples the Apostles to transmit the correct teachings with authority. But as the Apostles died out, different congregations in different parts of the Roman Empire developed their own interpretations and practices; plus, they sometimes differed in which books they held to be sacred to guide them. So, there got to be considerable differences, each group claiming to be authoritative and correct in its views, and these differences grew as the years passed.

The single biggest disagreement during the life of Athanasius was over the nature and substance of Jesus. Some people, like Athanasius, believed Jesus to be one person of the Godhead, completely divine, even though he was also completely human during his earthly ministry. They believed that Jesus had existed throughout all eternity, and that he is co-equal with God the Father and co-equal with God the

Holy Spirit. Other Christian thinkers, usually referred to as Arians, believed that Jesus was begotten of the Father and is therefore subordinate to the Father and that he had not existed before he was begotten.



The Arian point of view was named after Arius a Libyan priest, teacher and theologian who was also active in Alexandria. There were many Christians who held this position but Arius was the strongest and clearest voice in that camp. Opposed to him was Athanasius who was the strongest and most eloquent voice for the Trinitarian belief system. The controversy raged throughout the worldwide Church, each side using Scripture and intelligent arguments to refute the other side and try to settle the issue once and for all. The first organized attempt to resolve this was at that first ecumenical (meaning "worldwide") council in the writing and adoption of the Nicene Creed, which we say every Sunday. Athanasius, even at a very young age, was hugely influential in formulating the creed in a way that boldly affirmed the Trinitarian belief system. In the end, the council formally adopted the theology advocated by Athanasius.

However, that was not the end of Arianism. It survived and flourished for several centuries in the Germanic tribes of Central and Western Europe, in the Visigoths who settled Spain and Portugal, in Northern Italy, in North Africa and elsewhere. When the Protestant Reformation broke the authority of the Roman Catholic Church in Northern Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century, it did not take long for non-Trinitarian churches to emerge, although they were always a minority. Some of their beliefs seem similar to Arianism but did not necessarily descend directly from the teachings of Arius. Even so, many individual Christians today who belong to Trinitarian faiths have personal beliefs about the nature of Jesus that are essentially Arian. (Examples of modern day faiths that are sometimes described as Arian are the Unitarians and Jehovah's Witnesses, although those claims are debated by many.)

Arius did not question Jesus' exalted status over all creation and special relationship to God the Father. He just believed that Jesus could not be eternal in the same sense that the Father is eternal. "There was a time when he [Jesus] was not," Arius

famously said. For Athanasius, combating that teaching was the most important thing in the world because he was convinced that if a person did not believe correctly concerning this, he or she would forfeit salvation. It was a very formulaic, no-nonsense approach to understanding how God works, which was common in that age and for a long time afterward. Today we tend to focus more on God's tender mercy and concern for his people, and to be drawn toward a God whose love is inexhaustible and complete, rather than one who is dangerous and fiercely judgmental.

Athanasius had other interesting items on his résumé. For one thing, he lived a remarkably long life. He was somewhere between 75- and 79-years-old when he died. That was about three times the normal human lifespan at that point in history. He was bishop of Alexandria for 45 years, even though he was forced into exile for 17 of those years. At the young age of about 30, he was consecrated bishop of Alexandria in 326 C.E., which made him patriarch of the churches in Africa. He also held the title of "pope." Today we think of the Catholic bishop of Rome who is head of the Roman Catholic Church as the one and only pope, but that's not historically true. The first known usage of the title of pope was by Bishop Heraclas of Alexandria in Egypt, who was installed in 246 C.E. The title comes from the Greek *Papás*, which originally was a form of address meaning "Father." The bishops of the Roman Church did not use that title until the 6<sup>th</sup>-century. The patriarchs of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria still use the title of pope; the current one is Pope Tawadros II who was elevated to that position in 2012.



Athanasius was a very influential and prolific writer. His treatise called "On the Incarnation" served as the basis for the Trinitarian party at the Council of Nicaea and did much to help promote the writing and acceptance of the Nicene Creed. Athanasius was known as an ascetic and was keenly interested in the emerging monastic movement. He may have even personally known his fellow Egyptian St. Anthony the Great, who is considered the father of Christian monasticism. Athanasius' book "The Life of St. Anthony" helped to shape the Christian ideal of monastic life and was a best seller of the day. It is said that it did much to influence pagans, such as the future St. Augustine of Hippo, to convert to Christianity. Athanasius did a lot of other writing, notably on understanding Scripture and on devotional practice. By the way, the so-called "Athanasian Creed" was not actually written by Athanasius. Scholars believe that was written by an unknown author in the 5<sup>th</sup>- or early 6<sup>th</sup>-century and misattributed to him.

Each year Athanasius wrote a Festal Letter that set the dates for Lent and Easter and other Church festivals. These letters also discussed topics of general interest to the faithful. In his 39<sup>th</sup> Festal Letter written in 367 C.E. Athanasius named 27 books that he considered canonical for the Christian faith from among the many documents that were being circulated and used by churches. These are the same 27 books that make up what we call the New Testament today. There were other lists composed by other church leaders but the books that Athanasius selected ended up becoming the official canon that was eventually formalized by the Church.

Athanasius is called one of the four great Doctors of the Eastern Church, a Pillar of the Faith, the Champion of Christ's Divinity and the Father of Orthodoxy. He is venerated in the Anglican Communion, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church. In Western Christianity his feast day is May 2, although the Coptics honor him on May 15 and the Eastern Orthodox on January 18. He is considered the patron saint of theologians and of faithful Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians. There is a major shrine to him at St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo, Egypt where part of his remains are interred. In stained glass or other Christian art, he is often depicted as a bishop holding an open book or writing in a book or debating with a heretic or standing over a defeated heretic.

To his credit, Athanasius was a man of peace and love. He was passionate about what he believed but he did not persecute others who differed from him. He was a tireless pastor and administrator as well as a great thinker. For me, looking at the life and career of St. Athanasius says that throughout the history of Christianity we have had to struggle for understanding as we seek more revelation. We do this by prayer, meditation, study, dialogue, collaborative efforts, works of mercy, and our ongoing attempts to appropriately use our God-given intelligence. The red hot controversies of one generation of Christian thinkers may differ from those of another generation, but the struggle to understand God's will and to live in love and respect with each other as a family of faith continues. We have many divisions among ourselves but I think at this point in history we are listening to each other more – and, thank goodness, Christians are no longer waging genocidal wars against each other or burning each other at the stake when we disagree. That in itself is something of a miracle and it encourages much hope.

*Provident Father, we pray for your holy universal Church: fill it with all truth and healing. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any way it is amiss, reform it; where it is proud, humble it; where it is right, strengthen it; where it is spiteful, make it tender; where it is in need, provide for it; where it is hostile, pacify it; where it is divided, reunite it; all for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. Amen.*