

St. Athanasius

BORN 295 OR 296; DIED 373
BISHOP AND DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH
FEAST DAY: MAY 2

NOW OFTEN is the claim made that “everybody’s doing it,” whatever preferred form of wrongdoing the favorite “it” of the moment is? Somehow, wrong becomes right and falsehood becomes truth, because “most” people believe it so. The life of St. Athanasius is testimony to the power of truth over the power of “everybody”; he is a model and teacher of how to hold fast to what is right and true.

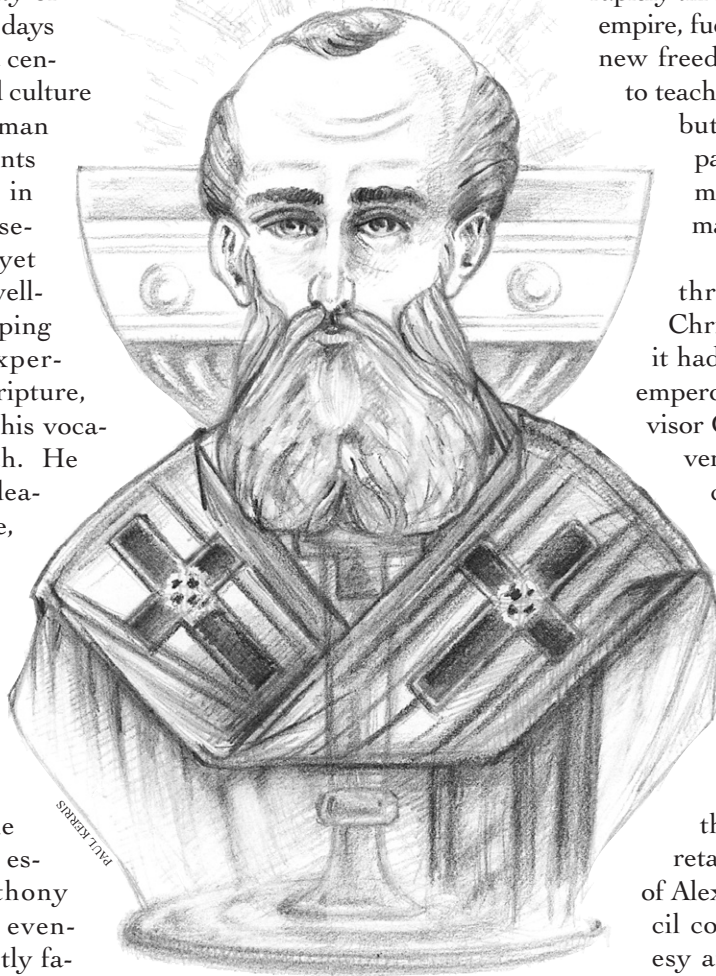
Athanasius was born in the great Egyptian city of Alexandria, in the days when it was still a center of learning and culture for the entire Roman Empire. His parents were Christians, in a time when persecutions had not yet ended. He was well-educated, developing especially an expertise in Sacred Scripture, and early sought his vocation in the Church. He was ordained a deacon at twenty-one, and in addition to his great learning began to learn the ways of prayer, ascetical living, and holiness from the monks and hermits of the Egyptian desert, especially St. Anthony about whom he eventually wrote a justly fa-

mous biography. He was gifted with an exceptional intellect, was a skillful debater, and was a great writer and speaker. In addition, he was well known for his great charm, kindness, and good humor.

In 317, when Athanasius was twenty-two and only four years after the emperor Constantine had legalized Christianity, the Arian heresy which nearly destroyed Christian orthodoxy arose. The proponent of this heresy, a priest named Arius, taught that Jesus was not truly divine, uncreated, and eternal in the same sense as God the

Father, but was instead a creature of the Father. The heresy spread rapidly throughout the Roman empire, fueled not only by the new freedom of the Church to teach and preach openly but eventually by the patronage of various members of the Roman emperor’s family.

Alarmed by the threat of a break in Christianity just when it had become legal, the emperor at his bishop-advisor Ossius’ urging convened a Church council, held in Nicaea (in modern Turkey) in 325, presided over by Ossius and sanctioned by Pope Silvester. Athanasius attended this council as theologian and secretary to the Patriarch of Alexandria. The council condemned the heresy and Arius, and de-



veloped most of the Nicene Creed recited at every Sunday Mass.

Soon after the Council of Nicaea concluded, Athanasius succeeded as Patriarch of Alexandria, then one of the four most important bishoprics in the Roman empire (the others being Rome, Antioch, and Jerusalem). He bent his efforts to ensuring that correct doctrine was taught, destroying Arianism, and carrying out the decisions of the Council of Nicaea. This effort became the hallmark of the remainder of his life.

His heroic dedication to the truth of orthodox doctrine was matched only by the strength of the opposition, which sought to destroy his reputation by accusing him of murder, treason, sacrilege, and embezzlement to force his removal from office. He was banished no less than five times, spending altogether seventeen of the remaining forty-five years of his life in exile, and several times had to undergo council and synod proceedings to clear his name. The emperor Constantius, one of Constantine's sons, regarded Athanasius as a personal enemy, and Athanasius was banished by Constantius' successor Julian and the later emperor Valens as well. Once he was forced to hide among the desert monks for six years, a period he used fruitfully in writing many of his greatest works. Through it all, the people of Alexandria gave him the love and sup-

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Christ, by El Greco, 1541-1614

port that this true shepherd of his people had, throughout his life, offered to them.

The unwillingness of Constantine to hold firmly against Arius and the outright support of emperors succeeding Constantine helped the Arian heresy to become widespread throughout the Roman empire, so that for a while the bishops in heresy were actually in a majority. Despite this, Athanasius never wavered in championing the truth of Jesus' nature as true God, to be worshipped in exactly the same way as God the Father is worshipped. Without exaggeration, it can be said that Athanasius, against the opposition of emperors and the often-violent

attacks of his Arian opponents, nearly single-handedly preserved the Christian doctrine of the coequal divinity of Christ with the Father. This doctrine is of overwhelming importance because Jesus himself claimed divinity. If this claim is false, his entire life and message are false. If this claim is false, he is not Truth itself. If this claim is false, humanity's need for a divine Redeemer — for redemption at all — and the deadly seriousness of sin are false beliefs. If this claim is false, there is no Trinity, no community of divine persons eternally giving themselves to each other in love.