

Saint  
Athanasius  
*contra*  
*mundum*



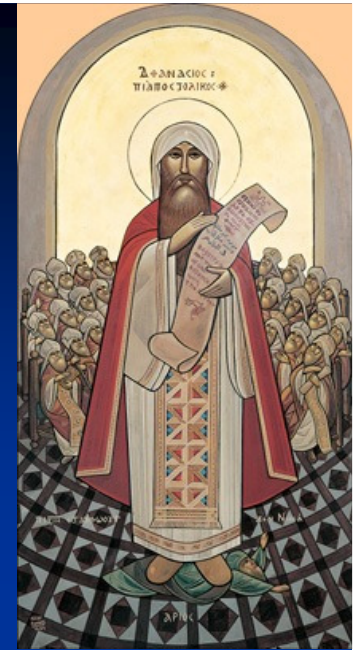
# Trivia

- When was St. Athanasius born ?
- What was his nationality?
- How did he meet Pope Alexander?
- Which heresy did he fight all his life?
- Who was Arius?
- What did St. Athanasius fight against most of his life?
- How many times was he exiled?
- How old was St. Athanasius when he was ordained Pope? How long did he stay as a Pope?

# Introduction

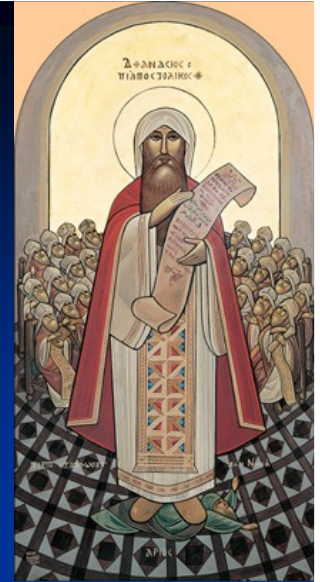
- “Every student of Church History in the fourth century knows that it was St Athanasius who, in the 40 years of the Arian reaction that followed the Council of Nicea, stood for and saved the Catholic faith in the Godhead of our Lord. From that confessorship, *Athanasius contra mundum* has passed into a proverb and every generation of Christians...has done him honour.”

- The Life of St Athanasius



# Early Years

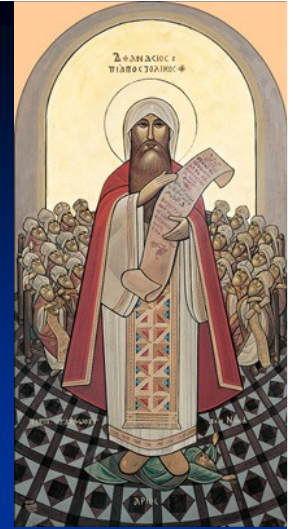
- Born in Alexandria in 298AD
- Parents were wealthy Christians
- He received a liberal and Christian education at the Catechetical school of Alexandria
- 3 strong influences on his early life:
  1. Persecution of the church
  2. St Anthony the Great
  3. Pope Alexander



# Early Influences

## 1. Persecution of the Church:

- From 303 to 311 AD most severe period of persecution of the Coptic Church under Diocletian and then Maximin
- Athanasius certainly would have known and seen martyrs confessing their faith and being martyred as a result
- From age 5 to 13, he not only learned the Christian faith, but he saw it in action



# Early Influences

## 2. Saint Anthony:

- Became a monk in approx 285AD
- During persecutions, many Christians took refuge in the desert
- In “The Life of St Anthony” by Athanasius he wrote that he “was his attendant for a long time” and “I saw the saint often and poured water on his hands”
- The most likely time of this companionship was in his boyhood
- There was between them a close friendship for the remainder of their lives

# Early Influences

## 3. Pope Alexander (19<sup>th</sup> Pope)

- Saw boys playing on the beach and noticed they were practicing the rite of baptism
- Called for them, Athanasius described the ritual of baptism with all its complex details (14 yrs old)
- The Pope chrismated them, recognising the baptism
- Asked Athanasius' parents that he live in the papal residence and soon became the papal secretary and an archdeacon

# Early Writings

- In 318AD as the papal secretary, Athanasius wrote two books to his friend Macarius:
  - Against the Heathens
    - Refutes Greek paganism and the lewd sexual pagan gods
  - On the Incarnation
    - The central mystery of Christianity is that the Word of God took flesh and became a real man, and that this was necessary to trample death and accomplish salvation.
- NOTE: This is not a defense of Christianity against heretics, as Arius was not to start preaching for another year



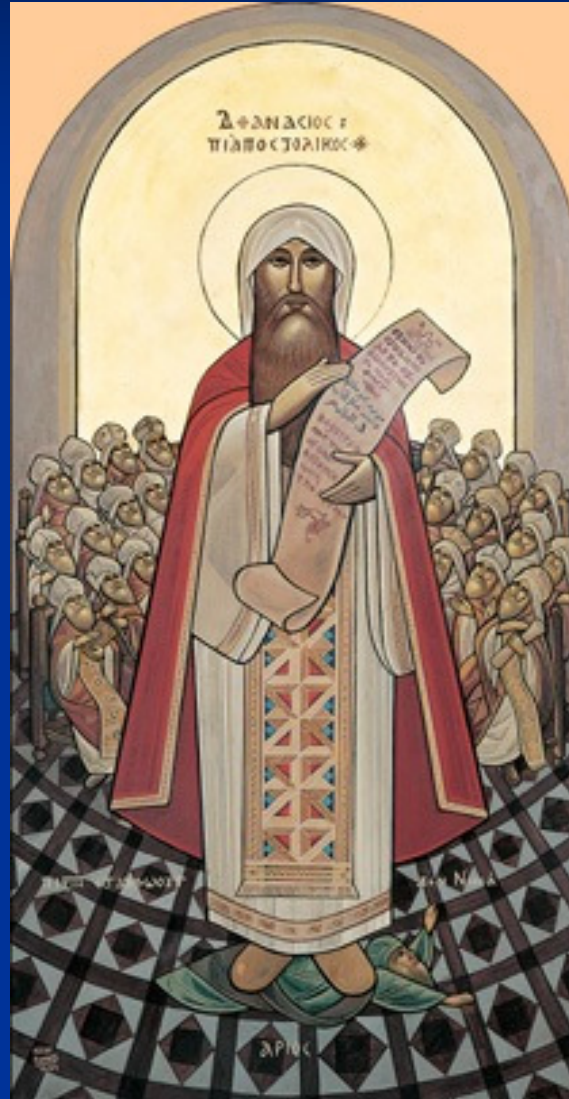
# On the Incarnation

- “In our former book we dealt fully enough with a few of the chief points about the heathen worship of idols....We also by God’s grace, briefly indicated that the Word of the Father is Himself divine....and that it is through Him that the Father gives order to creation, by Him that all things are moved, and through Him that they receive their being.
- Now, Macarius, true lover of Christ, we must take a step further in the faith of our holy religion, and consider also the Word’s becoming Man and His divine appearing in our midst. That mystery the Jews reject, the Greeks ridicule, but we adore; and your own love and devotion to the Word also will be greater, because in His Manhood He seems so little worth.
- For it is a fact that the more unbelievers pour scorn on Him, so much the more does He make His Godhead evident. The things which they as men rule out as impossible, He plainly shows to be possible; that which they deride as unfitting, His goodness makes most fit; and the things which they laugh at as “human”, He by His inherent might declares Divine”
  - *On the Incarnation (p.1)*

# On the Incarnation

- Starts with the fall of Adam, sin entering the world, and death gaining a hold over humanity.
- Christ came to renew the image of man by destroying death and making Himself known as the true image of Man and God.
- At the same time as He was a child, a carpenter, and a crucified criminal, He was God, immortal, full of Divine energy, and He was still:
  - “present in all things by His own power, giving order to all things, and over all and in all revealing His own providence, and giving life to each thing and all things, quickening the whole universe”
- At the same time He was truly man:
  - “having a body in truth and not in seeming in order that He might die and accomplish the death of all things in His own body. For there was need of death, and death must be suffered on behalf of all, that the debt owing from all might be paid”

# Battle Against Arianism



# Start of Arianism

- 319AD – Arius started preaching
  - Note – only 6 years after the end of persecutions
- He was an Egyptian priest, originally from Libya
- Charismatic, large following, good speaker
- Began claiming:
  - “If the Father begat the Son, then He who was begotten had a beginning in existence; and from this it follows there was a time when the Son was not. It follows further that He received substance out of nothing”
  - Christ was no more than a mediator between man and God
- The cry of the Arians became:
  - “There was a time when the Son was not”

# Start of Arianism

- Pope Alexander and Athanasius immediately saw the depth of heresy:
  - If there was a time when the Son was not, such that He was created, then He is infinitely lower than the Father
  - He is then less than God, and His death cannot have been enough to loose the bonds of death
- Pope Alexander and Athanasius believed the heresy could destroy the church to its foundations and called for Arius:
  - Read description of Arius – *Holy Fire* p.74
  - They asked Arius to reject the heresy but he refused
  - Arius and his followers were deposed

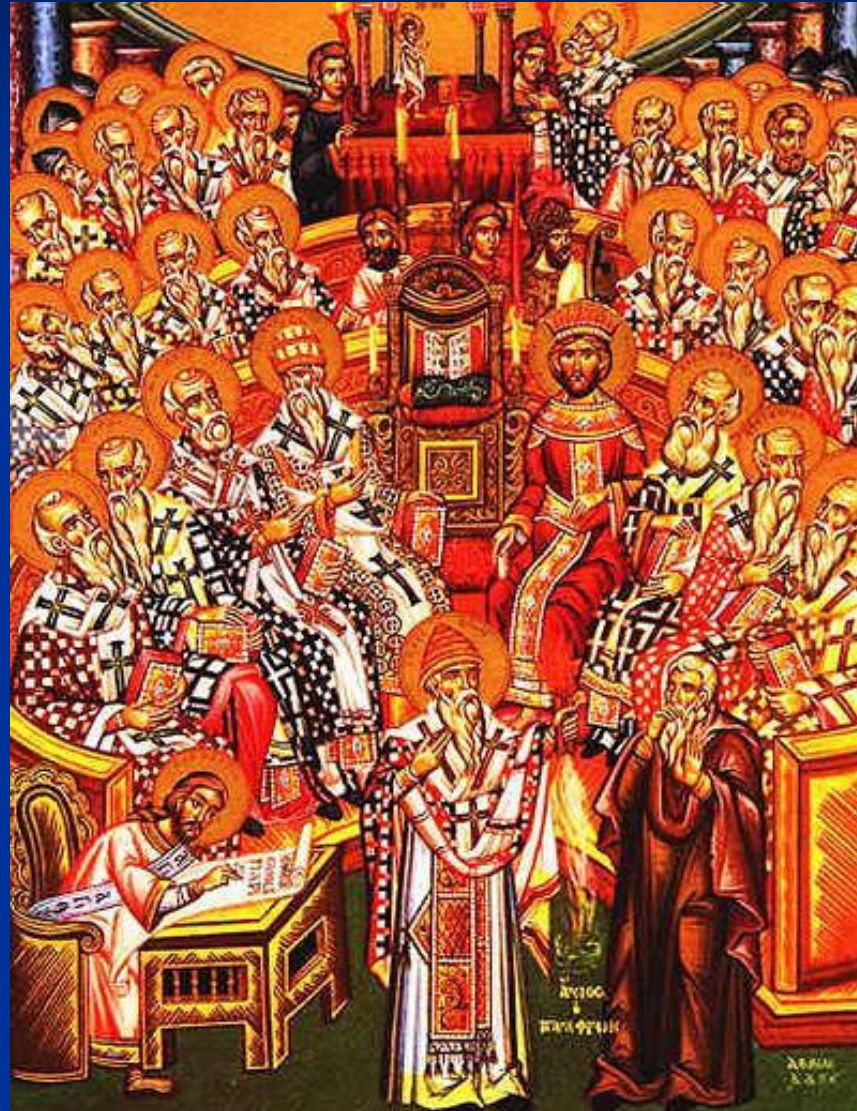
# Letter by Alexander

- Encyclical letter explained some of the consequences of the Arian heresy (possibly written by Athanasius):
- “The novelties the Arians put forward are these...: God was not always a Father, for there was a time when God was not a Father. The Word of God was not always, but originated from things that were not...for the Son is a creature and a work; neither is He like in essence to the Father; neither is He the true and natural Word of the Father; neither is He His true wisdom; but He is one of the things made and created....Therefore He is by nature subject to change and variation, as are all rational creatures....And the Father cannot be described by the Son, for the Word does not know the Father perfectly and accurately, neither can He see Him perfectly.....Accordingly when someone asked then whether the Word of God can possibly change, as the devil changed, they were not afraid to say that He can; for being something made and created, His nature is subject to change.”

# Arius Deposed

- Arius and teaching rejected
- Arius withdrew to Nicomedia where he had a strong following of Bishop Eusebius and many people
- His heresy spread like fire across the empire, with bishops rising against bishops, and the church in danger of splitting:
  - “In former times the church was attacked by enemies and strangers from without. Today those who are native of the same country, who dwell under one roof and sit down at table together, fight with their tongues as if with spears”
- There was danger of civil war and Emperor Constantine called the first general ecumenical council in Nicea in 325 AD

# Council of Nicaea





# Council of Nicea

- 318 bishops from the whole empire (mostly the east)
- Pope Alexander attended with Athanasius as his secretary
- All gathered together in one hall in the presence of Constantine
- Pope Alexander was seated beside the Emperor
- Athanasius stood just behind the Pope
- Arius called to explain the nature of his beliefs
- After speaking first he sang a song....

# Council of Nicea

*The uncreated God has made the Son  
A beginning of things created,  
And by adoption has God made the Son,  
Into an advancement of Himself,  
Yet the Son's substance is  
Removed from the substance of the Father:  
The Son is not equal to the Father,  
Nor does He share the same substance.  
God is the all-wise Father,  
And the Son is the teacher of His mysteries:  
The members of the Holy Trinity  
Share unequal glories.*



# Council of Nicea

- Athanasius called to respond on behalf of Pope Alexander (age 27 yrs)
- No record of what he said – likely argued step-by-step all of the errors that result from the Arian heresy
- The Emperor began favouring the anti-Arian bishops
- A proposal was made to formulate a Creed
- Emperor Constantine agreed that Christ should be defined as “*homoousios*” – of one essence with the Father – “Light from Light, true God from true God; begotten not made; co-essential with the Father....”

# Council of Nicea

- Arius and his teachings were anathematized
- Constantine issued a decree that all Arius' books be burned:
  - “so that his depraved doctrine shall be entirely suppressed and so that there shall be no memorial of him left in the world”
  - Any person concealing an Arian book was punishable with death
- Many other issues considered during the Council over 7 weeks:
  - Date of Easter
  - Whether the clergy can marry

# Pope Athanasius

- Pope Alexander and Athanasius returned to Alexandria victorious
- However, despite the victory against Arius, the fight against Arianism had only just begun and was to continue for many decades
- In 328AD Pope Alexander, elderly and ill, appointed Athanasius to be his successor
- Athanasius was not willing, but after the death of Alexander he was elected as Pope (29 to 30 yrs old)
- He remained on the throne for 46 years (20<sup>th</sup> Pope)
- Athanasius had a close relationship with the monks and was loved by the people

# Arius Returns

- Arius had powerful followers among Bishops and people in the Imperial Court
- In 328 AD they were able to persuade Constantine that the anathema of the Council of Nicaea was too harsh and that Arius should be accepted again
- Constantine signed an order allowing Arius to continue his preaching
- Athanasius wrote to the Emperor accusing him of being too lenient, and forgetting the troubles caused by Arius
- Athansius fell out of favour with the Emperor for this

# First Exile

- Rumours and accusations were made by Arians against Athanasius: black magic, murder, violence
- A trial was convened but Athanasius defended himself against the main accusation:
  - That he had killed Bishop Arsenius, cut off his hand and used it in black magic. A severed hand was produced as evidence
  - Read p.91
  - He was still found guilty of other offences
- Athanasius travelled to Constantinople, waited for the passing Emperor, grabbed the reins of horse and proclaimed his innocence
- The Emperor exiled Athansius to Treves (in France)

# Arius Death

- He died mysteriously on 336 AD
- Bishop Alexander the bishop of Jerusalem was ordered to accept Arius in the church. The saintly old bishop prayed in tears asking the Lord to accept his departure from the world before seeing Arius entering the church.
- On that Sunday while Arius was in the procession of entering the church among his supporters , he felt pain and went to the toilet where he found dead as his bowel came down of his body.]



# First Return

- On Constantine's death in 337 AD, Athanasius was allowed to return
- Thousands of people, bishops and monks went to meet his returning ship with great celebrations



# Second Exile

- Emperor of the West, Constantine, was orthodox, but his brother Constans in the East was Arian.
- Constantine was murdered and again Arius was exiled, and an Arian Bishop sent to rule in his place
- Athanasius fled to Rome to live with Pope Julius in 340 AD
- Second exile lasted 5 years
- Arianism became entrenched in the East

# Second Return

- 345 AD an Alexandrian mob killed the Arian Bishop
- Emperor Constantius allowed Athanasius to return on the condition he would allow an Arian church in Alexandria
- Athanasius agreed if the Emperor would allow an orthodox church in Arian controlled Antioch
- The Emperor dropped his demand
- 346AD Athanasius returned to Alexandria – again to overwhelming reception

# Third Exile

- 356AD Constantius again exiled Athanasius and sent a general and 5,000 troops to remove him
- Athanasius fled into the desert, and another Arian Bishop was enthroned
- Of this time St Jerome wrote: “The whole world groaned, and was amazed to find itself Arian”
- During this time he wrote letters, books and apologies:
  - Apology to Constantius (in his defence)
  - Apology for my flight
  - History of the Arians:
    - Rages against the Emperor calling him names like Saul, Ahab, Pilate, Antichrist, a poor idiot with no mind of his own doomed to hell fire
- Exiled for 6 years

# Third Return and Fourth Exile

- 362 AD Constantius died and Julian, a pagan, became Emperor
- Again the Alexandrians killed the Arian Bishop
- Athanasius returned to his throne
- However, he was immediately exiled again by Julian because he had returned to Alexandria without waiting for an imperial decree to do so.
- Athanasius returned to live in the desert
- 363AD Julian killed at war
- Emperor Jovian was orthodox and reaffirmed Athanasius on his throne

# Final Exile

- 364AD Jovian died and was replaced by Emperor Valens, an Arian
- 367AD he ordered all non-Arian bishops be banished
- This lasted 6 months then he allowed their return
- From 367AD to his death in 373AD there was peace in Egypt and Athanasius remained on his throne
- Departed in May 373AD at the age of 75 yrs

**1<sup>st</sup>. exile -2 years**  
(335-337) Trier Germany

**Constantine I**  
313-337

**Constans**  
337-350  
*WEST*

**Constantine II**  
337-340

**Constantius**  
337-350  
*EAST*

**2<sup>nd</sup>. exile -6 years**  
(340-346)- Rome  
[Spread Monastic life]

**Constanstius**  
350-361  
*ALL EMPIRE*

**3<sup>rd</sup>. exile- 6 years**  
(356-362)  
[ Egyptian desert ]

**Julian the Apostate**  
361- 363

**4<sup>th</sup>. exile- 6 years**  
(362-363)  
[ Egyptian desert ]

**Jovian**  
363- 364

**Valens**  
364- 378

**5<sup>th</sup>. exile -1 year**  
(365- 366)  
[ Egyptian desert ]

# Writings

1. Life of St Anthony
2. Against the Heathens
3. On the Incarnation
4. Apology to Constantius
5. Apology for my flight
6. History of the Arians
7. Letters – Paschal letters, letters to Bishops
8. Biblical exegesis – mostly OT
9. Discourse on Virginitiy
10. On Sickness and Health



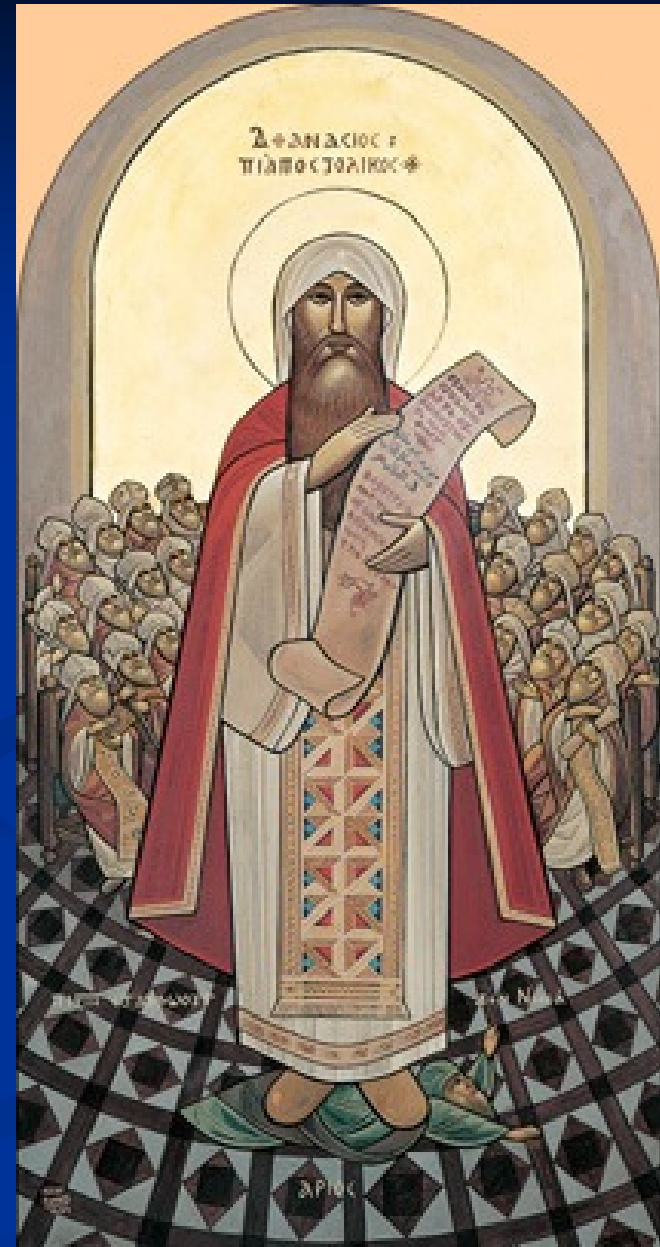


# Writings

- Attempted to write another book about the incarnation of Christ (40 yrs after the first) but of this attempt he wrote:
  - “the more I desired to write and endeavoured to force myself to understand the divinity of the Word, so much the more did the knowledge thereof withdraw itself from me; and in proportion as I thought that I had apprehended it, in so much I perceived myself to fail of doing so. Moreover also, I was unable to express in writing even what I seemed myself to understand”
- This attempted book is lost as he wrote: “it is not safe that the writings of us babblers and private persons should fall into the hands of those that shall come after”

# Titles

- Athanasius contra mundum
- Athanasius the Apostolic
- Athanasius the Great
- Athanasius responsible to God



# Conclusion

- Gregory of Nazianzus wrote after his death:
  - “He was sublime in action, lowly in mind; inaccessible in virtue, most accessible in intercourse; gentle, free from anger, sympathetic, sweet in words, sweeter in disposition; angelic in appearance, more angelic in kind; calm in rebuke, persuasive in praise....but rebuking with the tenderness of a father... his disposition sufficed for the training of his spiritual children, with very little need of words; his words with very little need of the rod, and his moderate use of the rod with still less for the knife....He was the patron of the wedded and virgin alike, both peaceable and a peacemaker....In a good old age he closed his life and was gathered to his fathers, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs who contended for the truth”

# Conclusion

- Saint Athanasius was a hammer, wielded by God to destroy the heresy that was set to destroy the orthodox faith
- Lessons:
  - Seek the Lord from an early age
  - Build a personal relationship with the Lord
  - Develop a deeper understanding of your faith
  - Be prepared to stand against the world
  - Read the Fathers

