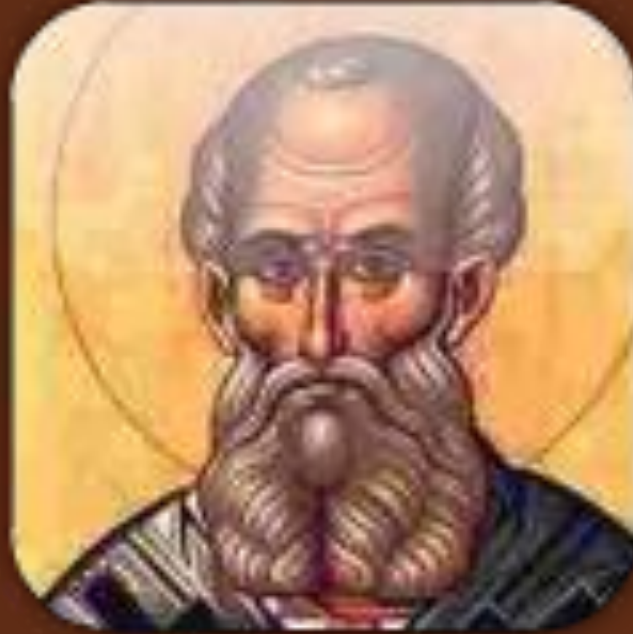


# St Athanasius



Saint Athanasius of Alexandria , also given the titles Athanasius the Great, Pope Athanasius I of Alexandria, and Athanasius the Apostolic, was a Christian theologian, Bishop of Alexandria, Church Father, and a noted Egyptian leader of the fourth century

# ST ATHANSIUS (C. 298-373)

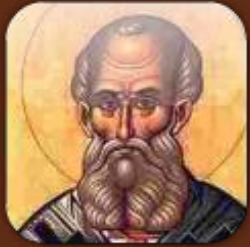
- Born in Alexandria of wealthy high-ranking parents
- Educated in the classics as a Greek and at School of Alexandria as a Christian
- From Age 5 – 13 would have witnessed persecution of many people he knew
- Had a strong friendship with St Anthony, may have been sent to the desert during strong persecutions
- It is said he attracted the attention of Pope Alexander Pope at the time when from an early age he was playing/acting by a beach with some boys and exercised the sacrament of “baptism” perfectly. Pope Alexander kept Athanasius by his side to educate and prepare him for the priesthood.
- By age 20 he was the papal secretary, and author of 2 authoritative books
- From an early age he showed an independent and strong grasp of Christian principles

# RISE OF ARIANISM

- Arius was born in Libya about 256 AD. Received theological training, and ordained by Pope Alexander as a deacon, but later excommunicated when the Pope found out about Arius' heretic teaching
- Arius incorrectly taught that the Son was not one and equal with God the Father – that Jesus was created and acting only as an intermediary between God the Father and the world, and that Jesus was not truly God by nature.
- Later after he was excommunicated he turned to another Pope, Archillas who unfortunately ordained him as a priest and allowed him to preach.

# Council of Nicea 325 AD

- Arianism spread through Egypt, Libya, Palestine, Asia Minor.
- This led to the calling of the Council of Nicea. Pope Alexander took with him, together with some of his bishops, deacon Athanasius.
- At this council, deacon Athanasius, through his energy and eloquence, led the great majority of bishops to reject Arius
- Athanasius helped formulate the positive belief of the Church (the Creed) in such a way to exclude the Arian heresy.
- Despite Arius being excommunicated, and his followers exiled, Arianism remained a strong force against which the Church had to battle.
- In 336 AD Arius died a mysterious and painful death, but despite his death his heresy did not disappear.



**St Athanasius:** Jesus whom I know as my Redeemer cannot be less than God.

# ORDINATION OF POPE ATHANASIUS

- 3 years after the Council of Nicea, in 328 AD Pope Alexander died. Athanasius (at age 31) was elected to preside over the Church of Alexandria. When he discovered this, he fled to the wilderness to St Anthony and hid, considering himself unworthy.
- He was eventually found and ordained Pope.
- One of the first activities he undertook was a pastoral tour of his see. His fatherly love made a deep impression on the people.
- He presided over the Church 46 years (of which he spent 17 years in exile by orders of various emperors, and because he was a very strong opponent to the Arian heresy).

# PERSONAL ATTACKS ON ATHANASIUS

- In Egypt the Arians and Meletians united in an effort to remove Athanasius.
- Meletius was a bishop of Assiut and the founder of the Meletians. This was around the time that the empire turned from one which persecuted the Christians, into one which was itself Christian. An issue arose for the Church as to what to do with those believers who faltered in their faith and converted to paganism because of fear of persecution. Once the persecution ended, was the Church to accept them if they truly repented? Meletius took a hard line and refused to accept them back. The Council of Nicea disagreed with this approach, and it was agreed the Church could accept the converts, if truly repentant.
- It is no surprise therefore that the Meletians and the Arians decided to conspire against the Church in the form of persecuting her leader Pope Athanasius.

# Lies and more lies

- Many personal attacks were made against Athanasius to Emperor Constantine:
  - he levied a tax on Egypt for church expenses
  - He governed in arrogance
  - He used magic
- Constantine called him to answer the allegations
- Constantine was moved by Athanasius' defence and sent him home with a commendation. Athanasius returned in triumph to Alexandria
- More complaints were raised: that Athanasius has refused to follow the emperor's decree to accept Arius. Allegation also that Athanasius had murdered a Meletian bishop
- Constantine asked bishops to gather in Tyre to investigate Athanasius



# COUNCIL OF TYRE

- Athanasius arrived to find Arian bishops and no emperor
- He was ordered to remain standing like a prisoner
- Allegations of violence were again brought up against him.
- Athanasius pointed to discrepancies in the stories, but rather than dismiss it (as Constantine had) they decided to investigate further
- He was accused of cutting off the hand of a Meletian bishop to use in magical rites (a hand was brought into evidence)
- Athanasius' deacons had heard the rumour and found the Meletian bishop in question hiding out in Tyre
- After asking if anyone knew this bishop personally, Athanasius had him ushered in before the council
- In the following uproar Athanasius escaped to Constantinople, and waited for the emperor Constantine
- The council deposed Athanasius in his absence

# 1<sup>st</sup> EXILE: Feb 336 – May 338

- Athanasius declared to the emperor his situation
- Whilst not convinced of the allegations made against Athanasius, Constantine in trying to keep the peace still confirmed the sentence against Athanasius and banished him to Treves in Western France
- Constantine had 3 sons: Constantine II, Constans, Constantius
- Constantine II was the eldest, and the governor of Treves. He was Orthodox (not Arian)
- When Emperor Constantine died in 337, his sons pardoned Athanasius, and he was able to return to his see
- The joy of his return led to a spiritual revival

## 2<sup>nd</sup> EXILE: Apr 339 – Oct 346

- Unfortunately when Constantine II was killed two years later, his brother Constantius (an Arian) was persuaded that Pope Athanasius ought not to have been pardoned.
- Constantius appointed another Arian bishop to sit on the throne of St Mark, and Athanasius was forced to flee to Rome where he was welcomed by Pope Julius
- Athanasius stayed in Rome, wrote “Life of St Anthony”
- Many Roman villas turned into monasteries
- After problems between the East and West emperors, St Athanasius was allowed to return back to Alexandria and be fully reinstated as Pope of Alexandria over the see of St Mark

## 3<sup>rd</sup> EXILE: Feb 356 – Feb 362

- For a decade between 346 and 356, there was a wave of religious enthusiasm. This was the longest undisturbed residence of Athanasius in his see
- However, Arian followers again stirred up Constantius, who again turned against Athanasius. He sent 5000 troops to arrest Athanasius, but the people smuggled him out
- Spent a great deal of time hiding in the desert cells, but continued to write paschal letters and many books

# 4<sup>th</sup> EXILE: Oct 362 – Feb 364

- In 361 Constantius died and was succeeded by his cousin Julian
- Julian hated Christianity, and wanted to convert the empire back to paganism
- He returned all the bishops back from exile, hoping that they would fight with each and destroy Christianity
- When this didn't work, Julian ordered Athanasius to leave Egypt, or be killed
- Athanasius once again fled to the desert monks and could not be found
- In 363 Julian was killed by a stray arrow, and was replaced by a new Emperor Jovian, who was orthodox
- Jovian gave permission to Athansius to return to his throne, and welcomed him with great honour

## 5<sup>th</sup> EXILE: Oct 365 – Feb 366

- Jovian only ruled for several months then died whilst travelling
- New emperors were again influenced by the Arian bishop, and banished Athanasius and all his bishops from their sees
- However, sensing the frustration of the people, St Athanasius and his bishops were allowed to return to keep the peace. Athanasius was requested to remain as the head of his Church

# The Last Years

- The last 7 years of Athanasius' life were calm
- He died peacefully nominating his friend Peter a priest as his successor
- St Athanasius spent a large part of his life being persecuted and in exile. However, he stood up and defended his faith
- Because of his fierce defence of the faith, in the same way the Apostles defended the faith, he is often given the title "St Athanasius, the Apostle"
- Because of his love for his congregation, despite spending 17 years in exile, he had remarkable support and loyalty in his flock
- His theology became a solid rock on which future generations of theologians built the faith