

The Life and writings of Pope Athanasius the Apostolic
(the 20th Pope Of Alexandria 326-373 AD)

St. Athanasios is one of the great pillars of Christianity. The Church gives him the title of "Apostolic", because he defends the faith like them. Unless he stood so firm against the Arians heresy, our faith now in "Jesus Christ" would be completely different

HIS CHILDHOOD

St Athanasius was born in Upper Egypt about the year 297 AD. His parents were Christians and their virtues were remarkable. They left Upper Egypt and settled in Alexandria. It is possible that his early education took place in the Catechetical school of Alexandria. There is a tradition that St Athanasius attracted the attention of St. Alexander, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria, as he was playing at "baptism" with solemnity and dignity on the seashore with some boys. The Pope was very pleased with Athanasius who was acting as a bishop and recognise the authenticity of the baptism thus performed. He kept the boy-bishop, Athanasios at his court

IN THE COURT OF POPE ALEXANDER.(19)

- ❖ Athanasius copied diligently the virtues of his Pope, receiving piety and holy zeal. In 312 AD the Pope appointed him "reader" and in 318 AD ordained him deacon and employed him as his secretary.
- ❖ Athanasios spent some time with St. Anthony in the wilderness. In his book about St. Anthony, he mentioned that he was very blessed to pour water on the hands of St. Anthony.
- ❖ He spent all his time in reading the scripture and practicing the Christian virtues.
- ❖ He absorbed the sayings of the fathers and the teachers of the church specially those concerning the disturbing heresy of Arius. In the age of about 20 (~ 318 AD), he wrote his famous book about the "incarnation of Christ" and another book "against the Gentiles"
- ❖ He accompanied His Pope to Nicea for the "first Ecumenical Council", and was the power behind the "Nicene Creed" which adopted by all the Christian churches till now. When the council was over, he left; accompanied by the admiration of the 318 Bishops assembled there and by the hatred of the heretical party which raised so many storms in his life.

ARIANISM

- ❖ Arius (256 - 336) was a native of Libya, received his theological training at Antioch in the school of Lucian. From Antioch he went to Alexandria, where St Peter the seal of Martyrs (17), Pope of Alexandria ordained him deacon. But later he excommunicated him as he knew about his heretic teaching and advised his two children Archillas and Alexander (who followed him on the see of St. Mark) not to accept him in the church.
- ❖ Unfortunately Pope Archillas ordained him as a priest and put him in charge of the church of Baucalis, the principal church of Alexandria. Arius was a pragmatic thinker succeeded in attracting a large congregation to his ideas.
- ❖ He had great influence on some of the bishops (as Eusebius) and even in the palace of the emperor, so he caused a lot of disturbances in the church. His heresy did not

disappear by his death but continued till now in the form of some cults as 'Jehovah witnesses' and 'Adventist'

- ❖ 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.]

ARIUS THEOLOGY

- ❖ His doctrine was a typical product of theological rationalism and lack of a strong grip of the essential principles of the Christian His strongest interest was the maintenance of Monotheism, and a first principle with him was "simplicity" - the singleness - of God, as absolutely One and transcendent, distant, unknown, inaccessible, and incommunicable hidden in eternal mystery and separated by an infinite chasm from men. Thus he understood " Monotheism" as a numerical and could not understand the "unity" of the Holy Trinity in one essence.
- ❖ He denied the coequality and coeternity of JESUS with the Father and suggested that the Father created the Son before time from nothing, only as an instrument to created the world. Therefore he was not truly God by nature, but the Son of God in a moral sense. He is an intermediate being between God and the world.
- ❖ The Logos was made flesh in the sense that he fulfilled in Jesus Christ the function of a soul.
- ❖ The Holy Spirit is the first of the Creatures of the Logos, He is still less God Than The Logos.

By this theology, Arius isolated God from men, revealed him solid, destroyed the eternal love among the Holy Trinity, ruined the mystery of salvation, ignored the prophecies and denied the true renewal of our nature through adoption and unity with God the Father in His Son.

POPE ATHANASIUS (20)

In 328 AD Pope Alexander (19)died, and the presbyters and the people elected St Athanasius (at the age of 31) to preside at the Church of Alexandria. He fled to the wilderness considering himself unworthy for this service. But they searched and found him hiding at his teachers' residence, "St. Anthony". He presided over the church for forty-six years , of which over seventeen were passed in exile on account of his vigorous opposition to the spread of Arianism, which had the support of certain emperors. He was exiled five times

THE MAIN ADVERSARIES : “ MELITIANS AND ARIANS”

- ❖ Meletius the bishop of Assiut – in the time of Pope Peter the seal of martyrs- is the founder of the Melitians . He seemed to be very zealous for the Christian faith, refusing the return of the clergy and Laity who were weakened before the prosecution and presenting true repentance . He caused a schism for a long time in the Church and had a long dispute with Pope Peter .
- ❖ He started also, to ordain bishops for the parishes belonging to the Pope.
- ❖ The dispute with “Melitians’ was discussed in the Ecumenical council of Nicea.

- ❖ It is not strange that they entered with the Arians - who denied the true divinity of Christ into a mutual conspiracy against the truth. The two parties forgot every enmity and agreed to persecute the church in the person of her Pope, St Athanasius.
- ❖ Arius convinced 'Eusebius', the bishop of Nicomedia to accept Arianism . He became the main defender of the heresy mainly for his effective connections to the palace and princesses .Eusebius became a dangerous thorn to the true faith and St Athanasios all his life.

SAINT ATHANASIOS PAPASY

- ❖ For the first time in the church history , we notice the interference of the Emperors into the faith of the church. The main aim of any emperor is the peace in his empire and to quench any reasons that lead to disputes among the different countries in his empire. Because the emperor has no theological background , so he is liable to listen to whoever is near to the palace regardless of the truth. This was the main problem of St. Athanasios with the Roman Emperors. The dispute between the Emperors and the Popes of Alexandria was the main reason for thousands of martyrs and fall Egypt into the hands of the Arabs invaders.
- ❖ In 330 AD, the Arian bishop of Nicomedia, Eusebius, asked Constantine to write to Athanasius, bidding him to readmit Arius into his communion. St Athanasius refused the emperors demand, for he was not affected by the Arians flattering words nor by the emperors threats.
- ❖ Eusebius wrote to the Egyptian Melitians urging them to impeach St Athanasius for personal misconduct. They brought charges that he had levied a general tribute of linen for use in his own church, and made other petty accusations. At his trial before the emperor he cleared himself and returned in triumph to Alexandria, bearing him a letter of approval from Constantinople, wherein he calls him a man of God and a most venerable man.
- ❖ St Athanasius was soon afterwards accused of murdering the Melitian Arians, and other crimes. Constantine was shocked at these serious accusations and asked him to clear himself in a council, to be held at Caesarea, in Palestine (333 - 334), Where one of the Arian bishops tended. The Pope refused to be present at this council and ordered another council to be assembled at Tyre.
- ❖ In Tyre the Melitians devices were discovered and if it had not been for the imperial governor who rescued St Athanasius the Arians would have torn him to pieces. He fled to Constantinople, while the council deposed him in his absence. There he met the emperor in the streets and declared to him the situation, but the emperor changed his mind and confirmed the sentence of the council, banishing him to Treve.
- ❖ In May 337 AD Constantine died, and his son Constantine the Younger resorted the Pope to his See.
- ❖ Two years later Constantine, the Younger was killed in battle. Eusebius of Nicomedia came to power, bringing new scandals for St Athanasius. St Athanasius was declared deposed by a council held in Antioch (339 AD) and Pistus, an excommunicated priest was elected as Archbishop of Alexander. He proved to be unsuitable and they ordained Cappadocian Gregory by force.

- ❖ St Athanasius was forced to flee to Rome where Pope Julius welcomed him.
- ❖ After problems between the East and the West Emperors , St Athanasius returned to Alexandria.
- ❖ Although the western emperor Constans (337 - 350AD) lent his support to the great prelate, the eastern emperor Constantius II, being greatly influenced by Eusebius in particular and the Arians in general turned against him, Constantius condemned and even instigated the persecution of St Athanasius. Constantinus obtained a condemnation of St Athanasius and his supporters by a Synod assembled at Arles in 353 AD and another at Milan in 355 AD.
- ❖ In 356 AD while St Athanasius was holding a vesper service, soldiers invaded the church. The pope fleeing safely to the desert for six years. During the time of St, Athanasius' exile the church was handed over to the Arians. St Athanasius exile ended in February 362 AD, when Julian became emperor and permitted the bishops in exile to return.
- ❖ The energetic activities of St Athanasius aroused Julian's displeasure. He ordered him to leave Egypt, describing him as a disturber of the peace and an enemy of the gods. St. Athanasios escaped to his father's tomb for six months but the emperor insisted that he leave Egypt. He fled to the monasteries in Upper Egypt.
- ❖ In 363 AD Julian was murdered and all the bishops returned from their exile, and St Athanasius to his See.
- ❖ Jovian the emperor who succeeded Julian died in the following year and with him did the peace for St Athanasius.
- ❖ Valens succeeded Jovian and exiled the bishops who were previously exiled, St Athanasius left Alexandria for the 5th time.
- ❖ He spent nine months in hiding and returned at the age of seventy under the pressure of his people to his seat in Alexandria.
- ❖ He spent the last seven years of his life in Alexandria and in May 373 AD he departed in the Lord.
- ❖ He ordained the first bishop to Ethiopia

HIS CHARACTER

- ❖ ST ATHANASIUS was greatly affected by the martyrs he saw in his boyhood. He conceived their victory even upon death through their piety in Jesus Christ, or through their unity with the father in His Son by the Holy Spirit. Following their steps, he desires to offer his life as a daily sacrifice, on behalf of the Church Faith..
- ❖ His intimate friendship and close relation with his tutor, St. Anthony the Great, and other monks, all through his life, influenced his theological concepts. To him theology is not a purely metaphysical truth, it is a truth whose super natural influence must be reflected in every day life.

- ❖ In this spirit, he became a true leader, whose authority was never contested. He believed that he was doing Christ's' work, and that final victory would come from God, meanwhile he spared no means of achieving it. He never despaired even during the darkest hour of strife. Supported him to attain this
 1. His personal relation with Christ which creates in his heart the continuous zeal of fire .
 2. Stead fastness in the sacramental life mainly the 'Eucharist'. *He says 'we are glorified and become gods because we eat from the Body of Christ Himself'*
 3. Continuous exhortation in the 'word of God'
 4. Stead fast in the tradition of the fathers of the church.

- ❖ His writings reveal the intelligence and clarity of an outstanding personality. He declares "it is the business of religion not to impose but to persuade". It is noteworthy that St Athanasius believed that the essential cause of heresies is the dependence upon "reason" without "faith", subsequently he established priority of faith over reason. He says: "and how do the impious men venture to speak folly as they ought not, being men and unable to find out how to describe even what is in earth?" But why do I say, "what is on earth?" Let them tell us their own nature if they can discover how to investigate their own nature?

- ❖ It simply serves the practical demands of piety in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.. He was not a Christian philosopher and was very far from being a mere dogmatic theologian. His main interest was pastoral. His one desire was to forward the salvation of souls.

ST. ATHANASIOS THEOLOGY

1. LOGOS AND REDEMPTION

- ❖ We would not have been redeemed if God himself had not become man, for man was in need of the creator to redeem His fallen nature to its origin, bestowing upon it the image of God, and restoring it from corruption to in-corruption. In Him mankind overcame death and was recreated.

- ❖ As a Son of God, one with the Father in essence (ousia), He offered himself as a sacrifice that can pay our dept of sins and achieve divine justice and mercy at the same time.

- ❖ He is God who overcame the devil not only for Himself but for all of us · He as the True God - restored our honour, bestowing upon us the adoption of the Father in Him by the Holy Spirit.

- ❖ St Athanasius says: "He was made man that we might be gods" "For as, although there be one Son by nature, True and Only- Begotten, we too become sons, not as He in nature and truth but according to the grace of Him that called, and though we are men from the earth, are yet called gods".

2. CHRISTOLOGY

- ❖ He took perfect and complete manhood. St. Athanasius says, " the Saviour had not a body without a soul, not without sense or intelligence, for it was not possible, when

the Lord had become man for us, that his body should be without intelligence, nor was the salvation effected in the word Himself of the body only, but of the soul also.

- ❖ The Logos is not an external instrument for creation, God was not in need of an 'instrument for creation or even for salvation.
- ❖ The Logos is one with the Father in essence. [for if the Divine essence be not fruitful itself, but barren, as they hold, as a light that lightens not, and a dry foundation, are they not ashamed to speak of His possessing framing energy].

3.THE HOLY SPIRIT

- ❖ He defends the divinity of the Holy Spirit in his reply to the Arians who believed that he was a creature and less than the Logos. He also wrote about the Holy Spirit in 4 letters addressed to Bishop Serapion. His theology concerning the Holy Spirit is the same concerning Christ. The Holy Spirit must be God, because if He was a creature, we should have no participation of God in Him.

HIS WRITINGS

Attempts to compile his works have been by scholars since 1482 AD. A full English compilation was published in English at Oxford in 1842-1844 AD.

All his writings were in Greek , so the publisher of '*Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers*' encyclopaedia considered him 'Greek' , while he is Egyptian and from upper Egypt.

1. Dogma writings :
 - The Incarnation of God
2. The letters
 - ❖ The Pascal letters
 - ❖ Letter to Bishop Serapion
3. Historic –Polemical writings
 - ❖ Apologies against Arians
4. Ascetic writings
 - ❖ The life of St. Anthony
5. Exposition writings
 - ❖ The book of Psalm

Together with the discomfort" of Arianism and the firm establishment of the Nicene Creed, Athanasius, through his relations with the Pachomian monks and Serapion, was able to give Monasticism and ascetic life in Egypt tremendous encouragement and support. Moreover, he was directly responsible for the introduction of monastic rule in the west. As a biographer of Saint Anthony, he dedicated his life of the great saint to the people of Gaul and Italy. His theology remained the solid rock on which future generations of theologians continued to build. He was canonized, and the next generation described him as the Apostolic and the Great.

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