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The Story of Christianity, Volume 1

Chapter 19

19
Athanasius of Alexandria

> The results of the incarnation of the Savior are such and so many, that anyone attempting to enumerate them should be compared to a person looking upon the vastness of the sea and attempting to count its waves.
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> ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA

Among those who were present at the Council of Nicea there was a young man, so dark and short that his enemies would later call him "the black dwarf." This was Athanasius, Alexander's secretary, who would soon become one of the central figures in the controversy, and the champion of Nicene orthodoxy. He was one of the great leaders—or "Fathers"—of the fourth century, whose biographies we now turn to as the best way to understand the events of that time.

THE EARLY YEARS

The time and place of Athanasius's birth are not known, although it is likely that he had rather obscure origins in a small town or village on the shore of the Nile River. Since he spoke Coptic, the language of the original inhabitants of the area who had been successively conquered by the Greeks and the Romans, and his complexion was dark, like that of the Copts, it is very likely that he belonged to that group, and that therefore he was a member of the lower classes in Egypt. He certainly never claimed to be of high birth, nor to be well versed in the subtleties of Greco-Roman culture.

During his early years he was in close contact with the monks of the desert. Jerome affirms that he gave a cloak to Paul the Hermit; and Athanasius himself, in his *Life of Saint Anthony,* says that he used to visit

that famous monk and wash the old man's hands. This last detail has led some to venture the suggestion that when he was a child Athanasius served Anthony. Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt that throughout his life Athanasius kept in close contact with the monks of the desert, who repeatedly gave him support and asylum.

Though mocked as "the black dwarf," Athanasius was a theological giant.

From the monks, Athanasius learned a rigid discipline that he applied to himself, and an austerity that earned him the admiration of his friends and even the respect of many of his enemies. Of all the opponents of Arianism, Athanasius was to be feared most. The reasons for this were not to be found in subtlety of logical argument, nor in elegance of style, nor even in political perspicacity. In all these areas, Athanasius could be bested by his opponents. His strong suit was in his close ties to the people among whom he lived, and in living out his faith without the subtleties of the Arians or the pomp of so many bishops of other important sees. His monastic discipline, his roots among the people, his fiery spirit, and his profound and unshakable conviction made him invincible.

Even before the Arian controversy broke out, Athanasius had written two works, *Against the Gentiles* (meaning the pagans) and *On the Incarnation of the Word,* which offered clues as to the nature of his theology. The speculations of Clement or of Origen are not to be found here. These works show the deep conviction that the central fact of Christian faith, as well as of all human history, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The presence of God amidst humankind, made human: that is the heart of Christianity as Athanasius understood it.

In a memorable passage, he speaks of the incarnation in terms of an imperial visit to a city. The emperor resides in one of the houses in the city. As a result, the particular house, as well as the entire town, receives special honor and protection. Bandits stay away from such a place. Likewise, the Monarch of the Universe has come to visit our human city, living in one of our houses, and thanks to such a presence we are all protected from the attacks and wiles of the Evil One. Now, by virtue of that visit from God in Jesus Christ, we are free to be what God intends us to be—that is, beings capable of living in communion with the divine.

Clearly, the presence of God in history was the central element in the faith of Athanasius. Therefore, it is not surprising that he saw Arianism as a grave threat to the very heart of Christianity. What Arius taught was that the one who had come to us in Jesus Christ was not truly God, but a lesser being, a creature. Such a notion was unacceptable to Athanasius—as it also was to the monks who had withdrawn to the desert for the love of God Incarnate, and to the faithful who gathered to participate in worship under Athanasius's leadership. For Athanasius, for the monks, and for many of the faithful, the Arian controversy was not a matter of theological subtleties with little or no relevance. In it, the very core of the Christian message was at stake.

When Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, was on his deathbed, all took for granted that he would be succeeded by Athanasius. But the young man, whose purpose was to live in peace offering the sacraments and worshiping with the people, fled to the desert. It is said that, shortly before he died, Alexander asked for his younger friend, probably in order to indicate that he wished him to be the next bishop of Alexandria. But Athanasius was still in hiding. Finally, several weeks after the death of Alexander, and against his own wishes, Athanasius was made bishop of Alexandria. The year was 328, the same year in which Constantine revoked the sentence banishing Arius. Arianism was regaining ground, and the battle lines were being drawn.

THROUGH MANY TRIALS

Eusebius of Nicomedia and the other Arian leaders knew that Athanasius was one of their most formidable enemies. They soon began to take steps to assure his downfall, circulating rumors that he dabbled in magic, and that he was a tyrant over the Christian flock in Egypt. As a result, Constantine ordered him to appear before a synod gathered at Tyre, where he was to answer to grave charges brought against him. In particular, he was accused

of having killed a certain Arsenius, a bishop of a rival group, and having cut off his hand in order to use it in rites of magic. A chronicle with a flair for the dramatic reports that Athanasius went to Tyre as ordered, and after hearing the charges brought against him he brought into the room a man covered in a cloak. After making sure that several of those present knew Arsenius, he uncovered the face of the hooded man, and his accusers were confounded when they realized that it was Athanasius's supposed victim. Then someone who had been convinced by the rumors circulating against the bishop of Alexandria suggested that perhaps Athanasius had not killed Arsenius, but had cut off his hand. Athanasius waited until the assembly insisted on proof that the man's hand had not been cut. He then uncovered one of Arsenius's hands. "It was the other hand!" shouted some of those who had been convinced by the rumors. Then Athanasius uncovered the man's other hand and demanded: "What kind of a monster did you think Arsenius was? One with three hands?" Laughter broke out through the assembly, while others were enraged that the Arians had misled them.

Free from the accusations made before the Synod of Tyre, Athanasius decided to go on to Constantinople in order to present his case before the emperor. Eusebius of Nicomedia had a great deal of influence at court, and Athanasius found it impossible to gain access to the emperor. He then took bolder steps. One day when Constantine was out for a ride, the tiny bishop of Alexandria simply jumped in front of the emperor's horse, grabbed its bridle, and did not let it go until he had been granted an audience. Perhaps such methods were necessary, given the political situation at court. But they served to convince Constantine that Athanasius was indeed a dangerous and impulsive fanatic. Therefore, he was willing to listen some time later, when Eusebius of Nicomedia told him that Athanasius had boasted that he could stop the shipments of wheat from Egypt to Rome. On the basis of Eusebius's accusation, Constantine sent Athanasius away from Alexandria, banishing him to the city of Trier, in the West.

But shortly thereafter Constantine died—after having been baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia—and was succeeded by his three sons Constantine II, Constans, and Constantius. The three brothers decided that all exiled bishops—there were a number of them—could return to their sees.

Yet Athanasius's return to Alexandria was not the end, but rather the beginning, of a long period of struggle and repeated exiles for him. There was an Arian party in Alexandria, and these people now claimed that Athanasius, who had been away, was not the legitimate bishop. The rival

claimant, a certain Gregory, had the support of the government. Since Athanasius was not willing to give him the church buildings, Gregory decided to take them by force, and the result was a series of disorders of such magnitude that Athanasius decided that, in order to avoid further violence, it was best for him to leave the city. There were also indications that the authorities blamed him for the disorders. This was confirmed when he reached the port and was refused passage because the governor had forbidden it. Eventually he convinced one of the captains, who smuggled him out of the port and took him to Rome.

Athanasius's exile in Rome was fruitful. Both the Arians and the Nicenes had requested support from Julius, the bishop of Rome. Athanasius was able to present the Nicene position in person, and he soon gained the support of the Roman clergy, who took up the Nicene cause against the Arians. Eventually, a synod gathered in the ancient capital declared that Athanasius was the legitimate bishop of Alexandria, and that Gregory was a usurper. Although this did not mean that Athanasius could return to Alexandria immediately, it did signal the support of the Western church for the Nicene cause, and for Athanasius in particular.

After the death of Constantine II, Constans became sole emperor in the West, and he then asked Constantius, who ruled in the East, to permit the return of Athanasius to Alexandria. Since at that particular moment Constantius needed the support of his brother, he granted the request, and Athanasius was able to return to Alexandria.

Gregory's mismanagement in Alexandria had been such that the people received Athanasius as a hero or a liberator. It is possible that one of the factors involved in this situation was that Gregory and the Arian party represented the more Hellenized higher classes, whereas Athanasius was the man of the people. In any case, he was given a noisy and joyous welcome. Besides the inhabitants of the city, many monks came from the desert to join in the celebrations. With such show of support, Athanasius was free from the attacks of his enemies for approximately ten years. During that time he strengthened his ties with other defenders of orthodoxy, particularly through abundant correspondence. It was also at this time that he wrote a number of treatises against Arianism.

But Emperor Constantius was a committed Arian, and felt the need to rid himself of this champion of the Nicene faith. As long as Constans was alive, Constantius would endure the presence of Athanasius, who counted on the support of the Western emperor. In addition, a certain Magnentius tried to

usurp imperial power, and Constantius had to gather all of his resources against this new rival.

Finally, in 353 CE, Constantius, who now ruled the whole empire, felt sufficiently secure to unleash his pro-Arian policy. Through threats and the use of force, an increasing number of bishops accepted Arianism. It is said that when Constantius ordered a synod to condemn Athanasius and was told that this was not possible, since the canons of the church did not permit them to condemn someone without a hearing, the emperor responded: "My will also is a canon of the church." On that ominous threat, many of the bishops signed the condemnation of Athanasius. Those who refused were banished.

If the chroniclers of the time are to be believed, Constantius feared the power Athanasius enjoyed in Alexandria, and for that reason sought to remove him from that city without actually banishing him. Athanasius received a letter in which the emperor granted him an audience that had never been requested. The bishop answered politely that there must have been an error, for he had not requested such an honor, and did not wish to waste the emperor's valuable time. Constantius then ordered a concentration of troops in Alexandria. When the legions were in place and any revolt could be crushed, the governor ordered Athanasius, in the name of the emperor, to leave the city. Athanasius responded by producing the old imperial order in which he was given permission to return. There must be a mistake, he told the governor, since the emperor would not contradict himself.

Constantius II, named after his grandfather Constantius Chlorus, eventually became sole heir to Constantine. His support for Arianism was such that, as Nicene theologian Jerome would say, "The world woke up as from a slumber, and discovered itself to be Arian."

Shortly thereafter, when Athanasius was celebrating communion in one of the churches, the governor ordered the building to be surrounded and suddenly burst into the room leading a group of armed soldiers. Chaos ensued, and Athanasius ordered the congregation to sing Psalm 136, with its refrain: "For His mercy endureth forever." The soldiers pushed their way through the crowd, while some sang and others sought to escape. The clergy who were present formed a tight circle around Athanasius, who refused to flee until his flock was safe. But at that point he fainted, and somehow the clergy carried him to safety.

From that moment, Athanasius seemed to have become a ghost. He was sought everywhere, but the authorities could not find him. He had taken refuge among the monks of the desert, his faithful allies. These monks had means of communication among themselves, and whenever the officers of the empire approached the bishop's hideout, he was simply transferred to a safer place.

For five years, Athanasius lived among the monks in the desert. During those five years, the Nicene cause suffered severe setbacks. Imperial policy openly favored the Arians. Several synods were forced to declare themselves in favor of Arianism. Eventually, even Hosius of Cordoba and Liberius of Rome, both well advanced in years, were forced to sign Arian confessions of faith. Although many bishops and other church leaders were convinced that Arianism was unacceptable, it was difficult to oppose it when the state supported it so decisively. The high point for Arianism came when a council gathered in Sirmium openly rejected the decisions of Nicea. This was what orthodox leaders called the "Blasphemy of Sirmium."

Unexpectedly, Constantius died and was succeeded by his cousin Julian. Since the new emperor had no interest in supporting either side of the controversy, he simply canceled all orders of exile against all bishops. He was apparently hoping that the two parties would weaken each other while he moved forward toward his goal of restoring paganism. One of the consequences of this action was that Athanasius was able to return to Alexandria, where he undertook a much-needed campaign of theological diplomacy.

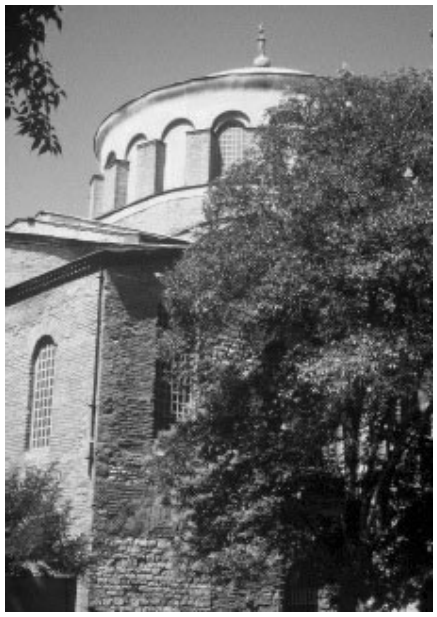
A THEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT

During the course of the controversy, Arianism had become increasingly technical and abstract. Among its defenders were many who had been

trained in the best of Greek logic, and who therefore offered ever subtler arguments in defense of their position. On the basis of such arguments, Athanasius would clearly be bested. But the reason why he opposed Arianism—and the core of his arguments against it—had little to do with such speculations. His concern was rather with the core Christian tenet that Jesus is the Savior of humankind, the restorer of that which had fallen. While it is possible that in its early stages Arianism was also concerned primarily with the doctrine of salvation, it soon moved on to the field of speculative argument. This, which seemed to be its strength, would actually be its downfall, for it left Athanasius and his supporters in possession of the central issue of salvation. Along these lines, Athanasius argued that the corruption of humanity as the result of sin was such that a new creation was required, a radical reformation and restoration of what had been destroyed by sin. The work of salvation is no lesser than the work of creation. Therefore, the one responsible for our re-creation can be no lesser than the one responsible for our creation.

Athanasius was also willing to move beyond doctrinal or verbal formulae, and seek clarification and accord on the real issues at stake. He had come to the conclusion that many opposed the Nicene Creed because they feared that the assertion that the Son was of the same substance as the Father could be understood to mean that there is no distinction between the Father and the Son. Therefore, some preferred not to say "of the same substance," but rather "of a similar substance." The two Greek words were *homoousios* (of the same substance) and *homoiousios* (of a similar substance). The Council of Nicea had declared the Son to be *homoousios* with the Father. But now many were saying that they would rather affirm that the Son was *homoiousios* with the Father.

At an earlier time, Athanasius had insisted on the Nicene formula, declaring that those who said "of a similar substance" were as heretical as the Arians. But now the elderly bishop of Alexandria was ready to see the legitimate concern of those Christians who, while refusing Arianism, were not ready to give up the distinction between the Father and the Son.



The Church of Saint Irene in Constantinople, where the Second Ecumenical Councill gathered in 381 and finally reaffirmed the doctrine of the Trinity.

Through a series of negotiations, Athanasius convinced many of these Christians that the formula of Nicea could be interpreted in such a way as to respond to the concerns of those who would rather say, "of a similar substance." Finally, in a synod gathered in Alexandria in 362 CE, Athanasius and his followers declared that it was acceptable to refer to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as "of one substance" as long as this was not understood as obliterating the distinction among the three, and that it was also legitimate to speak of "three substances" as long as this was not understood as if there were three gods.

Also, just as the followers of Arius had once used chants to promote their views, now the Nicene party did likewise, composing hymns that affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity. Most famous among these are "O Splendor of God's Glory Bright," by Ambrose (c.339–397; see Chapter 21) and "Of the Father's Love Begotten," by Aurelius Prudentius (348–c.413).

On the basis of this understanding, most of the church rallied in its support of the Council of Nicea, whose doctrine was eventually ratified at the Second Ecumenical Council, gathered in Constantinople in 381 CE. But Athanasius would not live to see the final victory of the cause to which he devoted his life.

FURTHER TRIALS

Although Julian did not wish to persecute Christians, the news that arrived from Alexandria disturbed him. His efforts to restore paganism were met with the staunch resistance of Athanasius, who by now had become a popular hero. If imperial policy were to succeed in Alexandria, it was necessary to exile its bishop once again. It soon became clear to Athanasius that Julian wanted to remove him not only from Alexandria, but also from Egypt. Athanasius knew that he could not remain in the city, where there was no place to hide, and therefore resolved to seek refuge once again among the monks.

Aware that Athanasius was planning to hide in the desert, the imperial authorities sought to arrest him. According to some biographers, Athanasius was being carried up the Nile River on a ship. "Have you seen Athanasius?" shouted some soldiers from a a faster ship overtaking his. "Yes," Athanasius answered quite truthfully. "He is just ahead of you, and if you hurry you shall overtake him." Soon the other ship was lost ahead of Athanasius.

As we have seen, Julian's reign did not last long. He was succeeded by Jovian, who was an admirer of Athanasius. Once again the bishop of Alexandria returned from exile, although he was soon called to Antioch to counsel the emperor. When he finally returned to Alexandria, it seemed that his long chain of exiles had come to an end.

But Jovian died in a few months and was succeeded by Valens, a staunch defender of Arianism. Fearing that the emperor would take measures against the orthodox in Alexandria if he remained in the city, Athanasius resolved to leave once again. It soon became evident, however, that Valens was not eager to tangle with the bishop who had bested both Constantius and Julian. Athanasius was thus able to return to Alexandria, where he remained until death claimed him in 373 CE.

Although Athanasius never saw the final victory in the cause to which he devoted his life, his writings clearly show that he was convinced that in the end Arianism would be defeated. As he approached old age, he saw emerge around himself a new generation of theologians devoted to the same cause. Most remarkable among these were the Great Cappadocians, to whom we now turn our attention.