

St Athanasius (*Part 1*)

When we celebrate Christ's Nativity this month it is important that when we search for theological truth, it is best to read old books and go to the source material that is first-hand knowledge, according to C. S. Lewis. He wrote this in the introduction to a translation of Saint Athanasius' *On the Incarnation of the Word* that was translated by a friend of his, Sister Penelope Lawson (at that time, the nuns of that community of the convent of the community of Saint Mary the Virgin were not permitted to write in their own names so if you're looking for this translation you will find it under "a religious of C.S.M.V.") This work or any other translation is valuable for anyone wanting to understand why God became man, and as a member of our Church, it is good to read fundamental documents.

First, Athanasius was born and died in Alexandria, Egypt. He was born around 293 and died May 2, 373. In 325, Alexander of Alexandria, the Bishop, ordained Athanasius to the diaconate during the Council of Nicaea, where Athanasius served as his secretary, theologian, and ascetic. When Alexander died, Deacon Athanasius was elected bishop/patriarch. He devoted the beginning of his time to visiting the patriarchate, which included Libya and all of Egypt. He established a good relationship with the Coptic monks, led by St. Pachomius. This relationship led to his writing of the *Life of Saint Antony*.

With the Council of Nicea defining the two natures of Christ and calling Arianism a heresy, new problems began for Athanasius. Bishop Meletius went back to teaching the Arian heresy. At the same time, the Arians and Meletians were persecuted by hostile gatherings of the local people. Athanasius defended them and criticized the uprising against them. It was not the appropriate response of Christians to disagreements. When the two groups were called to meet Emperor Constantine at Constantinople, Athanasius was accused of trying to stop grain from going to Constantinople instead of discussing theology. Because of this, Constantine exiled him to the Rhineland without any trial.

Here is a brief summary of Athanasius' exiles: when Constantine died in 337, Athanasius returned to Alexandria, but Constantine's son, Constantius, renewed the banishment order. This time, Athanasius took refuge in Rome under the protection of Constans, the emperor of the West. Even though he was banished, Athanasius kept in touch with the faithful of Alexandria through *Festal* letters, probably because the new bishop was Arian. Because of Constans' influence, he was allowed to return to Egypt. This began the "golden decade" of peace when he wrote the *Apology against the Arians*. With the death of Constans, Constantius became the sole emperor and extended his pro-Arian policies to the whole of the Empire. Athanasius was banished again. During this time period, he wrote very strongly-worded tracts against Arians. In *History of the Arians*, he treated Constantius as the precursor of the Antichrist. With the death of Constantius and the murder of the unpopular Arian Bishop George, Athanasius returned to

Alexandria. Then, the new Emperor, Julian the Apostate, ordered Athanasius to leave Alexandria, so he remained in upper Egypt until the death of Julian. Two years later, the new emperor, Valens, who also supported the Arians, once again banished Athanasius, but this time merely to the city's suburbs. There, with the support of the local city officials, he would visit the city at times and so enjoyed a few years of peace before his death in 373.

Athanasius dealt with the questions of theology that concern salvation. In order to deal with this, it is necessary to define from what we are being saved. The answer is "sin", all sin, whether personal or corporate (sins we are involved with, for example: the sins of a nation, i.e., slavery in the United States) and ancestral (those of Adam and Eve.). Sins lead to corruption. For example: the sins of Hitler led others to sin grievously as well. Parents' sins may or may not cause their children's lives to become sinful as well. For example: a thieving parent may teach their children to be thieves, which they may choose because of the example of their parents, knowing that it is an immoral choice.

Athanasius states that human nature was marred by sin and was spiraling downward. Sin was not just that humans had wronged God but tore into our very nature. Once nature had become corrupted, as Athanasius writes, "Repentance... merely halts sins. If then there were only the offense and not the consequence of corruption, Repentance would be fine."

A change in human nature was required. The Incarnation offers this change. As Athanasius wrote:

"For the Word, realizing that in no other way would the corruption of human beings be undone except simply by dying yet being immortal and the Son of the Father, the Word was not able to die for this reason. He takes to Himself a body capable of death in order that participating in the Word Who was above all might be sufficient for death on behalf of all and through the indwelling Word would remain incorruptible and so corruption might henceforth cease from all the grace of the resurrection."

Jesus' human nature connected all human nature in such a way that the effects of the divine nature on the human nature spread to all humanity as a result of Jesus's death and resurrection.

As Athanasius wrote, "being above all, the Word of God consequently by offering His own temple and His bodily instrument as a substitute for all, fulfilled and death that which was required and being with all through the like body the incorruptible Son of God consequently clothed all with incorruptibility and the promise concerning the resurrection. And now the very corruption of death no longer holds ground against human beings because of the indwelling Word in them through one body."

Next month, we will continue with Athanasius on the Incarnation.

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