

## **St. Athanasius**

Today, the Church gives us quite the saint to reflect upon. St. Athanasius was born in AD 298. He was born at the end of the Church's period of persecution from Roman persecution. The fourth century in Church history could be called what Charles Dickens once remarked in *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." While there was relative peace, the Church also faced pernicious heresies that twisted or denied articles of the Catholic faith.

One of the worst heresies to rear its ugly head during this time was Arianism which proposed that Jesus was not God. Instead, he was "made" like the rest of creation, yet before the rest of creation. The Son was "willed" into existence by the Father. In other words, there was a time when Jesus was not. According to Arianism, Jesus was not co-eternal with God. Arianism spread so broadly that the Biblical scholar, St. Jerome, remarked, "The world groaned and found itself Arian."

Thankfully, the Lord always raises up saints to help his Church in troubled times. Athanasius grew up in the city of Alexandria, Egypt. There is an endearing story that the bishop of Alexandria came across Athanasius playing church with other boys where he pretended to be the bishop. He pretended to baptize the other boys. Given that he wasn't pretending, the bishop told him stop doing that as they were valid baptisms.

Later, Athanasius would accompany that same bishop to the Council of Nicaea at age 27. It was Athanasius who suggested the term "consubstantial" to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son. Jesus is "of the same substance or essence" as the Father. The Father is God. The Son is God.

The bishop of Alexandria was dying and called Athanasius and told him that he must be the next bishop. Athanasius was well aware of the turmoil coming and the difficulty that the Church would face. He declined and tried to flee. The bishops of the Church assembled in Alexandria to elect the new bishop of Alexandria. They held up their hands to heaven asking for Athanasius. He accepted and was generous with his time in visiting all the churches in his territory.

During this time, Arianism broke out in the Church. Athanasius was instrumental in defending the truth about the Trinity. He would serve his diocese with a pastoral heart as bishop for 45 years. Interestingly, he would be exiled for 17 of those years – nearly half of this time! He was exiled five times, spending time in Gaul, the Holy Land, Germany, and Rome.

Additionally, there were six attempts made on Athanasius' life. The pope at the time was quite weak and even excommunicated him. Eventually, Athanasius was restored. In short, Athanasius experienced all kinds of persecutions from the Church itself. It's a good reminder that while those in Church offices can disappoint us, Christ never will!

Over time, Athanasius would become a symbol of orthodoxy for the Catholic faith. Although he was treated unjustly, his behavior was exemplary giving others courage and hope.

After many years of exile, Athanasius was able to return to his diocese and minister to his people the last ten years of his life. He built a great foundation for the patriarch who would succeed him. He died in peace in AD 373. St. Gregory of Nazianzus praised Athanasius and went so far as to say that his doctrine was the rule of the faith.

While the world groaned as it found itself Arian, the Lord raised up Athanasius to help guide the Church through troubled waters. Our saint today reminds us that the Lord will always protect his Church and guide the little boat of Peter to the port of heaven.

~St. Athanasius, pray for us!