

## St. Athanasius

During his lifetime, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, had the unfortunate sobriquet of *Athanasius Contra Mundum*, "*Athanasius Against the World*." Sometimes standing up for one's beliefs does not go well at all! During its first four centuries the Church had to sort out what it believed. The Church's understanding of Jesus' life, death and resurrection provided the foundation, but its implications had to be worked in councils, synods, and, occasionally, in riots in the streets.



The case of Bishop Arius was a particularly messy example of how the Church came to terms with what it believed. Arius taught that Jesus was adopted into the Godhead because of his heroic sacrifice of his life for humankind. The Catholic understanding was that Jesus had always been God, but was uniquely of two substances—human and divine. This is known as the *hypostatic union*. The Creed of Athanasius states:

He is God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and he is human from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely human flesh; equal to the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity. Although he is God and human, yet Christ is not two but one...

Sound familiar? It has come down to us as the *Nicene Creed* that we recite most Sundays. It is the meaning of the word "*consubstantial*."

While this argument may turn on a technicality, it has broad implications for us. If, as Arius claimed, Jesus had become the Son of God through his heroic efforts, it would be incumbent on *us* to achieve our salvation—something beyond our power. Faith alone saves us; anything else is a bar too high for us to surmount.

Although Athanasius' teaching finally won the day, he spent his whole life getting there. As in our own time, politics played a role in the adoption of the Hypostatic Union as our creed. As Bishop of Alexandria (Egypt), Athanasius was exiled from his own see five times, and died thinking the Arians had won. Nevertheless, within a few years of his death, he was beatified, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus called him a Pillar of the Church. His feast day is this Thursday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, the date of his death in 373.

Athanasius is considered one of the four great Eastern Doctors of the Church. Some scholars have made the case that, in his Easter letter of 367, Athanasius was the first person to list the 27 books of the New Testament canon that are in use today. He is venerated as a saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Coptic Orthodox Church, as well as in the Church of England and the Lutheran Church.

St. Athanasius is an example for those of us who might waver in our belief. His position was well thought out and had the backing of a council. He stuck to it even when it made him unpopular and forced him to flee his post. I suspect Athanasius may not have had the most ingratiating personality, but his writings ultimately formed the basis for a central tenet of our belief—that salvation is God's free gift, not something we have to work to earn. Our work is in grateful thanksgiving for something we cannot achieve on our own.