

Our Catholic Heritage

Christians Who Denied Christ

Heresy Threatens the Life of the Church

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"There have arrived recently in our community men who are evil and the enemies of Christ. They are teaching the sin which is foretold to be that of anti-Christ." (Alexander of Alexandria, 319 A.D.)

The Church had little time to rejoice in her new found freedom. A new wave of enemies was soon upon her. The attacks of heresy became so frequent and so clever that they threatened the very life of the Church. The most dangerous of all was devised by Arius, a priest of Alexandria (d. 336).

Arius was heir to a long line of teachers who had great difficulty in accepting the fact of the Incarnation, i.e., that Jesus is fully God and fully man. Arius was deeply concerned with defending the unity of God, and refused to accept the doctrine of the Trinity. In particular, he refused to acknowledge the full divinity of Jesus.

Using Greek philosophy and mythology, Arius arrived at the conclusion that Jesus was a demi-god, i.e., that Jesus was neither fully god nor fully man:

"God, they say, was not always the Father. There was a time when He was by no means a Father. The Word of God, they say, is not eternal, but is merely a creature . . . There was a time when the Son was not. He is but a creature, they say, one of God's works." (Synodal Letter of Bishop Alexander against the Arians, 319 A.D.)

The Arian system was so subtle, and Arius himself so persuasive, that many areas of the Church fell into various forms of heresy. The danger was critical:

"Arius, if triumphant, would have reduced Christianity to legend." (Thomas Carlyle)

The tensions and violence that arose from the disputes finally

reached the stage where the civil authorities had to intervene to keep the peace. The Emperor Constantine summoned the bishops of the Church to a council at Nicea in the year 325. Pope Sylvester sent Bishop Hosius of Cordova (Spain) as his legate. This was the first of the 21 Ecumenical Councils of the Church, each an extraordinary event, each in the words of Pope John XXIII, "A new Pentecost!"

The Fathers of the Council roundly rejected Arianism. They proclaimed Catholic truth about the Trinity, and especially the Son of God, in the Nicene Creed. This Profession of Faith was judged so important that it is recited as part of the Mass to this day.

The Fathers enshrined their teaching about Jesus in a newly-coined word — HOMOUSION. It means Jesus is "one in being" with the Father. HOMOUSION became the Catholic password, the cutting edge of Catho-

lic truth about Jesus. The HOMOUSION outlawed the Arians forever after.

This condensation of a whole body of Scriptural truth into a single, unique, specially coined word is a watershed in Catholic thought and teaching. Nicea, in its own way, sanctioned the idea of a development of doctrine, i.e., a growth in our understanding and a clarification of our teaching of the Scriptures. Nicea, in truly Catholic fashion, established the role of human reason in faith and theology. Nicea definitively raised the issue of Tradition as a source of Revelation.

Arianism would continue to trouble the Church for generations to come, but in the words of brave old Bishop Alexander:

"They shall not prevail. The truth will conquer. The light has no part with darkness, nor has Christ with the devil."

St. Athanasius — Champion of Catholic Truth

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"That extraordinary man . . . a principal instrument after the apostles by which the sacred truths of Christianity have been conveyed and secured to the world." (John Henry Cardinal Newman)

Chief among the champions of Catholic truth during the Arian crisis was St. Athanasius (c. 296-373 A.D.). As a deacon he attended the Council of Nicea, and in 328 was elected Bishop of Alexandria (Egypt). He was bishop for 45 years, 17 of which were spent in five different periods of exile. He fought so long and so hard against emperors, heretics, and just plain ignorance that he became known as "Athanasius against the world."

The Council of Nicea had by no means silenced the Arians. One mutation of their teachings followed another, each subtler and more esoteric than the last. After a generation of such conflict St. Jerome could say: "The whole world groaned, and marvelled to find itself Arian!"

Athanasius' life was a living witness to the truth of the Incarnation and an heroic testimony to the work of the Fathers of Nicea.

A Council imprints a unique character on history. A Council is not a discussion club or a parliament. It is a binding historic moment of instruction, the most vital doctrinal experience the Church can achieve after the apostolic age. It is

not possible to act as if a Council never occurred. One cannot theologize, in the Catholic tradition, as if a Council never happened.

This was the battle which Athanasius had to



St. Athanasius

(Art by Robert F. McGovern)

fight. In all his writings he proclaimed the Nicene, the Scriptural, truth about Jesus.

"The human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death." (On the Incarnation)

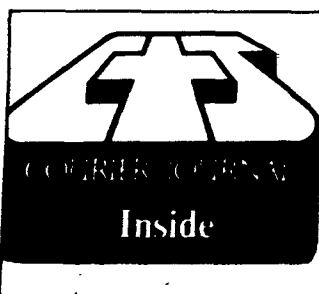
"He was true God in one flesh, and He was true flesh in the Word." (Against the Arians)

Almost every province of the empire was graced by the presence and teaching of Athanasius in the cause of Nicea which he considered as the sole pleasure and business, duty and glory of his life.

"Athanasius displayed a superiority of character and abilities which would have qualified him, far better than the degenerate sons of Constantine, for the government of a great monarchy." (Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire)

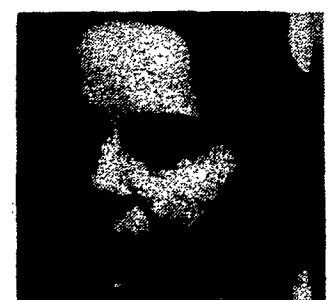
Athanasius finally outlived his enemies, and spent the last seven years of his life in peaceful possession of the See of Alexandria.

"The immortal name of Athanasius will never be separated from the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity to whose defense he consecrated every moment and every faculty of his being." (Edward Gibbon)



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