

# COLUMNISTS

## Saint's trials reflect history of the time

The major Christian liturgical traditions observed the feast of St. Athanasius on May 2. Like all truly significant saints, Athanasius left his personal mark on the history of the church and provided us a prism through which the contemporary period could be viewed and interpreted.

Athanasius was a young deacon and secretary to Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, when he accompanied him to the Council of Nicaea in 325, the first of the church's 21 ecumenical councils. Nicaea condemned the heresy of Arianism, which held that Jesus Christ was the greatest of creatures but not divine.

Against Arianism, the council taught that Jesus Christ is "of the same substance" as the Father. He is, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; one in Being with the Father."

Athanasius became the most outspoken defender of Nicaea's teaching during the postconciliar period. Less than three years after its adjournment, and while still in his early 30s, he was popularly acclaimed as the successor to Alexander as bishop of one of the most important sees of the early church, comparable in prestige to Jerusalem and Antioch.

The new bishop took his episcopal re-



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

sponsibilities seriously, making extensive pastoral visits throughout the region. But he also came under heavy attack from opponents of the Council of Nicaea. They challenged the validity of his election as bishop, charged his supporters with employing violence on his behalf, even raising questions about his personal conduct.

Athanasius was summoned to a regional council in Tyre, composed almost entirely of his enemies, and was exiled to Trier in northern Gaul (modern-day France) by the emperor in 335. Upon the emperor's death two years later, Athanasius was allowed to return to his diocese, but his opponents continued their criticism, continuing to deny the legitimacy of his election as part of their ongoing campaign against the Council of Nicaea. Athanasius was deposed a second time,

in this instance by a synod meeting in Antioch (337/338), and a rival bishop was installed in his place. When Athanasius appealed his case to Rome, Pope Julius I convened a synod at which Athanasius was cleared of all charges. His opponents back home, however, refused to accept the verdict so Athanasius remained in the West, traveling through Italy and Gaul to promote monastic ideals.

A regional council in Sardica three years later once again exonerated Athanasius, but it had no effect until the death of the rival bishop who had replaced him. In October 346, the new emperor allowed him to return to his diocese, where he remained for 10 years. The Arians continued their campaign against Athanasius, arranging for his condemnation at two separate local councils which they controlled: in Arles (353) and in Milan (355).

In February 356, a military detachment surrounded the church where Athanasius was holding a vigil service. With the help of some monks, he managed to escape and went into hiding in the Libyan desert. An Arian bishop was installed in his place.

For the next six years Athanasius moved from one safe house to another, protected all the while by his clergy and the monks. He continued to shepherd his people from afar and even made a few se-

cret visits to his diocese. During this period he produced some of his major writings, including his classic *Life of Antony*.

After the death of the emperor, the rival bishop of Alexandria was murdered and the new emperor invited Athanasius back home, where he called a synod that condemned Arianism. He himself adopted a tolerant attitude toward those who had signed Arian formulas under duress.

Athanasius was to be exiled from his diocese twice more by emperors sympathetic to the Arian cause — five exiles in all. He spent more time in enforced absences from his diocese than in his see.

But his last six or seven years were tranquil ones. His liturgies and sermons were always well attended and candidates for monastic life multiplied. He died during the night of May 2, 373, and was immediately venerated as one of the church's first confessors, that is, Christians who suffered for the faith without actually being put to death.

When tempted to bemoan post-Vatican II stresses, one need only reflect on the post-Nicaean history of the church. Athanasius offers us a lesson not only of fidelity and courage but also of hope.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## Jesus protects followers in time of temptation

4th Sunday of Easter (May 6): (R3) John 10:27-30; (R1) Acts 13:14, 43-52; (R2) Revelation 7:9, 14-17.

The incident in Sunday's Gospel occurred on the Festival of the Dedication of the Temple. The Jewish name today is Hanukkah. The celebration occurred in the month of December. It commemorates the victory of Judas Maccabaeus over the Syrian king Antiochus in 164 B.C. Another name for the feast was The Festival of Lights.

Pointing to the lights in the Temple, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." As he walked in the Temple on this feast, his enemies asked him to tell them plainly, "Are you the Messiah?" Jesus said that he had already told them, but they did not heed his voice, for they were not his sheep. "My sheep hear my voice." In Palestine the sheep knew their own shepherd's special call. They knew his voice. As Lazarus in the tomb heard the voice of Jesus when he called, so all the other sheep of Jesus hear his voice when he calls.

"I know them," Jesus said, "and they follow me." They follow his example and obey his commandments.



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

To these Jesus promises eternal life. Of course they may fall, but Jesus promises "that they shall never perish." Even saints fall sometimes, but they get up, go on and win eternal life.

The sheep of Jesus have a double protection: Jesus and the Father. "No one will snatch them out of my hand nor out of the hand of my Father." The hand of Jesus is beneath us and the hand of the Father is above us. In their clasped hands all the followers of Jesus are secure.

Finally, Jesus again reveals who he is. "The Father and I are one." The Jews realized that Jesus was claiming to be God, so they reached for rocks to stone him.

There are so many consoling lines in Sunday's Gospel. Speaking of his sheep, Jesus says, "No one shall snatch them out of my hand."

Temptation can really play havoc with our lives. It's hard to fight temptation, isn't it? Yet Christ promised us final victory. There is no temptation that can snatch us out of God's hand. If we pray for help when tempted, we can resist.

Never toy with temptation. To consider the possibility of an offense to God is halfway to falling into sin.

One day a Roman patrician asked the philosopher Epictetus the following question: "Nero is ordering me to play the part of a buffoon at a public function. This is very offensive and degrading to me. What would you do in my place?"

Epictetus replied: "If I were you, I would obey Nero."

"What!" exclaimed the patrician, "would you play the part of a buffoon?"

"No," said Epictetus, "I wouldn't but you could very well play it since you are even discussing it."

St. Catherine of Siena was terribly tempted one day. Afterwards, she com-

plained, "Where were you, Lord, when my soul was so shaken by temptation?" Our Lord answered, "I was deep in your heart, Catherine, taking delight in your resistance and giving you the courage to resist." All who trust in the Lord will weather the storms of temptation.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

### Daily Readings

Monday, May 7

Acts 11:1-18; John 10:1-10

Tuesday, May 8

Acts 11:19-26; John 10:22-30

Wednesday, May 9

Acts 12:24-13:5A; John 12:44-50

Thursday, May 10

Acts 13:13-25; John 13:16-20

Friday, May 11

Acts 13:26-33; John 14:1-6

Saturday, May 12

Acts 13:44-52; John 14:7-14

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