

# St. Athanasius

II Timothy 4:7

## Contribution

Even before Athanasius became prominent at the Council of Nicaea in 325 in defense of the catholic faith in the Godhead of our Lord, he had written two books in 318. The second of these books would have entitled him to lasting fame. The treatise of the *Incarnation of the Word of God* sets forth the positive content of the Christian faith as he had himself received it. It is not speculative, nor original; as far as Christians are concerned, it is not even controversial, for the need for defending the central truth of the Godhead of the Word within the Church itself had not yet risen. The book is a statement of the traditional faith of the catholic, universal, Church.

## Background

Athanasius was Egyptian by birth and Greek by education. His home was in Alexandria where he spent most of his life. The exact date of his birth is not recorded, but he was probably born in 298. His parents were wealthy and of good standing. Athanasius, who was a slightly built redheaded boy, received a liberal as well as a Christian education at the famous theological school in Alexandria, Egypt. He was a giant in intellect and character although he grew up small in stature. Gentle and strong, but determined and uncompromis-

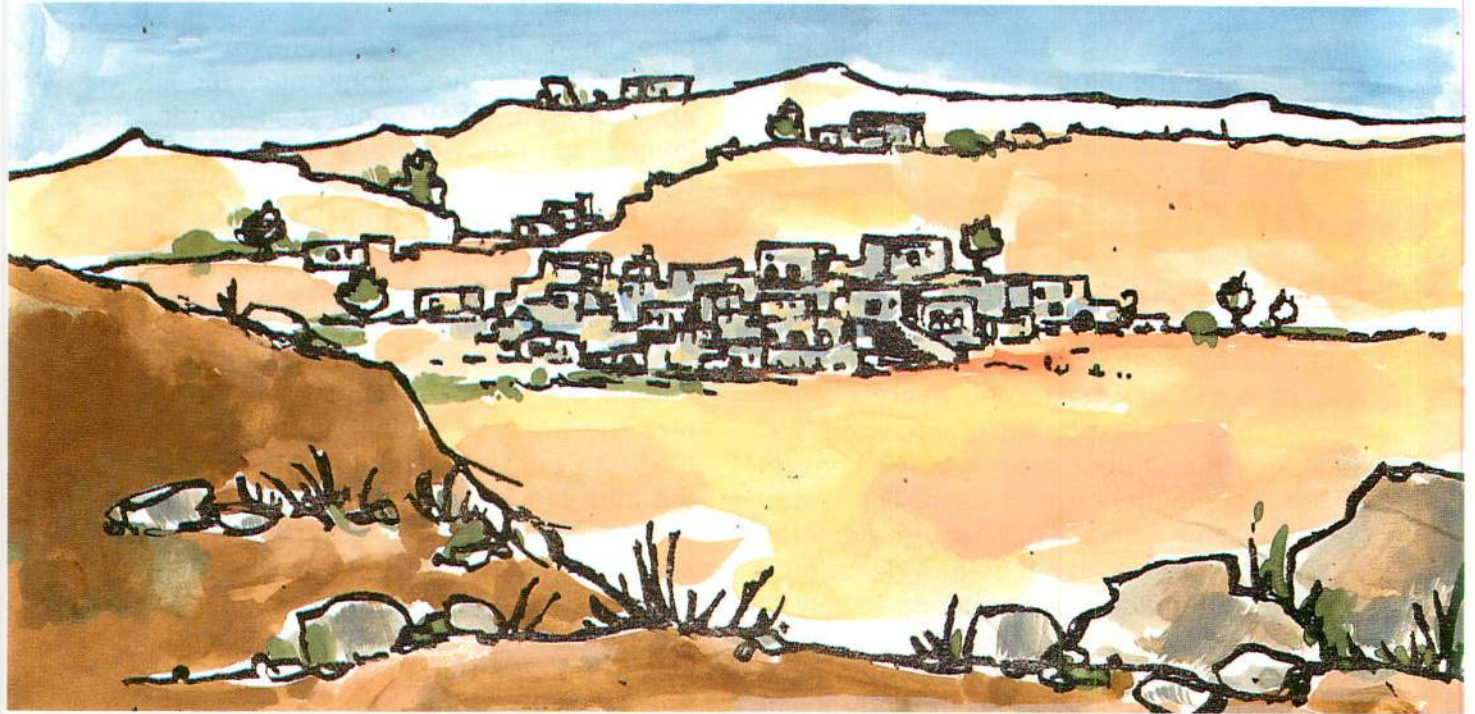
ing, his tongue and his pen were inspired by the Holy Spirit as he was called by God to defend the orthodox faith.

From the time Athanasius was five until he was fourteen, the last and greatest persecution of the Christian Church occurred after forty years of peace. The Church of Alexandria, already so rich in martyrs, became richer yet; and among them were many whom Athanasius knew. They were the men and women from whom he had learned the faith and a loving intimacy with Holy Scripture. The persecution ended in Egypt in 311. All through the most impressionable years of his childhood he had not only learned the Christian faith, he had seen it in action. He had faced the possibility of martyrdom for himself; and he had made his own faith for and by which the martyrs died — the faith of the Creator — Word Incarnate, the crucified and risen, the living and triumphant Christ.

The persecution terminated finally with the Edict of Milan in 313. Six years later the heretic Arius began to teach that the Son “once was not.” This became one of the most violent of the early heresies which plagued the Church, especially in the East, for fifty years.







## Council of Nicaea

Though at the age of twenty-seven he was present at the Council of Nicaea in 325 only as a voteless deacon, he spoke eloquently and sincerely in defense of orthodoxy. He answered Arius in such inspired words that everyone who heard him marveled. Arius was disclaimed in vehement terms, and a committee was appointed to draw up a profession of faith. One very important word is said to have been contributed by Athanasius: "consubstantial," which carries the meaning that the Son is of one substance, one nature, one essence with the Father and equal to him. (Armenia's official representative to the Council of Nicaea was Aristakes, son of St. Gregory the Illuminator.)

## Patriarch of Alexandria

Three years later, he succeeded Alexander as Patriarch of Alexandria at the age of 30. The Arian heresy persisted in Constantinople, Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt. Athana-

sus, a resolute and unyielding man, was in controversy with the Arians who, finding support in some of the emperors, including Julian the Apostate, forced his exile from Alexandria on five occasions.

The last eight years of his life as Patriarch were devoted to strengthening the segment of the Church which had remained loyal to the Nicaea Creed. His theological stand was reaffirmed at the second ecumenical council held in Constantinople in 381. By then, Athanasius was dead at the age of 77.

## Monasticism

Athanasius was called a "Pillar of the Church" by St. Gregory Nazianzen, the great Cappadocian theologian. Athanasius promoted monasticism. He introduced the monastic way of life to the Church in Rome, where he took refuge during one of his forced absences from Egypt.

Athanasius held Anthony, the head of monasticism in the Egyptian desert, in utmost reverence, and there was between them, for all their difference in life-style,



one of the closest and most fruitful of Christian friendships. Athanasius wrote Anthony's biography.

## Conclusion

Athanasius lived during one of the harsher chapters in church history. But in Athanasius, the authentic principle of redemption was at work, and he turned every circumstance to gold. Slandered, persecuted, exiled, the small figure moves from scene to scene, in confidence and calm. His secret is that an active, not-easy-to-come-by peace of poise and balance in a disordered world, a steadfast, single-minded loyalty, a persevering charity, a saving humor, are the fruit of his inner absorption in the mystery of Christ. He knew that the very existence of the church was at stake; but he was utterly certain of the truth and he knew that it must in time prevail.

Saints Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria are commemorated in our church on the third Saturday in January.

## On the Incarnation

God knew the limitations of mankind, you see; and though the grace of being made in his Image was sufficient to give them knowledge of the Word and through him of the Father, as a safeguard against their neglect of this grace, he provided the works of creation also as means by which the Maker might be known. Nor was this all. Man's neglect of the indwelling grace tends ever to increase; and against this further frailty also God made provision by giving them a law, and by sending prophets, men whom they knew. Thus, if they were tardy in looking up to heaven, they might still gain knowledge of their Maker from those close at hand; for men can learn directly about higher things from

other men. Three ways thus lay open to them, by which they might obtain the knowledge of God. They could look up into the immensity of heaven, and by pondering the harmony of creation come to know its Ruler, the Word of the Father, whose all-ruling providence makes known the Father to all. Or, if this was beyond them, they could converse with holy men, and through them learn to know God, the Artificer of all things, the Father of Christ, and to recognize the worship of idols as the negation of the truth and full of all impiety. Or else, in the third place, they could cease from lukewarmness and lead a good life merely by knowing the law. For the law was not given only for the Jews, nor was it solely for their sake that God sent the prophets, though it was to the Jews that they were sent and by the Jews that they were persecuted. The law and the prophets were a sacred school of the knowledge of God and the conduct of the spiritual life for the whole world.

So great, indeed, were the goodness and the love of God. Yet men, bowed down by the pleasures of the moment and by the frauds and illusions of the evil spirits, did not lift up their heads towards the truth. So burdened were they with their wickednesses that they seemed rather to be brute beasts than reasonable men, reflecting the very likeness of the Word.

What was God to do in face of this dehumanizing of mankind, this universal hiding of the knowledge of himself by the wiles of evil spirits? Was he to keep silence before so great a wrong and let men go on being thus deceived and kept in ignorance of himself? If so, what was the use of having made them in his own image originally? It would surely have been better for them always to have been brutes, rather than to revert to that condition when once they had shared the nature of the Word. Again, things being as they were, what was the use of their ever having had the knowledge of God? Surely it would have been better for God never to have bestowed it, than that men should subsequently be found unworthy to receive it.

Similarly, what possible profit could it be to God himself, who made men, if when made they did not worship him, but regarded others as their makers? This would be tantamount to his having made them for others and not for himself. Even an earthly king, though he is only a man, does not allow lands that he has colonized to pass into other hands or to desert to other rulers, but sends letters and friends and even visits them himself to recall them to their allegiance, rather than allow his work to be undone. How much more, then, will God be patient and painstaking with his creatures, that they be not led astray from him to the service of those that are not, and that all the more because such error means for them sheer ruin, and because it is not right that those who had once shared his image should be destroyed.

What, then, was God to do? What else could he possibly do, being God, but renew his image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very image himself, our Savior Jesus Christ? Men could not have done it, for they are only made after the image; nor could angels have done it, for

they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in his own Person, because it was he alone, the image of the Father, who could recreate man made after the image.

In order to effect this re-creation, however, he had first to do away with death and corruption. Therefore, he assumed a human body, in order that in it death might once for all be destroyed and that men might be renewed according to the Image. The image of the Father only was sufficient for this need. Here is an illustration to prove it.

You know what happens when a portrait that has been painted on a panel becomes obliterated through external stains. The artist does not throw away the panel, but the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material. Even so was it with the All-holy Son of God. He, the image of the Father, came and dwelt in our midst, in order that he might renew mankind made after himself, and seek out his lost sheep, even as he says in the Gospel: "I came to seek and to save that which was lost."

*St. Athanasius*

According to St. Athanasius:

A. What are the three ways we can know God?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

B. What did man do with his free will after he was created in God's image?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_



would one who said 'no' explain why? We will ask these two questions again after we do an activity." (15 min.)

3. Divide the class into three groups. The first group will read and discuss the Bible readings listed for Monday and Tuesday at the end of their lesson. The second will do the same for the readings listed for Wednesday and Thursday and the third group is assigned the readings for Friday and Saturday. After they finish, have them write a paragraph as a group, as to why they think Peter was or was not a good name for Simon Peter. (15 min.)

4. Let the three groups read their paragraphs and discuss. (At this time give the "Background for Teacher" information if you haven't already done so.) (15 min.)

#### 5. Homework

- Journal entry.
- Bible readings.
- Read and study next week's lesson.

## Session 3—St. Athanasius

### Key Concepts

- St. Athanasius is remembered for his theological writings, his life's stand against the Arian heresy, and his love of monasticism.
- St. Athanasius was influential in the formulation of the Nicene Creed.

### Objectives

Students will

- Read and answer questions on St. Athanasius' treatise, "On the Incarnation."
- Discuss the meaning of the Nicene Creed.
- Compare the life-styles and contributions of St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Athanasius, and St. Gregory of Narek.
- Compare the lives of these saints with ours.

### Background for Teacher

1. A great influence in the life of Athanasius was monasticism, which dated from the first part of the third century. Monasticism may have been a result of the persecutions which drove many Alexandrian Christians to take refuge in the Egyptian desert. Some found the life there so harmonious with Christian piety that, when the danger was over, they did not return. Thus was monasticism born and destined, when persecutions were past, to take an important place in the Church's life.

At one time Athanasius stayed with some of the desert fathers and visited the famous Anthony of Egypt. Athanasius wanted to retire to the desert to

live as a solitary, but he knew that such a life was not God's will for him.

2. At the age of thirty, Athanasius yielded to the wishes of the people and the council of bishops and was elevated to the position of Patriarch of Alexandria. Arius, with the help of Bishop Eusebius of Syria, persuaded the Emperor Constantine to banish Athanasius to Gaul (France), although the emperor refused to name a successor. Athanasius ruled as Patriarch from his place of exile.

Arius became ill and died during a procession to celebrate Athanasius' exile. Emperor Constantine was much impressed by these events and, on his deathbed, sent word to his eldest son Constantine to restore Athanasius to his See. But persecutions persisted under the rule of the Emperor's son Constantius. He desecrated churches, burned sacred books, and tortured priests and holy women. St. Anthony always sent words of hope and encouragement to Athanasius. In fact, at one time, he left his seclusion to visit Athanasius to indicate his support. Anthony died in 356 at the age of 105, and in the same year Athanasius was exiled for the third time.

Constantius died and was succeeded by the notorious Julian, the Apostate, who denied his faith. For the fourth time Athanasius was exiled. The next emperor, Jovian, was a Christian but unfortunately he lived only a short time and was succeeded by Valens whose wife was Arian. Again Athanasius was exiled. When he returned in 366, he was able to govern the Church in Alexandria in peace until his death seven years later. During these years of stabilizing and consolidating his dear Coptic (Egyptian) Church, he maintained a correspondence with Basil who at the time was establishing monasticism in Cappadocia on the Egyptian model. Even today the Armenian and Coptic churches are in communion with each other.

Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome were centers of religious activity. Emperor Constantine convoked the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council ever held. The creed formulated there is the Nicene Creed. To this day it is the profession of faith of the Armenian, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox Churches.

### Materials Needed

- Bibles
- Nicene Creed Flash Card Packet

### Procedure

1. Take time to talk to students as they arrive. Ask a student to read II Timothy 4:7 as an opening meditation. Ask if they remembered to pray for their prayer partners. Ask for volunteers to share journal entry for last week:

- "What's in a Name?"



- "Who would like to tell us about Peter's greatest failure and what you feel was his greatest triumph?" (Give time for discussion.) (15 min.)
- 2. "In your book there is an excerpt from St. Athanasius' treatise, *On the Incarnation*. You will work in pairs. First read the excerpt (numbers 12, 13 and part of 14 from his book), and then answer the questions following the reading together with your partners. Have students share answers to questions. (15 min.)
- 3. Read over the Nicene Creed (use the flash cards) and discuss the meaning as students remember it. (The first five articles are about God the Father; the next two about God the Son; the following two about God the Holy Spirit; and the last three are about the Church, the Body of Christ, and life after death.) (10 min.)
- 4. Divide class into two groups. (Depending on the size of your class.) Their task will be to compare (1) the life-styles and (2) the contributions of St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Athanasius, and St. Gregory of Narek. Material on these saints can be found in earlier units. Then have them compare their life-styles with the saints, and comment on which saint is most like them and why. Discuss results. (20 min.)
- 5. *Homework*
  - a. Journal entry.
  - b. Bible readings.
  - c. Read and study next week's lesson.

## Session 4—The Marys

### Key Concepts

1. God's call to service and his love is offered to all people, regardless of sex, race, or socio-economic position.
2. Women of the Bible held positions of leadership in the church.
3. Women of the Bible showed sensitivity to the Holy Spirit in the discernment that Jesus was God incarnate.

### Objectives

Students will

1. Identify women in the Bible who held positions of leadership in the early Church.
2. Describe the characteristics of the three women named Mary whom we are to emulate.

### Background for Teacher

Jesus elevated the status of women with his teachings and by his actions. (John 8:3-11; John 4:7-30, 39-42; Matthew 15:21-28)

Women in the early Church served as prophets (Luke 2:36-38); teachers and fellow workers with the

apostles (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Romans 16:3; I Corinthians 16:19; and II Timothy 4:19); helpful wives (I Corinthians 9:5); and consecrated business women (Acts 16:14, 40). The Greco-Roman world in which they moved was accustomed to women who used their intellectual and spiritual gifts.

The Armenian Church honors Armenian women saints in addition to honoring her Biblical saints. To name but a few: Santookht, Hripsime, Gayane, Khosrovitookht, and Ashkhen.

### Materials Needed

- Bibles

### Procedure

1. Take time to talk to students as they arrive. Begin by asking a student to read Galatians 3:28 for an opening meditation.

As a review:

a. Ask: "Who would like to share responses to the journal entry for last week on 'Anger: Implications for Christians.'"

b. "How would you paraphrase the illustration of St. Athanasius renewing a portrait? In what sacrament do we renew ourselves?" (Holy Eucharist.) (15 min.)

2. Say: "Today, we will look at women of the New Testament who had leadership roles in the early Church. At the end of your lesson is an exercise entitled, 'What's the Name?'" (Choose partners to do the exercise.) (15 min.)

3. Call the class together and ask each pair to report findings. (15 min.)

4. "In your lesson today Mary the Mother of God, Mary Magdalene, and Mary of Bethany are discussed. We will divide the class into three groups (depending on class size). Your task will be to list the Christian attributes that these three women had." Call the class together and have lists read and discussed. (15 min.)

5. *Homework*

- a. Journal entry.
- b. Bible readings.
- c. Read and study next week's lesson.

### Notes