



Department of Religious Education

Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern)

630 Second Avenue • New York, NY 10016-4806

212-686-0710 • FAX 212-779-3558

dre@armeniandiocese.org

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ST. ATHANASIUS: On the Christmas Story



While the world indulges itself in a fleeting season of “peace on earth,” the Armenian Church remembers one of the great Church Fathers, St. Athanasius (January 25). It was in his masterpiece of the early 4th century, *On the Incarnation*, that the meaning of Christ’s birth—of his coming to dwell among us, and be one with creation in every sense of the word—became permanently rooted in Christian theology and the popular imagination. His treatise is an eloquent reminder that the Lord’s birth in a humble stable, the visit of the wise men, and the angelic chorus to the shepherds, are not just the stuff of a few winter days, but a challenge for every day and for all time.

St. Athanasius lived in an age of enormous challenge to the Church. Born in Alexandria at about the turn of the 4th century, he grew up during the nine years of persecution under Diocletian and Maximin; the wail of martyrs was his lullaby. Even the guarantee of religious tolerance with the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. afforded the Church only a short-lived peace. As political enemies temporarily withdrew, internal sores—festered silently during the persecutions—broke and flooded the Church with controversy. For the first time after years of struggle and growth, the infant faith was forced to examine itself, explore the fine points of its belief, and resolve its confusions.

On the wave of popular belief and with the ecumenical councils as a vehicle (at the first Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., St. Athanasius attended as a deacon), the Church Fathers cut a path to the true faith. It is thanks to their energetic eloquence that the event of 2000 years ago is as keenly understood as it is today.

Among them all, St. Athanasius stands out as a churchman singularly devoted to defining the faith. Who is Christ? What does it mean to be Christian? What are the irreducible elements of the Christian faith? What happened on Christmas day? These are the questions St. Athanasius sought to answer for the faithful.

“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 redrawn 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 save that which was lost . . .'"
(On the Incarnation).

Save that which was lost. This is the meaning of Christmas. The trimmed tree, the snappy packages, the bright lights, these are all reminders of a splendor that has been lost and now found. We were created in God's image, but the image faded with the passage of time and the onslaught of sin. Christ came to live among us so that through his presence the good and beautiful in us could be restored and we could be all we were meant to be when God first breathed life into the still universe.

This is the Christmas story St. Athanasius told 1600 years ago. He chose it as the Christian story and it is as magnificent now as then.