

# Athanasius of Alexandria

“Athanasius” redirects here. For other uses, see [Athanasius \(disambiguation\)](#). For the Italian bishop, see [Athanasius I \(bishop of Naples\)](#).

Saint **Athanasius of Alexandria** (/ˌæθəˈneɪfəs/; Greek: Ἀθανάσιος Ἀλεξανδρείας, *Athanásios Alexandrías*; c. 296–298 – 2 May 373), also called **Athanasius the Great**, **Athanasius the Confessor** or, primarily in the Coptic Orthodox Church, **Athanasius the Apostolic**, was the twentieth bishop of Alexandria (as **Athanasius I**). His episcopate (because of the importance of the see, considered an archbishopric by Rome, the Coptic papacy, or an Orthodox patriarchate) lasted 45 years (c. 8 June 328 – 2 May 373), of which over 17 were spent in five exiles ordered by four different Roman emperors. Athanasius is a renowned Christian theologian, a Church Father, the chief defender of Trinitarianism against Arianism, and a noted Egyptian leader of the fourth century.

Conflict with Arius and Arianism as well as successive Roman emperors shaped Athanasius' career. In 325, at the age of 27, Athanasius began his leading role against the Arians as his bishop's assistant during the First Council of Nicaea. Roman emperor Constantine the Great had convened the council in May–August 325 to address the Arian position that the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, is of a distinct substance from the Father.<sup>[1]</sup> Three years after that council, Athanasius succeeded his mentor as archbishop of Alexandria. In addition to the conflict with the Arians (including powerful and influential Arian churchmen led by Eusebius of Nicomedia), he struggled against the Emperors Constantine, Constantius II, Julian the Apostate and Valens. He was known as “*Athanasius Contra Mundum*” (Latin for *Athanasius Against the World*).

Nonetheless, within a few years of his departure, St. Gregory of Nazianzus called him the “*Pillar of the Church*”. His writings were well regarded by all Church fathers who followed, in both the West and the East, who noted their rich devotion the Word-become-man, great pastoral concern, and profound interest in monasticism. Athanasius is counted as one of the four great Eastern Doctors of the Church in the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>[2]</sup> In Eastern Orthodoxy, he is labeled the “Father of Orthodoxy”. Some Protestants label him “Father of The Canon”. Athanasius is venerated as a Christian saint, whose feast day is 2 May in Western Christianity, 15 May in the Coptic Orthodox Church, and 18 January in the other Eastern Orthodox Churches. He is venerated by the Roman Catholic

Church, Oriental and Eastern Orthodox churches, the Lutherans, and the Anglican Communion.

## 1 Biography



*Statue in Catania, Sicily.*

Athanasius was born around the year 297 to a Christian family in the city of Alexandria.<sup>[3]</sup> His parents were wealthy enough to afford giving him a fine secular education. He had a Christian brother, and later in his life, during the last of his many exiles, he hid in his father's tomb in a Christian cemetery.<sup>[4]</sup> (See: “Fifth exile”, in section “Patriarch”, below).

### 1.1 National origin

Athanasius was an Egyptian, born in the city of Alexandria or possibly the nearby Nile Delta town of Damanhur around 293–298 (see birth year controversy below). Some Western scholars consider his command of Greek, in which he wrote most of his surviving works, evidence that he was a Greek born in Alexandria. How-

ever, in Coptic literature, Athanasius is the first patriarch of Alexandria to use Coptic as well as Greek in his writings.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 1.2 Education

Rufinus (Hist. Eccl., I, xiv), relates how Bishop Alexander had invited fellow prelates for breakfast after a great religious function. As he waited for his guests by a window, he watched boys playing on the seashore below. He soon noticed that they were imitating the elaborate ritual of Christian baptism. He sent for the children and discovered that one of the boys (Athanasius) had acted as bishop. After questioning Athanasius, Bishop Alexander informed him that the baptisms were genuine, as both the form and matter of the sacrament had been performed through the recitation of the correct words and the administration of water, and that he must not continue to do this as those baptized had not been properly catechized. He invited Athanasius and his playfellows to prepare for clerical careers.<sup>[6]</sup>

Alexandria was the most important trade center in the whole empire during Athanasius' boyhood. Intellectually, morally, and politically—it epitomized the ethnically diverse Graeco-Roman world, even more than Rome or Constantinople, Antioch or Marseilles.<sup>[6]</sup> Its famous catechetical school, while sacrificing none of its famous passion for orthodoxy since the days of Pantaenus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria, Dionysius and Theognostus, had begun to take on an almost secular character in the comprehensiveness of its interests, and had counted influential pagans among its serious auditors.<sup>[7]</sup>

Athanasius recounts being a student, as well as being educated by the Martyrs of the Great (tenth) and last persecution of Christianity by pagan Rome. This persecution was most severe in the East, particularly in Egypt and Palestine. Peter of Alexandria, the 17th archbishop of Alexandria, was martyred in 311 in the closing days of that persecution, and may have been one of those teachers. His successor as bishop of Alexandria, Alexander of Alexandria (312–328) was an Origenist as well as a documented mentor of Athanasius. According to Sozomen, Bishop Alexander “invited Athanasius to be his commensal and secretary. He had been well educated, and was versed in grammar and rhetoric, and had already, while still a young man, and before reaching the episcopate, given proof to those who dwelt with him of his wisdom and acumen”.<sup>[8]</sup> Athanasius' earliest work, *Against the Heathen – On the Incarnation* (written before 319), bears traces of Origenist Alexandrian thought (such as repeatedly quoting Plato and used a definition from Aristotle's *Organon*) but in an orthodox way. Athanasius was also familiar with the theories of various philosophical schools, and in particular with the developments of Neo-Platonism. Ultimately, Athanasius would modify the philosophical thought of the School of Alexandria away from the Origenist principles

such as the “entirely allegorical interpretation of the text”. Still, in later works, Athanasius quotes Homer more than once (*Hist. Ar.* 68, *Orat.* iv. 29). In his letter to Emperor Constantius, he presents a defense of himself bearing unmistakable traces of a study of *Demosthenes de Corona*.



St. Athanasius (1883–84), by Carl Rohl-Smith, Frederik's Church, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Athanasius knew Greek and admitted not knowing Hebrew [see, e.g., the 39th Festal Letter of St. Athan.]. The Old Testament passages he quotes frequently come from the Septuagint Greek translation. Only rarely did he use other Greek versions (to Aquila once in the *Ecthesis*, to other versions once or twice on the Psalms), and his knowledge of the Old Testament was limited to the Septuagint.<sup>[9]</sup> Nonetheless, during his later exile, with no access to a copy of the Scriptures, Athanasius could quote from memory every verse in the Old Testament with a supposed reference to the Trinity without missing any. The combination of Scriptural study and of Greek learning was characteristic of the famous Alexandrian School.

Bishop (or Patriarch) Alexander ordained Athanasius a deacon in 319.<sup>[10]</sup> In 325, Athanasius served as Alexander's secretary at the First Council of Nicaea. Already a recognized theologian and ascetic, he was the obvious choice to replace his aging mentor Alexander as the Patriarch of Alexandria,<sup>[11]</sup> despite the opposition of the followers of Arius and Meletius of Lycopolis.<sup>[10]</sup>

While still a deacon under Alexander's care (or early in his patriarchate as discussed below) Athanasius may have also become acquainted with some of the solitaries of the Egyptian desert, and in particular Anthony the Great,



whose life he is said to have written.<sup>[6]</sup>

### 1.3 Opposition to Arianism

Further information: [Arian controversy](#)

In about 319, when Athanasius was a **deacon**, a **presbyter** named **Arius** came into a direct conflict with **Alexander of Alexandria**. It appears that Arius reproached Alexander for what he felt were misguided or heretical teachings being taught by the bishop.<sup>[12]</sup> Arius' theological views appear to have been firmly rooted in Alexandrian Christianity, and his Christological views were certainly not radical at all.<sup>[13]</sup> He embraced a subordinationist **Christology** which taught that Christ was the divine Son (*Logos*) of God, made, not begotten, heavily influenced by Alexandrian thinkers like **Origen**,<sup>[14]</sup> and which was a common Christological view in Alexandria at the time.<sup>[15]</sup> Support for Arius from powerful bishops like **Eusebius of Caesarea**<sup>[16]</sup> and **Eusebius of Nicomedia**,<sup>[17]</sup> further illustrate how Arius' subordinationist Christology was shared by other Christians in the Empire. Arius was subsequently excommunicated by Alexander, and he would begin to elicit the support of many bishops who agreed with his position.

### 1.4 Patriarch

Frances A. M. Forbes writes that when the Patriarch Alexander was on his death-bed he called Athanasius, who fled fearing he would be constrained to be made Bishop. "When the Bishops of the Church assembled to elect their new Patriarch, the whole Catholic population surrounded the church, holding up their hands to Heaven and crying; "Give us Athanasius!" The Bishops had nothing better. Athanasius was thus elected, as St. Gregory tells us..." (Pope St Gregory the Great, **Pope Gregory I**, would have full access to the Vatican Archives).<sup>[18]</sup>

T. Gilmartin, (Professor of History, Maynooth, 1890), writes in *Church History*, Vol. 1, Ch XVII: On the death of Alexander, five months after the termination of the Council of Nice, Athanasius was unanimously elected to fill the vacant see. He was most unwilling to accept the dignity, for he clearly foresaw the difficulties in which it would involve him. The clergy and people were determined to have him as their bishop, Patriarch of Alexandria, and refused to accept any excuses. He at length consented to accept a responsibility that he sought in vain to escape, and was consecrated in 326, when he was about thirty years of age.<sup>[19]</sup>

Athanasius' episcopate began on 9 May 328 as the **Alexandrian Council** elected Athanasius to succeed the aged Alexander. That council also denounced various heresies and schisms, many of which continued to pre-occupy his 45-year-long episcopate (c. 8 June 328 – 2

May 373). Patriarch Athanasius spent over 17 years in five exiles ordered by four different Roman Emperors, not counting approximately six more incidents in which Athanasius fled Alexandria to escape people seeking to take his life. This gave rise to the expression "Athanasius contra mundum" or "Athanasius against the world". However, during his first years as bishop, Athanasius visited the churches of his territory, which at that time included all of **Egypt** and **Libya**. He established contacts with the hermits and monks of the desert, including **Pachomius**, which proved very valuable to him over the years. Shortly thereafter, Athanasius became occupied with the disputes with the **Byzantine Empire** and **Arians** which would occupy much of his life.<sup>[11]</sup>

**First exile:** under Emperor Constantine, for 2.5 years [11 Jul 335 – 22 Nov 337]; in Trier (Germany).

Athanasius' first problem lay with Meletius of Lycopolis and his followers, who had failed to abide by the **First Council of Nicaea**. That council also anathematized Arius. Accused of mistreating Arians and Meletians, Athanasius answered those charges at a gathering of bishops in Tyre, the **First Synod of Tyre**, in 335. There, Eusebius of Nicomedia and other supporters of Arius deposed Athanasius.<sup>[10]</sup> On 6 November, both sides of the dispute met with Emperor Constantine I in Constantinople.<sup>[20]</sup> At that meeting, Athanasius was found guilty of threatening to interfere with the supply of grains from Egypt, and sent into exile at Trier in the Rhineland.<sup>[10][11]</sup> The Arians claimed Athanasius would try to cut off essential Egyptian grain supplies to Constantinople. Athanasius was exiled to **Augusta Treverorum** in Gaul, (now Trier in Germany).<sup>[21]</sup>

When St. Athanasius was banished to Trier in 336, St. **Maximinus of Trier** received him not as a disgraced person. Athanasius stayed with him for two years. Also, **St. Paul I of Constantinople** stayed with him, who was banished by the Emperor Constantius. Maximinus, pre-cautioned the Emperor Constantius against the Arians, revealing their plots.<sup>[22]</sup>

**Second exile:** under Emperor Constantius, for 7.5 years [16 Apr 339 – 21 Oct 346]; lived at Rome.

When Emperor Constantine I died, Athanasius was allowed to return to his See of Alexandria. Shortly thereafter, however, Constantine's son, the new Roman Emperor **Constantius II**, renewed the order for Athanasius' banishment in 338. Athanasius went to Rome, where he was under the protection of Constantius, the Emperor of the West. During this time, **Gregory of Cappadocia** was installed as the Patriarch of Alexandria, usurping the absent Athanasius. Athanasius did, however, remain in contact with his people through his annual *Festal Letters*, in which he also announced on which date **Easter** would be celebrated that year.<sup>[11]</sup>

In 340, one hundred bishops met at Alexandria, declared in favor of Athanasius, and vigorously rejected the criticisms of the Eusebian faction at Tyre. Plus, Pope Julius I

wrote to the supporters of Arius strongly urging Athanasius's reinstatement, but that effort proved in vain. Pope Julius II called a synod in Rome in 341 to address the matter, which found Athanasius was found to be innocent of all the charges raised against him.

Early in the year 343 we find Athanasius had travelled, via Rome, from Alexandria, North Africa, to Gaul; nowadays Belgium / Holland and surrounding areas, where Hosius of Cordoba was Bishop, the great champion of orthodoxy in the West. The two, together, set out for Sardica. A full Council of the Church was convened / summoned there in deference to the Roman pontiff's wishes. The travel was a mammoth task in itself. At this great gathering of prelates, leaders of the Church, the case of Athanasius was taken up once more, that is, Athanasius was formally questioned over misdemeanours and even murder, (a man called Arsenius and using his body for magic, - an absurd charge.<sup>[21]</sup>). [The Council was convoked for the purpose of inquiring into the charges against Athanasius and other bishops, on account of which they were deposed from their sees by the Semi-Arian Synod of Antioch (341), and went into exile. It was called according to Socrates, (E. H. ii. 20) by the two Emperors, Constans and Constantius; but, according to Baronius by Pope Julius (337-352), (Ad an. 343). One hundred and seventy six attended. Eusebian bishops objected to the admission of Athanasius and other deposed bishops to the Council, except as accused persons to answer the charges brought against them. Their objections were overridden by the orthodox bishops, about a hundred were orthodox, who were the majority. The Eusebians, seeing they had no chance of having their views carried, retired to Philoppopolis in Thrace, Philippopolis (Thracia), where they held an opposition council, under the presidency of the Patriarch of Antioch, and confirmed the decrees of the Synod of Antioch.<sup>[19]</sup>]. Once more, at the Council of Sardica, was his innocence reaffirmed. Two conciliar letters were prepared, one to the clergy and faithful of Alexandria, the other to the bishops of Egypt and Libya, in which the will of the Council was made known. Meanwhile the Eusebian party had gone to Philippopolis, where they issued an anathema against Athanasius and his supporters. The persecution against the orthodox party broke out with renewed vigour, and Constantius was induced to prepare drastic measures against Athanasius and the priests who were devoted to him. Orders were given that if the Saint attempt to re-enter his see, he should be put to death. Athanasius, accordingly, withdrew from Sardica to Naissus in Mysia, where he celebrated the Easter festival of the year 344.<sup>[4]</sup> It was Hosius who presided over the Council of Sardica, as he did for the First Council of Nicaea, which like the 341 synod, found Athanasius innocent.<sup>[23]</sup> &.<sup>[19]</sup> He celebrated his last Easter in exile in Aquileia in April 345, received by bishop Fortunatianus.<sup>[24]</sup>

After the death of the replacement bishop Gregory in 345, Constans used his influence to allow Athanasius to return to Alexandria in October 345, amidst the enthu-

siastic demonstrations of the populace.<sup>[23]</sup> This began a "golden decade" of peace and prosperity, during which time Athanasius assembled several documents relating to his exiles and returns from exile in the *Apology Against the Arians*. However, upon Constans' death in 350, another civil war broke out, which left pro-Arian Constantius as sole emperor. An Alexandria local council in 350 replaced (or reaffirmed) Athanasius in his see.

Pope Julius had died in April, 352, and was succeeded by Liberius. For two years Liberius had been favourable to the cause of Athanasius; but driven at last into exile, he was induced to sign an ambiguous formula, from which the great Nicene text, the "homousion", had been studiously omitted. In 355 a council was held at Milan, where in spite of the vigorous opposition of a handful of loyal prelates among the Western bishops, a fourth condemnation of Athanasius was announced to the world. With his friends scattered, the saintly Hosius in exile, and Pope Liberius denounced as acquiescing in Arian formularies, Athanasius could hardly hope to escape. On the night of 8 February, 356, while engaged in services in the Church of St. Thomas, a band of armed men burst in to secure his arrest. It was the beginning of his third exile.<sup>[4]</sup>

T. Gilmartin, (Professor of History, Maynooth, 1890), writes in Church History, Vol. 1, Ch XVII: By Constantius' order, the sole ruler of The Roman Empire at the death of his brother Constans, the Council of Arles in 353, was held, which was presided over by Vincent, Bishop of Capua, in the name of Pope Liberius. The fathers terrified of the threats of the Emperor, an avowed Arian, they consented to the condemnation of St. Athanasius. The Pope refused to accept their decision, and requested the Emperor to hold another Council, in which the charges against Athanasius could be freely investigated. To this Constantius consented, for he felt able to control it, at Milan. Milan was named as the place, here three hundred bishops assembled, most from the West, only a few from the East, in 355. They met in the Church of Milan. Shortly, the Emperor ordered them to a hall in the Imperial Palace, thus ending any free debate. He presented an Arian formula of faith for their acceptance. He threatened any who refused with exile and death. All, with the exception of Dionysius (bishop of Milan), and the two Papal Legates, viz., Eusebius of Vercelli and Lucifer of Cagliari, consented to the Arian Creed and the condemnation of Athanasius. Those who refused were sent into exile. The decrees were forwarded to the Pope for approval, but were rejected, because of the violence to which the bishops were subjected.<sup>[19]</sup>

**Third exile:** under Emperor Constantius, for 6 years [9 Feb 356 – 21 Feb 362]; in the Egyptian desert.

Constantius, renewing his previous policies favoring the Arians, banished Athanasius from Alexandria once again. This was followed, in 356, by an attempt to arrest Athanasius during a vigil service. Athanasius fled to Upper Egypt, where he stayed in several monasteries and other

houses. During this period, Athanasius completed his work *Four Orations against the Arians* and defended his own recent conduct in the *Apology to Constantius* and *Apology for His Flight*. Constantius' persistence in his opposition to Athanasius, combined with reports Athanasius received about the persecution of non-Arians by the new Arian bishop **George of Laodicea**, prompted Athanasius to write his more emotional *History of the Arians*, in which he described Constantius as a precursor of the **Antichrist**.<sup>[11]</sup>

Constantius, ordered Liberius into exile in 356 giving him, then, three days to comply. He was ordered into banishment to Beroea, in Thrace; **Beroea (Thrace)**. He sent expensive presents, too, if he were to accept the Arian position but were refused. He sent him, indeed, five hundred pieces of gold "to bear his charges" but Liberius refused them, saying, he might bestow them on his flatters; as he did also a like present from the empress, bidding the messenger learn to believe in Christ, and not to persecute the Church of God. Attempts were made to leave the presents in The Church, but Liberius threw them out. Constantius hereupon sent for him under a strict guard to Milan, where, in a conference recorded by Theodoret, he boldly told Constantius that Athanasius had been acquitted at Sardica, and his enemies proved calumniators (see: "calumny") and impostors, and that it was unjust to condemn a person who could not be legally convicted of any crime. The emperor was reduced to silence on every article, but being the more out of patience, ordered him into banishment. Liberius went into exile. Constantius, after two years went to Rome to celebrate the twentieth year of his reign. The ladies joined in a petition to him that he would restore Liberius. He assented, upon condition that he should comply with the bishops, then, at court. He subscribed the condemnation of Athanasius, and a confession or creed which had been framed by the Arians at Sirmium. And he no sooner had recovered his see that he declared himself for the Creed of Niceae, as Theodoret testifies. (Theodoret, Hist. lib. ii. c. 17.).<sup>[22]</sup> The Emperor knew what he wanted people to believe. So did the bishops at his court. Athanasius stuck by the orthodox creed.<sup>[21]</sup> Constantius was an avowed Arian, became sole ruler in 350, at the death of his brother, Constans.<sup>[19]</sup>

T. Gilmartin, (Professor of History, Maynooth, 1890), writes in Church History, Vol. 1, Ch XVII: The Arians sought the approval of an Ecumenical Council. They sought to hold two councils. Constantius, summoned the bishops of the East to meet at **Seleucia in Isauria**, and those of the West to **Rimini** in Italy. A preliminary conference was held by the Arians at **Sirmium**, to agree a formula of faith. A "Homoeon" creed was adopted, declaring The Son to be "like the Father". The two met in autumn of 359. At Seleucia, one hundred and fifty bishops, of which one hundred and five were semi-Arian. The semi-Arians refused to accept anything less than the "Homoiouision", (see: **Homoiouision**), formulary of faith. The

Imperial Prefect was obliged to disband, without agreeing on any creed. Acacius, the leader of the "Homoean" party went to Constantinople, where the Sirmian formulary of faith was approved by the "Home Synod", (consisted of those bishops who happened to be present at the Court for the time), and a decree of deposition issued against the leaders of the semi-Arians. At Rimini were over four hundred of which eighty were Arian, the rest were orthodox. The orthodox fathers refused to accept any creed but the Nicene, while the others were equally in favour of the Sirmian. Each party sent a deputation to the Emperor to say there was no probability to agreement, and asked for the bishops to return to their dioceses. For the purpose of wearing-down the orthodox bishops; (Sulpitius Severius says), Constantius delayed his answer for several months, and finally prevailed on them to accept the Sirmian creed. It was after this Council that **St. Jerome** said: "...the whole world groaned in astonishment to find itself Arian."<sup>[19]</sup>

In 361, after the death of Emperor Constantius, shortly followed by the murder of the very unpopular Bishop **George**, Athanasius returned to his **patriarchate**. The following year he convened a council at Alexandria, and presided over it with **Eusebius of Vercelli**. Athanasius appealed for unity among all those who had faith in Christianity, even if they differed on matters of terminology. This prepared the groundwork for his definition of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. However, the council also was directed against those who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit, the human soul of Christ, and Christ's divinity. Mild measures were agreed on for those heretic bishops who repented, but severe penance was decreed for the chief leaders of the major heresies.<sup>[25]</sup>

The Arians no longer presented an unbroken front to their orthodox opponents. The Emperor Constantius, who had been the cause of so much trouble, died 4 November, 361 and was succeeded by **Julian**. The proclamation of the new prince's accession was the signal for a pagan outbreak against the still dominant Arian faction in Alexandria. **George**, the usurping Bishop, was flung into prison and murdered. An obscure presbyter of the name of **Pistus** was immediately chosen by the Arians to succeed him, when fresh news arrived that filled the orthodox party with hope. An edict had been put forth by Julian permitting the exiled bishops of the "Galileans" to return to their "towns and provinces". Athanasius received a summons from his own flock, and he accordingly re-entered his episcopal capitol on 22 February, 362.<sup>[4]</sup>

With characteristic energy he set to work to re-establish the somewhat shattered fortunes of the orthodox party and to purge the theological atmosphere of uncertainty. To clear up the misunderstandings that had arisen in the course of the previous years, an attempt was made to determine still further the significance of the Nicene formularies. In the meanwhile, Julian, who seems to have become suddenly jealous of the influence that Athanasius was exercising at Alexandria, addressed an order to



Ecdicius, the Prefect of Egypt, peremptorily commanding the expulsion of the restored primate, on the ground that he had never been included in the imperial act of clemency. The edict was communicated to the bishop by Pythichodorus Trico, who, though described in the “Chronicon Athanasianum” (XXXV) as a “philosopher”, seems to have behaved with brutal insolence. On 23 October the people gathered about the proscribed bishop to protest against the emperor’s decree; but Athanasius urged them to submit, consoling them with the promise that his absence would be of short duration.<sup>[4]</sup>

**Fourth exile:** under Apostate Emperor Julian, 10 months [24 Oct 362 – 26 June, 363]; in the Egyptian desert.

In 362, the new Emperor Julian, noted for his opposition to Christianity, ordered Athanasius to leave Alexandria once again. Athanasius left for Upper Egypt, remaining there with the Desert Fathers until Julian’s death in 363. Julian terminated his brief career 26 June, 363; and Athanasius returned in secret to Alexandria, where he soon received a document from the new emperor, Jovian, reinstating him once more in his episcopal functions.<sup>[4]</sup>

His first act was to convene a council which reaffirmed the terms of the Nicene Creed. Early in September 363 he set out for Antioch on the Orontes, bearing a synodal letter, in which the pronouncements of this council had been embodied. At Antioch he had an interview with the new emperor, who received him graciously and even asked him to prepare an exposition of the orthodox faith. But in the following February Jovian died; and in October, 364, Athanasius was once more an exile.<sup>[4]</sup>

**Fifth exile:** under Emperor Valens, 4 months [5 Oct 364 – 31 Jan 366]; in his father’s tomb.

Two years later, the Emperor Valens, who favored the Arian position, in his turn exiled Athanasius. This time however, Athanasius simply left for the outskirts of Alexandria, where he stayed for only a few months before the local authorities convinced Valens to retract his order of exile.<sup>[11]</sup> Some early reports state that Athanasius spent this period of exile at his family’s ancestral tomb<sup>[10]</sup> in a Christian cemetery. It was during this period, the final exile, that he is said to have spent four months in hiding in his father’s tomb. (Soz., “Hist. Eccl.”, VI, xii; Soc., “Hist. Eccl.”, IV, xii).<sup>[4]</sup>

The accession of Valens gave a fresh lease of life to the Arian party. He issued a decree banishing the bishops who had been deposed by Constantius, but who had been permitted by Jovian to return to their sees. The news created the greatest consternation in the city of Alexandria itself, and the prefect, in order to prevent a serious outbreak, gave public assurance that the very special case of Athanasius would be laid before the emperor. But the saint seems to have divined what was preparing in secret against him. He quietly withdrew from Alexandria, 5 October, and took up his abode in a country house outside the city. Valens, who seems to have sincerely dreaded the possible consequences of another popular outbreak,

within a few weeks issued orders allowing Athanasius to return to his episcopal see.<sup>[4]</sup>

In 366 Pope Liberius died and was succeeded by Pope St. Damasus, a man of strong character and holy life. Two years later, in a council of the Church, it was decreed that no Bishop should be consecrated unless he held the Creed of Nicea. (F. A. Forbes)...<sup>[18]</sup>

**Final years and death:** [1 Feb 366 – 2 May 373] After returning to Alexandria in early 366, Athanasius spent his final years repairing all the damage done during the earlier years of violence, dissent, and exile. He resumed writing and preaching undisturbed, and characteristically re-emphasized the view of the Incarnation which had been defined at Nicaea. On 2 May 373, having consecrated Peter II, one of his presbyters as his successor, Athanasius died quietly in his own bed, surrounded by his clergy and faithful supporters.<sup>[6]</sup>

## 2 Works

### 2.1 Polemical and theological works

Athanasius was not a speculative theologian. As he stated in his *First Letters to Serapion*, he held on to “the tradition, teaching, and faith proclaimed by the apostles and guarded by the fathers.”<sup>[10]</sup> He held that not only was the Son of God consubstantial with the Father, but so was the Holy Spirit, which had a great deal of influence in the development of later doctrines regarding the Trinity.<sup>[10]</sup>

Athanasius’ “*Letter Concerning the Decrees of the Council of Nicaea*” (*De Decretis*), is an important historical as well as theological account of the proceedings of that council, and another letter from 367 is the first known listing of all those books now accepted as the New Testament.<sup>[10]</sup> (Earlier similar lists vary by the omission or addition of a few books.)

Examples of Athanasius’ polemical writings against his theological opponents include *Orations Against the Arians*, his defence of the divinity of the Holy Spirit (*Letters to Serapion* in the 360s, and *On the Holy Spirit*), against Macedonianism and *On the Incarnation*.

Athanasius also wrote a two-part *Against the Heathen and The Incarnation of the Word of God*. Completed probably early in his life, before the Arian controversy,<sup>[26]</sup> they constitute the first classic work of developed Orthodox theology. In the first part, Athanasius attacks several pagan practices and beliefs. The second part presents teachings on the redemption.<sup>[10]</sup> Also in these books, Athanasius put forward the belief that the Son of God, the eternal Word through whom God created the world, entered that world in human form to lead men back into the harmony from which they had earlier fallen away.

His other important works include his *Letters to Serapion*, which dealt with the divinity of the Holy Spirit. In a let-

ter to Epictetus of Corinth, Athanasius anticipates future controversies in his defense of the humanity of Christ. Another of his letters, to Dracontius, urges that monk to leave the desert for the more active duties of a bishop.<sup>[11]</sup>

Athanasius also wrote several works of **Biblical exegesis**, primarily of volumes in the **Old Testament**. Excerpts remain of his discussions concerning the **Book of Genesis**, the **Song of Solomon**, and **Psalms**.

## 2.2 Biographical and ascetic

His biography of **Anthony the Great** entitled *Life of Antony*<sup>[27]</sup>(Βίος καὶ Πολυτεία Πατρὸς Ἀντωνίου, *Vita Antonii*) became his most widely-read work. Translated into several languages, it played an important role in the spreading of the ascetic ideal in Eastern and Western Christianity.<sup>[11]</sup> Depicting Anthony as an illiterate and holy man who through his existence in a primordial landscape has an absolute connection to the divine truth, the biography also resembles the life of his biographer Athanasius.<sup>[28]</sup> It later served as an inspiration to Christian monastics in both the East and the West.<sup>[29]</sup> The so-called **Athanasian Creed** dates from well after Athanasius's death and draws upon the phraseology of Augustine's *De trinitate*.

Athanasius' works on ascetism also include a *Discourse on Virginity*, a short work on *Love and Self-Control*, and a treatise *On Sickness and Health* (of which only fragments remain).

## 2.3 Coptic author

In **Coptic literature**, St. Athanasius is the first patriarch of Alexandria to use **Coptic** as well as **Greek** in his writings.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 2.4 Misattributed works

There are several other works ascribed to him, although not necessarily generally accepted as being his own. These include the **Athanasian creed**, which is today generally seen as being of 5th-century Galician origin.<sup>[10]</sup>

## 2.5 Quotes from St Athanasius

“Jesus that I know as my Redeemer cannot be less than God” ~at the Council of Nicaea (c. 325)

“Both from the confession of the evil spirits and from the daily witness of His works, it is manifest, then, and let none presume to doubt it, that the Savior has raised His own body, and that He is very Son of God, having His being from God as from a Father, Whose Word and Wisdom and Whose Power He is. He it is Who in these latter days assumed a body for the salvation of us all, and taught the

world concerning the Father. He it is Who has destroyed death and freely graced us all with incorruption through the promise of the resurrection, having raised His own body as its first-fruits, and displayed it by the sign of the cross as the monument to His victory over death and its corruption”. – *The Incarnation of the Word*, Chapter 5, The Resurrection (5:32)

“But for the searching and right understanding of the Scriptures there is need of a good life and a pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind to grasp, so far as human nature can, the truth concerning God the Word. One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life. Anyone who wants to look at sunlight naturally wipes his eye clear first, in order to make, at any rate, some approximation to the purity of that on which he looks; and a person wishing to see a city or country goes to the place in order to do so. Similarly, anyone who wishes to understand the mind of the sacred writers must first cleanse his own life, and approach the saints by copying their deeds. Thus united to them in the fellowship of life, he will both understand the things revealed to them by God and, thenceforth escaping the peril that threatens sinners in the judgment, will receive that which is laid up for the saints in the kingdom of heaven.” [~in his conclusion to *The Incarnation of the Word*, Chapter 9, (9:57)].

“These are fountains of salvation that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take out from these. For concerning these, the Lord put to shame the Sadducees, and said, 'Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures' and He reproved the Jews, saying, 'Search the Scriptures, for these are they that testify of ME". ~describing the canon in his 39th Festal Letter (c.367).....(St Matthew, 22, v. 29).(St. John, 5, v. 39).

“The Son of God became man so that we might become God.”<sup>[30][31][32]</sup>

“He became what we are, so that He might make us what He is....” [On The Incarnation of The Word, St. Athanasius, Section 54.3]

“I know moreover that not only this thing saddens you, but also the fact that while others have obtained the churches by violence, you are meanwhile cast out from your places. For they hold the places, but you the Apostolic Faith. They are, it is true, in the places, but outside of the true Faith; while you are outside the places indeed, but the Faith, within you. Let us consider whether is the greater, the place or the Faith. Clearly the true Faith. Who then has lost more, or who possesses more? He who holds the place, or he who holds the Faith?<sup>[33]</sup>

“God the Word of the all-good Father did not abandon the human race when it was falling to its ruin. By the offering of His own body He destroyed death which had attached itself to man, by His own teaching He corrected

man's negligence, by His own power He restored all that belonged to man's condition." [On The Incarnation of the Word, N 10].

"The Word of God, incorporeal, incorruptible and immaterial, came down to our world. Not that He had been far off before, since no part of creation was ever without Him. Together with His Father He filled all things." [On The Incarnation of The Word, St. Athanasius, Section 8-9]

"The miracle of His kindness lies in this: He brings together to this feast those who are far off; and those who are separated in the body, He makes spiritually close by the unity of faith." [Easter letters of St. Athanasius, Letter 5, 1-2].

"Some may then ask, why did He not manifest Himself by means of other and nobler parts of creation, and use some nobler instrument, such as sun or moon or stars or fire or air, instead of mere man? The answer is this. The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering men...." [On The Incarnation of The Word, St Athanasius, Chapter 7].

"For it was not the Word Himself Who needed an opening of the gates, He being Lord of all, nor was any of His works closed to their Maker. No, it was we who needed it, we whom He Himself upbore in His own body—that body which He first offered to death on behalf of all, and then made through it a path to heaven..." [On The Incarnation of The Word, St. Athanasius, Chapter 4]..

"Orthodoxy is what Christ taught, the apostles preached, and the fathers kept....." 782 [1, 28].... "But what is also to the point, let us note that the very tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, was preached by the Apostles, and was preserved by the Fathers. On this was the Church founded; and if anyone departs from this, he neither is nor any longer ought to be called a Christian: there is a Trinity holy and perfect, acknowledged as God, in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, having nothing foreign or external mixed with It . . . It is consistent in Itself, indivisible in nature, and Its activity is one. The Father does all things through the Word in the Holy Spirit; and thus the unity of the Holy Trinity is preserved; and thus there is preached in the Church one God, "who is over all, and through all, through the Word; and in all, in the Holy Spirit." (St Paul to Ephesians Ch.4, 1-6). [St. Athanasius, Four Letters to Serapion of Thmuis; 359-360 A.D.

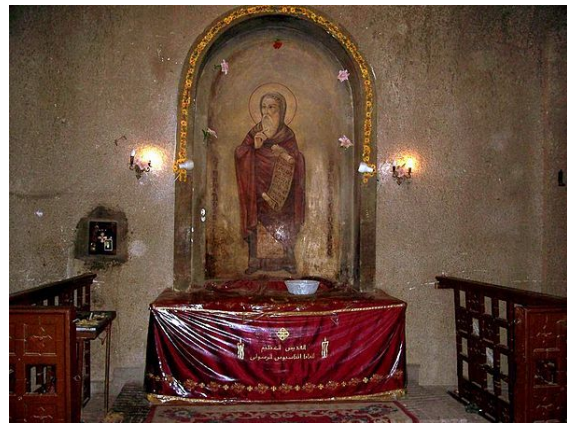
"Light, radiance and grace are in the Trinity and from the Trinity". From the first letter to Serapion, (Ep. 1 ad Serapionem 28-30: PG 26, 594-95. 599)

### 3 Veneration

St Athanasius was originally buried in Alexandria, Egypt, but his remains were later transferred to the Chiesa di



*Tomb of Zaccaria and Saint Athanasius in Venice*



*Athanasius' Shrine (where a portion of his relics are preserved) under St. Mark's Cathedral, Cairo*

San Zaccaria in Venice, Italy. During Pope Shenouda III's visit to Rome from 4 to 10 May 1973, Pope Paul VI gave the Coptic Patriarch a relic of Athanasius,<sup>[34]</sup> which he brought back to Egypt on 15 May.<sup>[35]</sup> The relic is currently preserved under the new Saint Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo, Egypt. However, the majority of St Athanasius's corpse remains in the Venetian church.<sup>[36]</sup>

All major Christian denominations which officially recognize saints venerate Athanasius. Western Christians observe his feast day on 2 May, the anniversary of his



death. The Roman Catholic Church considers Athanasius a Doctor of the Church.<sup>[2]</sup> For Coptic Christians, his feast day is Pashons 7 (now circa 15 May). Eastern Orthodox liturgical calendars remember St Athanasius on 18 January.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus (330–390, also a Doctor of the Church), said: “When I praise Athanasius, virtue itself is my theme: for I name every virtue as often as I mention him who was possessed of all virtues. He was the true pillar of the Church. His life and conduct were the rule of bishops, and his doctrine the rule of the orthodox faith.”<sup>[6]</sup>

Some Eastern Orthodox churches use the following troparion (hymn) to St Athanasius:

*O Holy father Athanasius,  
like a pillar of orthodoxy  
you refuted the heretical nonsense of Arius  
by insisting that the Father and the Son are equal  
in essence.  
O venerable father, beg Christ our God to save  
our souls.*

## 4 Historical significance and controversies

### 4.1 New Testament canon

See also: [Biblical canon](#)

It was the custom of the bishops of Alexandria to circulate a letter after Epiphany each year establishing the date of Easter, and therefore other moveable feasts. They also took the occasion to discuss other matters. Athanasius wrote forty-five festal letters.<sup>[37]</sup> Athanasius’s 39th *Festal Letter*, written in 367, is widely regarded as a milestone in the evolution of the canon of New Testament books.<sup>[38]</sup>

St Athanasius is the first person to identify the same 27 books of the New Testament that are in use today. Up until then, various similar lists of works to be read in churches were in use. Athanasius compiled the list to resolve questions about such texts as *The Epistle of Barnabas*. Athanasius includes the Book of Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah and places the Book of Esther among the “7 books not in the canon but to be read” along with the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Judith, Tobit, the Didache, and the Shepherd of Hermas.<sup>[39]</sup>

Athanasius’s list is similar to the Codex Vaticanus in the Vatican Library, probably was written in Rome, in 340, by Alexandrian scribes for Emperor Constans, during the period of Athanasius’s seven-year exile in the city. The establishment of the canon was not a unilateral decision by a bishop in Alexandria, but the result of a process of careful investigation and deliberation, as documented in

a codex of the Greek Bible and, twenty-seven years later, in his festal letter.<sup>[37]</sup>

Pope Damasus I, the Bishop of Rome in 382, promulgated a list of books which contained a New Testament canon identical to that of Athanasius. A synod in Hippo in 393 repeated Athanasius’ and Damasus’ New Testament list (without the Epistle to the Hebrews), and a synod in Carthage in 397 repeated Athanasius’ and Damasus’ complete New Testament list.<sup>[40]</sup>

Scholars debate whether Athanasius’ list in 367 was the basis for the later lists. Because Athanasius’ canon is the closest canon of any of the Church Fathers to the canon used by Protestant churches today, many Protestants point to Athanasius as the father of the canon.<sup>[39][41]</sup>

### 4.2 Birth year controversy

Estimates of Athanasius’ birth year vary from 293 to 296–298. The earlier date, 293, is sometimes assigned and apparently corroborated by the maturity revealed in his two earliest treatises *Contra Gentes (Against the Heathens)* and *De Incarnatione (On the Incarnation)*, which were admittedly written about the year 318 before Arianism had begun to make itself felt, as those writings do not show an awareness of Arianism.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Historian Cornelius Clifford says:<sup>[4]</sup> He was born around 296 and no later than 298. The argument for the later dates begins with the fact that Athanasius indicates no first hand recollection of the Maximian persecution of 303. Such reserve would scarcely be intelligible, if, on the hypothesis of the earlier date, he had been then a boy fully ten years old. The *Festal Epistles* state that the Arians had accused St. Athanasius, among other charges, of not having yet attained the canonical age (30) and thus could not have been properly ordained as Patriarch of Alexandria in 328. Athanasius must have at least appeared close enough to 30 years old in 328 for the accusation to seem plausible.

In the light of Mother F. A. Forbes research and reference to Pope Saint Gregory’s writings, it would appear that Athanasius was constrained to be Bishop: She writes that when the Patriarch Alexander was on his death-bed he called Athanasius, who fled fearing he would be constrained to be made Bishop. “When the Bishops of the Church assembled to elect their new Patriarch, the whole Catholic population surrounded the church, holding up their hands to Heaven and crying; “Give us Athanasius!” The Bishops had nothing better. Athanasius was thus elected, as St. Gregory tells us...” (Pope St Gregory the Great, Pope Gregory I, would have full access to the Vatican Archives).<sup>[18]</sup>

Alban Butler, writes on the subject: “Five months after this great Council, Nicae, St Alexander lying on his death-bed, recommended to his clergy and people the choice of Athanasius for his successor, thrice repeating his name.

In consequence of his recommendation, the bishops of all Egypt assembled at Alexandria, and finding the people and clergy unanimous in their choice of Athanasius for patriarch, they confirmed the election about the middle of year 326. He seems, then, to have been about thirty years of age. " [22]

## 5 Character



*Statue of the saint in St Athanasius' Roman Catholic Church in Evanston, Illinois*

Athanasius has always been a controversial, if not divisive, figure. While some scholars praise him as an orthodox saint with great character, others see him as a power-hungry politician who employed questionable ecclesiastical tactics.

Historian Cornelius Clifford says: "His career almost personifies a crisis in the history of Christianity; and he may be said rather to have shaped the events in which he took part than to have been shaped by them." [4]

The greater majority of Church leaders and the emperors fell into support for Arianism, so much so that Saint Jerome, 340–420, wrote of the period: "The whole world groaned and was amazed to find itself Arian". [19] He, Athanasius, even suffered an unjust excommunication from Pope Liberius (325–366) who was exiled and leant towards the Arians, until he was allowed back to the See of Rome. Athanasius stood virtually alone against the world. [22] (.see: "Third Exile", above.)

### 5.1 Supporters

Many Christian denominations revere Athanasius as a saint, teacher, and father. They cite his defense of the Christology described in the first chapter of the Gospel of John [1:1–4] and his significant theological works (C.S. Lewis calls *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* a "masterpiece") [42] as evidence of his righteousness. They also emphasize his close relationship with St Anthony, who is almost universally revered throughout Christendom.

The Gospel of St. John and particularly the first chapter demonstrates the Divinity of Jesus. This Gospel in itself is the greatest support of St Athanasius' stand. The Gospel of St John's first chapter began to be said at the end of Mass, we believe as a result of Athanasius, and his life's stand, but quietly. The Last Gospel of The Mass, The Eucharist, St John [1:1–14], together with the prayer; "Placeat tibi", the Blessing, are all private devotions that have been gradually absorbed by the liturgical service. The beginning of St John's Gospel was much used as an object of special devotion throughout the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the practice of saying it at the altar grew; eventually St. Pius V made this practice universal for the Roman Rite in his edition of the Missal. (1570). [43] It became a firm custom with exceptions in using an other Gospel in use from 1920. So the Missals showed different last Gospel for certain Feast days. A Prayer Card for the St John's Gospel. [44] Also: [45]

St Gregory Nazianzen (330–390) begins Or. 21 with: "When I praise Athanasius, virtue itself is my theme: for I name every virtue as often as I mention him who was possessed of all virtues. He was the true pillar of the church. His life and conduct were the rule of bishops, and his doctrine the rule of the orthodox faith." [6]

St Cyril of Alexandria (370–444) in the first letter says: "Athanasius is one who can be trusted: he would not say anything that is not in accord with sacred scripture." (Ep 1).

Many modern historians point out that such a hostile attitude towards Athanasius is based on an unfair judgment of historical sources. [46]

Saint Pope Pius X said in a letter to philosopher-friend and correspondent in the closing years of his life, (Epist. lxxi, ad Max.): "Let what was confessed by the fathers of Nicaea prevail". [6]

Historian Cornelius Clifford said in his account: "Athanasius was the greatest champion of Catholic belief on the subject of the Incarnation that the Church has ever known and in his lifetime earned the characteristic title of "Father of Orthodoxy", by which he has been distinguished ever since." [4]

Bl. John Henry Newman described him as a "principal instrument, after the Apostles, by which the sacred truths of Christianity have been conveyed and secured to the

world”. [Letters..]

## 5.2 Critics

Throughout most of his career, Athanasius had many detractors. Classical scholar Timothy Barnes relates contemporary allegations against Athanasius: from defiling an altar, to selling Church grain that had been meant to feed the poor for his own personal gain, and even violence and murder to suppress dissent.<sup>[47]</sup> Athanasius used “Arian” to describe both followers of Arius, and as a derogatory polemical term for Christians who disagreed with his formulation of the Trinity.<sup>[48]</sup> Athanasius called many of his opponents “Arian”, except for Miletus.<sup>[49]</sup>

Scholars now believe that the Arian Party was not monolithic,<sup>[50]</sup> but held drastically different theological views that spanned the early Christian theological spectrum.<sup>[51][52][53]</sup> They supported the tenets of Origenist thought and theology,<sup>[54]</sup> but had little else in common. Moreover, many labelled “Arian” did not consider themselves followers of Arius.<sup>[55]</sup> In addition, non-Homoousian bishops disagreed with being labeled as followers of Arius, since Arius was merely a presbyter, while they were fully ordained bishops.<sup>[56]</sup> However, others point to the Council of Nicaea as proof in and of itself that Arianism was a real theological ideology.

Conflict lawyer Richard E. Rubenstein suggests that Athanasius ascended to the rank of bishop in Alexandria under questionable circumstances because some questioned whether he had reached the minimum age of 30 years old, and further that Athanasius employed force when it suited his cause or personal interests. Thus, he argues that a small number of bishops who supported Athanasius held a private consecration to make him bishop.<sup>[57]</sup>

## 6 See also

- Apostles' Creed
- Nicene Creed
- Homoiousian
- Homoousian
- Creed of St. Athanasius
- Eastern Catholic Church
- Orthodox Church
- Dionysius (bishop of Milan)
- Eusebius of Vercelli
- Lucifer of Cagliari

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## 10 External links

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- Official web site of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa
- Works by Patriarch of Alexandria Saint Athanasius at Project Gutenberg
- Works by or about Athanasius of Alexandria at Internet Archive
- Works by Athanasius of Alexandria at LibriVox (public domain audiobooks) 🔊
- Archibald Robinson, *Athanasius: Select Letters and Works* (Edinburgh 1885)
- The so-called Athanasian Creed (not written by Athanasius, see Athanasian Creed above)
- Athanasius Select Resources, Bilingual Anthology (in Greek original and English)
- Two audio lectures about Athanasius on the Deity of Christ, Dr N Needham
- *Concordia Cyclopaedia: Athanasius*
- *Christian Cyclopaedia: Athanasius*
- Opera Omnia by Migne Patrologia Graeca with analytical indexes
- St Athanasius the Great the Archbishop of Alexandria Orthodox icon and synaxarion
- English Key to Athanasius Werke
- The Writings of Athanasius in Chronological Order

- *Introducing...Athanasius* audio resource by Dr. Michael Reeves. Two lectures on [theologynetwork.org](http://theologynetwork.org)
- Letter of Saint Athanasius to His Flock at the Our Lady of the Rosary Library
- St. Athanasius Patriarch of Alexandria at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library
- Colonnade Statue in St Peter's Square



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