

SAINT ATHANASIUS AND THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

- I -

The First Ecumenical Council

The Arians came to the First Ecumenical Council with complete confidence, and with full expectation of victory over the party of Patriarch Alexander of Alexandria. And in fact, things weren't going well at all as far as the Orthodox party was concerned. The Alexandrians confronted the Arians with the traditional scriptural phrases which appeared to leave no doubt as to the eternal divinity of the Son. But, to their surprise, they were met with total acquiescence on the part of the Arians! Only as each scriptural test was propounded, it was observed that the Arians whispered and gesticulated to one another, evidently hinting that each scriptural phrase could be safely accepted, since it admitted of evasion. If the Arians were asked to assent to the phrase that the Son is "like the Father in all things," they would agree, with the reservation that all men, as such, are "in the image and likeness of God." When the Orthodox pointed out that the Son is called "the power of God", this only elicited—after some whispering among the members of the Arian party—the explanation that the host of Israel also was spoken of as – "the power of God", and that even the locust and the caterpillar are called "the power of God" in the Holy Scriptures! The "eternity" of the Son was countered by the text, "We who live are always..."[delivered unto death]!

As Charlie Brown of "Peanuts" fame would say, "Aaaaauurrghhh!"

The Fathers were baffled.

The test of the word homoousios — "of one essence" — was being forced upon the majority by the evasions of the Arian party. When the day for the decisive meeting arrived, it became apparent that the choice lay between the adoption of the word homoousios or the admission of Arianism to a position of toleration and influence in the Church.

But then, was Arianism all that Saint Alexander and the other Orthodox made it out to be? Was Arianism so terrible and so very intolerable, so that this test must be imposed on the Church? The answer came from Eusebius of Nicomedia. Upon the assembling of the bishops for their momentous debate, Eusebius(who sympathized with the Arians) presented the Fathers with a statement of his belief. This statement was an unambiguous assertion of the Arian formulas, and it cleared the situation at once. An angry clamor silenced the innovator, and his document was publicly torn to shreds. Even the majority of the Arians were cowed, and their numbers immediately shrank to a total of five clergymen. It was now agreed on all hands that a stringent formula was needed to stop this blasphemy.

Eusebius of Caesaria came forward and produced a formula, not of his own devising; indeed, it was actually an ancient creed of his own church with an addition intended to guard against Sabellianism. The creed he recited was unassailable on the basis of Holy Scripture and Tradition. No one had a word to say against it, and the Emperor, Saint Constantine the Great, perhaps at the prompting of Saint Hosius, expressed his personal concern that it should be adopted, with the single improvement of the word homoousios — "of one essence". The suggestion thus quietly made was momentous in its result. The friends and allies of Saint Alexander had patiently waited their time, and now their time had come. But how and where was the necessary word to be inserted? And if some change must be made in the formula of Caesarea, would it not be in order to explain one or two other details as well? In fact, the

creed proposed by Eusebius was carefully considered clause by clause, and eventually took a form materially different from that in which it was first presented, and with affinities to the creeds of Antioch and Jerusalem as well as Caesarea.

The adoption of the word homoousios was a momentous decision. The word was not scriptural. We are told “the Council paused”. But the Council Fathers brought to mind all the previous discussions with the Arians, and they were reminded of the futility of the scriptural tests alone, of the locusts and the caterpillars, of the whisperings, the nods, the winks, and the evasions. Whereupon, the Council closed its ranks and resolutely marched to its conclusion. The word homoousios was adopted, and Arius’ blasphemy was condemned forever.

-II-

Philosophical and theological problems

Of course, It took many decades of intrigues, slanders, persecutions, and deceits on the part of the Arians, and of misunderstandings and frustrations among the Orthodox before the dust finally settled, and the Arians finally self-destructed in suicidal bickerings, and the Orthodox Catholic Faith emerged triumphant.

How did all this come to pass?

The actual origins of Arianism itself are obscure, but if we were to “round up the usual suspects”, to quote the French provincial governor in the film “Casablanca”, we would, of course, find the Greeks.

In his magnificent article, “Saint Athanasius’ concept of creation”, Father George Florovsky presents an excellent explanation of the philosophical and theological problems surrounding the Arian controversy.

As Fr. George points out, there were two biblical premises that the Christians had to establish in their dealings with the Greek pagan world. The first scriptural premise was that there was an absolute distinction between God, Who is uncreated, and the world, which is created. Creaturehood meant an essential, total, and absolute dissimilarity with God. The second scriptural premise was that there is a distinction between God’s inner being, His inner life, and His dealings with the world. Except for the few things that are revealed in the Holy Scriptures, we know nothing about what God is in His essence, or even about the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit. Nor do we know how and in what way the Son’s being begotten of the Father differs from the Holy Spirit’s procession from the Father. On the other hand, we do know God through His grace, His power, His providence, His energies and actions in the created world.

However, these two distinctions — that is, between God and creation, and between God’s unknowable essence and His knowable power — were basically unknown and alien to the pagan Greeks and their philosophy. But it was to this pagan world that the Christians had to convey their message.

If we keep these distinctions in mind, we will be able to tread our way more easily through the Arian controversy.

For the Greeks the world, the cosmos, was eternal, permanent and immutable in its essential structure and composition. It simply existed, and its eternal existence was “necessary”. Period. For the Christians, on the other hand, the world was created. It owes its existence and maintenance to God’s will and action, to the power of His uncreated energy. Without this, creation would vanish into nothingness in an instant. It is completely dependent and contingent.

This was a hard message for the Greeks.

In order to promote and defend their faith within the Greek-thinking and Greek-speaking world, however, the Christian apologists had to speak in Greek, of course, and use Greek terminology. But, as Father Georges Flororsky points out, they had to guard against the ambiguities involved in such an enterprise: “By using Greek terminology and categories, the Christian writers were forcing upon themselves, perhaps without knowing it, a world which was radically different from that in which they dwelt.” As one writer has pointed out, “the Christians brought forth the new wine to the Greek pagan world, and although the old skins of Greek philosophy did not burst at once, they were nonetheless tainted with an old smell, and the wine acquired in them an alien flavor”, especially in the writings of such writers as Origen and Clement of Alexandria (who by the way, are not Fathers of the Church).

Due to the Greek philosophical baggage he carried, Origen failed to make the two scriptural distinctions we mentioned earlier. That is to say, for Origen, the “idea” of the world, or the “pre-vision” of the world, as he would say, existed from all eternity. In this, he could never escape from the thinking of the Platonists of his time.

Origen was wrong because God, in His essence and power, is uncreated and eternal. In His essence, He is not subject to change or instability. He always existed. The created world is completely alien to His essence. Creation came to be through God’s will and is by essence subject to constant mutability; it is by nature unstable and alien to God’s nature. It is, to put it briefly, essentially and totally dissimilar to God. It hangs by a string over the abyss of nothingness, of non-existence. And the string that sustains it is God’s power.

As Saint Athanasius argued, although God could indeed, if He so willed, have created the world from all eternity, yet created things themselves, of their own nature, could not have existed eternally, since they are created “out of nothing”, and consequently did not exist before they were brought into existence. He asks, “How can things which did not exist before they originated be co-eternal with God?”

Here the Arians could agree with the Orthodox, although for them, God, was primarily a creator, and beyond that, little, if anything could be said of the incomprehensible being of God, which, they said, was unknown even to the Son. In addition, however, for Origen, the existence of the Son, the Word of God, was the result of God’s will. On this point, the Arians were in full agreement with Origen.

Both Origen and the Arians could never say that the Son was homoousios, “of the nature”, or “consubstantial” with the Father. The Son’s existence had to depend upon the deliberation and will of the Father, said the Arians, because otherwise it would appear that God had a Son “by nature”, that is, “by necessity” and, as it were “unwillingly”. Here the Arians were thinking in Greek philosophical categories. For them, as for the pagan Greeks, “by nature” meant “by necessity”.

For example, the Arians would say, we are humans by nature, and as such, we breath. Since breathing is part of our nature as living humans, we have to breath, by constraint, whether we like it or not. We must breath because it is an essential and necessary part of our humanity. But this also limits our freedom. For instance, we are unable—without some sort of artificial apparatus—to breath if we are found twelve miles above the surface of the earth, or in outer space. Nor can we breath, without outside help, if we are four or five miles down within the depths of the sea. This means that we are not free to go wherever we like. Our freedom is curtailed because of nature’s constraints upon us.

Therefore, said the Arians, by saying that the Son is of the essence, of the nature, of the Father, this means that you Orthodox are thereby limiting God’s freedom, because you are saying that God begat the Son by nature, which means He had to beget the Son, whether He wanted to or not. This is not acceptable, they said.

This kind of reasoning, retorted Saint Athanasius, only shows the inability of the Arians to grasp the basic difference between the inner life of God and His actions in relation to the created world. God does not deliberate within Himself about His own being and existence. Indeed, it would be absurd to contend that God’s goodness and mercy are just His voluntary habit, and not a part of His nature. But does it mean that God is good and merciful unwillingly? Now, continues Saint Athanasius, what is “by nature”, or “by essence”, is higher than what is only “by deliberation” or “by will”. Since the Son is the offspring of the Father’s own substance, the Father does not “deliberate” about Him, since it would mean “deliberation” about His own being. God is the Father of His Son “by nature” and not “by will”. Whatever was “created”, was indeed created by the good will and deliberation of God. But the Son is not a deed of will, like creatures, but by nature He is an offspring of God’s own substance. It is an insane and extravagant idea to put “will” and “counsel” between the Father and the Son.

Unlike the Greek gods, who, according to Plato’s speculations, hung from “the spindle of necessity”, the God of the Christians had nothing to do with these philosophical categories of “nature equals necessity”. The inadequacy of the Greek, or any other language, to convey the truths that pertain to God’s inner life can place no limitations to or definition of God’s essence. If the word — essence — is a problem for you, said the Church Fathers, then you should consider that God is actually hyperousios — “above nature”, that is, above every concept or definition we might have of the word “nature”.

The Church Fathers, in fact, loved to throw these little mental monkey-wrenches into the gears of our earth—bound and corpulent brains, just to wreak havoc with our rationalistic and mechanical approach to the things that pertain to God and also to deflate our self-inflated egos. One of my favorite mental monkey-wrenches is the word proanarchos — “pre-beginningless”. When you have dissected and analyzed that one to your satisfaction, we’ll bring in the little men in white coats to carry you away.

To sum up this section, therefore, we have seen that, for the Church Fathers, temporal creatures cannot “co-exist” eternally with the Eternal God. They have two disparate modes of existence. Creatures have their own mode of existence: they are outside of God’s inner life, His essence; they are created. The Son alone, as one uncreated, is an offspring of the Father’s substance, and has the intrinsic power to “co-exist” eternally with the Father.

The Arians, because they insisted that the Son was born by the will of the Father, made Him part of creation; to this the Orthodox Christians replied: YES!; the line is indeed between God and creation, but the Son was born from God by nature; therefore, He is not a creature, but God.

The “generation” of the Son from the Father’s essence is outside of time, and also outside of any philosophical concepts such as necessity. We cannot ascribe human concepts to God’s being. Unlike the pagan philosophers, we are not permitted to make God in our image. As Saint Gregory Palamas would say many centuries later, God’s inner mode of existence is, except for what He has revealed, completely unknown to us and foreign to our mode of existence. In fact, says Saint Gregory, it is so different, if God exists (as we understand existence according to our fleshly brains) then we do not exist (at least, according to how we perceive existence); and conversely, if we exist, then God does not exist (at least, according to how we perceive existence).

Once again, two distinctions had to be made: the first distinction was between God and creation; the second distinction was between God’s inner life, and his energies.

This is the point where human philosophy and Arianism stumbled. This is where the Greek wine skins burst.

Perhaps the best way to sum up this section is to quote a section from *The Life of Saint Anthony the Great*, which was written by Saint Athanasius himself.

The Arians had spread the rumor that the famous ascetic of the desert, Saint Anthony, was on their side. To counter-act this falsehood, Saint Anthony came in person into Alexandria, and professed his loyalty to the Orthodox faith, as the following account records:

Answering the appeal of both the bishops and all the brethren, Saint Anthony came down from the mountain, and entering Alexandria, he denounced the Arians. He said that their heresy was the worst of all and a forerunner of the Antichrist. He taught the people that the Son of God is not a creature nor has He come into being “from non-existence”, but He is the eternal Word and Wisdom of the substance of the Father. Hence, too, it is impious to say, “There was a time when He was not”, for the Word was always coexistent with the Father. Wherefore, do not have the least thing to do with the most godless Arians: there simply is no fellowship of light and darkness. You must remember that you are God-fearing Christians, but they, by saying that the Son and Word of God the Father is a creature, are in no respect different than the pagans, who worship the created in place of God the Creator. And you may be sure that all creation is incensed against them because they count among created things the Creator and Lord of all, to Whom all things owe their existence.

This, in brief, was the message of the Orthodox Faith: we are not saved by a creature, but only by the living God. Christ is our Saviour; therefore, He is not a creature.

-III-

“Athanasius Against The World”

Arianism was a novelty subversive to the Christian Faith as it had been received by the Fathers, and, as we have seen, the First Council reacted to it with horror and spontaneous rejection.

But now the fun part begins.

We have already spoken about the Arians and their penchant for deceit and evasion. They were squashed at the First Ecumenical Council, but like a bad penny, they kept coming back. By hook or by crook, they were determined to prevail, and the next four decades of Saint Athanasius' life reflect this. The Arians proved to be very resourceful and completely unscrupulous. Every false accusation, outright slander and intrigue that could suit their purpose was employed without the slightest hesitation. Thanks to the effectiveness of these slanders, Saint Athanasius, who enjoyed enormous support and popularity in Alexandria, in all Egypt, and throughout the entire West, suffered five exiles, totaling some seventeen years out of his forty-six as Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria. On a few occasions, the Arians managed even to dupe the Emperor, Saint Constantine the Great, although on at least one occasion the Emperor sent the Saint away from Alexandria just to get him out of the clutches of the Arians, who were determined to destroy him at all costs. There were, in fact, a lot of close calls.

Saint Athanasius was born in Alexandria around the year 296 or 297. Although he learned something about philosophy, and neoplatonism in particular, his special interest and attention were reserved for the Holy Scriptures, of which he had an exceptional knowledge." "an Alexandrian by birth", a learned man, mighty in the Scriptures."

He is one of the most imposing figures in all ecclesiastical history. Of undaunted courage, unflinching in the face of danger or adversity and cowed by no man, he was the steadfast champion and great defender of the faith of Nicea, "the pillar of the Church", as Saint Gregory the Theologian calls him. Despite his uncompromising hostility towards error and the fierceness with which he opposed it, he had the quality of being capable, even in the heat of battle, of tolerance and moderation towards those who had in good faith been led astray. Many of the eastern bishops were wary of and had rejected the word homoousios through misunderstanding, and the Saint demonstrated great sympathy and patience in winning them back to the true course.

He had a commanding personality. His early rise to epoch-making influence (he was scarcely more than twenty-eight at the First Ecumenical Council) his election as bishop when scarcely of canonical age, the speedy ascendancy which he gained all over Egypt and Libya, the rapid consolidation of the tempest-tossed province under his rule, the enthusiastic loyalty of his clergy and monastics, the extraordinary popularity enjoyed by him at Alexandria, the evident feeling of the Arians that as long as he lived their cause would not prosper—all this is a combined and impressive tribute to his personal greatness and holiness.

He had the not too common gift of seeing the proportions of things. He always saw at once where principles separated or united men; where the bond or divergence was merely superficial. With Arianism, no compromise was allowed; but he did not fail to distinguish individuals really at one with him in essentials, even when their conduct towards himself had been indefensible. So long as the Orthodox Catholic cause was advanced, personal questions were insignificant to him.

In the whole of our detailed knowledge of his life, we see a total lack of self-interest. The glory of God and the welfare of the Church absorbed him fully at all times. Almost unconscious of his own

power, he treat Serapion and the monks as his equals or superiors, begging them to correct and alter anything amiss in his writings. His humility was all the more real for never having been conspicuously paraded.

In addition,, he had — as we shall see — a real sense of humor. Even in his youthful works we detect it, and it is always present. In many incidents of his life, we shall see the twinkle of his keen, searching eye. Courage, self-sacrifice, steadiness of purpose, versatility and resourcefulness, width of ready sympathy, were all harmonized by deep reverence and the disciple of a single-minded lover of Christ. The Arian controversy was to him no battle of ecclesiastical power. It was a religious crisis involving the reality of revelation and our redemption. As he wrote to the bishops of Egypt, “We are contending for everything we have.” Indeed, the Orthodox were fighting for their salvation.

Saint Athanasius was noticed by Saint Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, when Athanasius was still a teenager. According to the Ecclesiastical History of Rufinus, Bishop Alexander, on the anniversary of the martyrdom of his predecessor, Peter, was expecting some clergy to dinner in a house by the sea after the church service. Out of the window of the upper floor he saw some boys at play on the beach. As he watched, it became apparent they were imitating the Church’s sacred rite of baptism! In fact, what had happened was that some of the boys had been appointed Readers, others were serving as Deacons, others as Presbyters, others as Bishops. Young Athanasius himself had been elected Patriarch, and they were in the process of catechizing and baptizing some little pagan Greek boys in the water of the Mediterranean!

Thinking at last that the boys had gone too far, Saint Alexander sent some of his clergy to bring them in. At first his inquiries of the little rascals produced a Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer type of alarmed denial. But at length he elicited that one of them had acted as Patriarch and had baptized some of the others in the character of catechumens. On ascertaining that, in fact, all the details of the Church’s rite had been correctly and duly observed, he consulted his clergy and decided that the baptisms should be treated as valid, and that the boy-bishop and his small-fry clergy had given such plain proof of their vocation that their parents should be instructed to hand them over to be educated for the sacred calling of the priesthood. Saint Alexander, in the meantime, read some appropriate prayers over the newly-baptized youngsters, chrismated them, and sent them off.

By the time he was twenty or twenty-one, Saint Athanasius had already written his two monumental works, *Against the Pagans* and *On the Incarnation of God the Word*.

Arius’ beginnings were less auspicious. We are told that he was from Libya and had settled in Alexandria soon after the origin of the Meletian schism in 301. Out of motives of ambition, he sided first with Meletius, then with Saint Peter, the bishop of Alexandria, who ordained him deacon, but afterwards was compelled to depose him. He became reconciled to Achillas, Saint Peter’s successor, who raised him to the priesthood. Disappointed that he failed to gain the position of bishop of Alexandria at the election of Saint Alexander, Arius nurtured a private grudge, which eventually culminated in his opposition to Saint Alexander’s teaching. That Arius was a vain person is evident from his work *Thalia*, but he was a good and persuasive speaker, and known for his strict ascetic life. He was also influenced by some of Origen’s bad aspects, and he himself claimed, as well, that he was a disciple of a certain Lucian of Antioch (see our Church’s periodical *The True Vine*, issue no. 19, for an extensive study of this particular matter).

Around 319, Arius began to propagate his ideas in earnest, and he began to canvass for support among the clergy and laypeople of Alexandria and beyond. A letter was addressed to Arius and his supporters by Saint Alexander and signed by the clergy of Alexandria, but produced no result. Finally, in 321, a Council of bishops of Egypt and Libya was called, and Arius and his allies were deposed. Even this did not check the movement. Others began to side with Saint Alexander, and others, including some influential bishops, allied themselves with Arius. The winds of controversy began to whip the flames of a local dispute into a raging conflagration that was rapidly spreading out of control.

In all this growing uproar and confusion, Saint Athanasius was ready with his defense of the Orthodox Faith. His sure instinct and powerful grasp of the center of the question made him the mainstay of his bishop in this painful conflict. At a stage difficult to determine with precision, Saint Alexander sent out to the bishops of the Church at large a concise and carefully-worded memorandum of the decision of the Egyptian Synod of 321, fortified by the signatures of the clergy of Alexandria and elsewhere.

This weighty document bears the clear stamp of the mind and character of Saint Athanasius; it contains the essence of which his whole series of anti-Arian writings are the expansion.

Early in 324, a new actor came upon the scene. Saint Hosius, bishop of Cordova and confessor, arrived in Alexandria with a letter from the Emperor himself, entreating both parties to make peace. The anxiety of the Emperor for the peace of his new dominions is its keynote. On the arrival of Saint Hosius, a Council was held in Alexandria in 324, but it produced little effect. Nonetheless, Saint Hosius brought back to the Emperor a strong report in favor of Saint Alexander; the Emperor is credited with a stern letter of rebuke to Arius. Such was the state of affairs which led to the imperial resolve, probably at the suggestion of Saint Hosius, to summon a Council of bishops from the whole world to decide this doctrinal dispute.

An Ecumenical Council was a new experiment. Local councils had long since grown to be a recognized organ of the Church. But no precedent as yet described the “general Council” as a supreme expression of the Church’s mind. We have already mentioned in brief the discussions and the results of the Council. The almost unanimous horror of the bishops at Nicea at the novelty and profaneness of Arianism condemned it as alien to the traditional belief of the Churches throughout the world. But it was one thing to perceive this, and another to formulate the positive belief of the Church in such a way as to exclude the heresy. It was one thing to agree in condemning Arius’ doctrines, and another to agree upon an adequate test of Orthodoxy. This was the problem that lay before the Council, and we have seen how the holy Fathers of the Council finally adopted the word *homoousios* — “of one essence” — as the best means of excluding the devious interpretations of Arius.

As we said earlier, there was a certain danger and ambiguity involved in seeking to address the Christian message of the God the Word’s incarnation to the Greek pagan world. The new Christian wine had to be poured, out of necessity, into the old Greek wine-skins, and although the wine skins did not burst at once, as we noted, they did finally explode at Nicea. Eusebius of Nicomedia, like several other prominent individuals and writers in the Church, like Sabellius, Paul at Samosata and Arius, were characterized by a primarily secular or philosophical knowledge. The Nicene Creed and the work of Saint Athanasius which followed were a summons back to the simple first principles of the Holy Gospel and the Rule of Faith, which turned a philosophical term on its head. Just as our Saviour “trampled

down death by death”, so also did the Council Fathers destroy a pagan, philosophical notion by a philosophical term, redefined.

After the First Ecumenical Council, things began to move swiftly. Saint Alexander of Alexandria died in April of 328. Two months later, on June 8 328, at about the age of thirty-one, Saint Athanasius became Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria. Eusebius of Nicomedia, who pretended to accept the creed at Nicea, though in actuality he supported Arius, became an implacable and unscrupulous enemy of Saint Athanasius and was constantly hatching plots, and slandering the Saint in the ears of the Emperor, Saint Constantine the Great. In the presence of Saint Constantine, he always appeared as a supporter of the First Ecumenical Council, but his real purpose was to overturn its decisions by hook or by crook. Actually until his death in the autumn of 342, he primarily used crooks.

Some Church histories have called him a semi-Arian, but this is not true. He was a real Arian. The name “semi-Arian” is often a misnomer for a group of bishops who were truly Orthodox, but who, at first, did not understand the use of the term homoousios.

Now the intrigues, the back-stabbing, the outright lies, and the cloak and dagger scenarios began on the part of the Arians, and they would last almost to the end of Saint Athanasius’ life.

Saint Athanasius was elected bishop by general consent. Saint Alexander, his predecessor, had practically nominated him, and a large body of the popular opinion clamored for Saint Athanasius’ election as “the good, the pious, the Christian, the ascetical, the genuine bishop.”

The earliest biographers of Saint Athanasius divide his life into two periods: 1) the period of quiet, and 2) the period of ferocious persecutions and exile. His first period of quiet lasted from June of 328 to July of 335, a period of a little over seven years. During this quiet period, he visited the churches throughout Egypt and also went as far as the Ethiopian frontier; he visited Saint Pachomius and his monks at Tabenna.

Meanwhile, Eusebius of Nicomedia was busily and skillfully hatching anti-Nicene plots. Everything was done to foment troubles in Antioch and disturbances in Egypt. The Arians of Egypt joined forces with the Meletian schismatics. Eusebius managed to have Arius recalled from exile, and wrote to Saint Athanasius to admit Arius and his friends into communion, and also warned of dire consequences if Saint Athanasius failed to do this. Saint Athanasius knew that Arius had not repented, and so he firmly replied that “the Christ-opposing heresy has no communion with the Catholic Church.” Period. Whereupon, Eusebius shifted his first intrigue into gear. Three Meletian bishops appeared at the imperial court and accused Saint Athanasius of having levied a special tax upon all Egypt for his Church’s expenses. Fortunately, two priests from Alexandria were there at the same time and were able to disprove the slander. However, other charges followed quickly: Athanasius governed with arrogance and violence; he used magic; he subsidized treasonable people. Saint Athanasius successfully defended himself against these charges.

But Eusebius had more slanders and intrigues in readiness. A notable example is the case of Ischyras. Ischyras had been uncanonically ordained a priest and was subsequently and properly condemned by an Alexandrian council in 324. However, he continued to serve as a priest. His place of worship was a cottage, and his congregation consisted of one orphan, some of his relatives, and seven other people. During a visitation of this particular diocese, Saint Athanasius had heard of Ischyras’ case

from the presbyter of the township, and had sent Macarius, one of his clergy, to summon Ischyras for explanations. Macarius found the poor man ill in bed and unable to come; but Macarius urged Ischyras' father to dissuade him from his irregular proceedings. But instead of desisting, Ischyras joined the Meletians. His first version of the matter appears to have been that Macarius had used violence and broken his chalice. The Meletians communicated this to Eusebius, who eggs them on to get up the case. The story gradually improves. Ischyras, it now appeared, had been actually celebrating the Eucharist; Macarius had burst in upon him, and not only broken the chalice, but also upset the Holy Table. In this form the tale was carried to Emperor Constantine when Saint Athanasius was at Nicomedia. The relatives of Ischyras, however, prevailed upon him to recall his statements, and he presented the bishop with a written statement that the whole story was false, and had been extorted from him by violence. Ischyras was forgiven, but placed under censure, which led to his eventually renewing the charge with increased bitterness. Saint Athanasius now was accused of personally breaking the chalice, etc. In the letter issued by the council of Phillipopolis the cottage of Ischyras becomes a "basilica" which Saint Athanasius had caused to be thrown down.

Then there was the case of Arsenius. Arsenius was a Meletian bishop. By a large bribe, as it is stated, he was induced by John Arcaph, the leader of the Meletian bishops, to go into hiding among the Meletian monks of the Thebaid; rumors were quietly set in motion that Saint Athanasius had had Arsenius murdered, and had procured one of his hands for magical purposes. A hand was circulated purporting to be the very hand in question. A report of the case, including the last version of the Ischyras scandal, was sent to Saint Constantine, who, startled by the new accusation, sent orders to his half-brother, Dalmatius, a high official at Antioch, to inquire into the case. Finally, it was determined to hold a council at Tyre in July of 335 in order to try Saint Athanasius. This council was actually an Arian assembly, but Saint Athanasius was not caught napping. He launched a secret counter-attack. A trusted deacon was sent off on the tracks of the missing Arsenius. Arsenius was traced to a Meletian monastery in the town of Antaeopolis in Upper Egypt. Pinnes, the presbyter of the community, got wind of the discovery, and smuggled Arsenius away down the Nile; then he was spirited away to the city of Tyre. The deacon, however, very astutely made a sudden descent upon the monastery in force, seized Pinnes, carried him to Alexandria, brought him before the Duke, confronted him with the monk who had escorted Arsenius away, and forced them to confess to the whole plot. As soon as he was able to do so, Pinnes wrote to John Arcaph, the Meletian bishop, warning him of the exposure of the plot, and suggesting that the charge had better be dropped (this letter is an amusingly naive exhibition of human rascality). Meanwhile, Arsenius was heard of at an inn in Tyre by the servant of a magistrate; the latter had him arrested, and informed Saint Athanasius. Arsenius stoutly denied his identity, but was recognized by the bishop of Tyre, and at last confessed. The Emperor Constantine was informed of all this and wrote to Saint Athanasius, expressing his indignation at the plot. Arsenius made his peace with Saint Athanasius, and in due time succeeded (according to the Nicene rule of Faith) to the sole episcopate of the city of Hypsele.

However, at the Council of Tyre itself the proceedings became heated and disorderly; everyone was accused of promiscuity; while against Saint Athanasius every possible charge was raked up. He was accused of rebellion, sedition, ecclesiastical tyranny, murder, fornication, sacrilege and magic. Meletian bishops charged that the Saint had had them beaten and imprisoned. The number of witnesses, and the evident readiness of the majority of the bishops to believe the worse against him, inspired the

Saint with profound misgivings as to his chance of obtaining justice. Then, altogether unexpectedly, a prostitute, paid off by the party of Eusebius, entered the assembly, accusing the Saint of having committed fornication with her. The Saint was on the point of entering the hall, when one of his very alert presbyters, Timothy by name, caught on to what was going on. Whereupon, before the Saint could enter, Father Timothy himself ran on in before him, walked up to the woman and said, “Woman, am I the one you accuse of having sinned with you?” Thinking that he was the Saint (she had never seen Saint Athanasius before), she burst into tears and cried out, “That’s him, O holy bishops! This is the profligate and impure Athanasius who sinned with me! Oh, you horrible man! Oh, boo, hoo, hoo, hoo!”

She was quickly hustled out of the room.

But the Arians had one more accusation ready; nonetheless, they walked into another trap. The “hand of Arsenius” was produced by the Arians, and naturally made a deep impression. But the Saint was also now ready. “Did you know Arsenius personally?” he asked the assembly. The eager reply came from many sides, “Yes!” Promptly, Arsenius was ushered in alive, but wrapped up and disguised in a cloak. Suddenly, the “murdered” man dropped the cloak, and everyone in the assembly gasped in shock, because, to all intents and purposes, Arsenius appeared to be alive. But what of the missing hand? The Saint drew out Arsenius’ right hand. “You will observe that Arsenius has a right hand,” said the Saint to the assembly. There was a moment of suspense, artfully managed by Saint Athanasius, who had that twinkle in his eyes. Then Arsenius dramatically produced his left hand. Whereupon, the Saint turned to the now thoroughly annoyed and furious Arians and asked, “Would you kindly inform us from whence the third hand was cut off?” This was too much for John, the head of the Meletian schism, who immediately fled out of the council. The Eusebians, however, were tougher. They began to shout, “Did we not say that he is a sorcerer?” The Saint walked out of the council, followed by the enraged Arian bishops who continued to hurl curses and insults at him. The Arian prefect of Mareotis, a district in Egypt, was so angry and frustrated on learning of this turn of events, he consoled himself by turning loose the violence of a mob of pagans against the Church’s young consecrated virgins, the young nuns, who were mercilessly raped.

The Emperor was no longer disposed to hear any more Arian accusations about broken chalices and severed hands, but the Eusebians were still not at a loss. They made short work of the Saint. The whole mishmash of charges examined at Tyre were thrown aside. In the imperial presence, when the Saint was also present, the Arians now accused the Saint of cutting off the wheat supply from Saint Constantine’s new capital by stopping the grain ships that left from Egypt every autumn. In vain, the Saint protested that he had neither the means nor the power to do anything of the kind. “You are a rich man, and can do whatever you like,” replied Eusebius of Nicomedia. The Saint was, as a result of all this, banished to Treveri in Gaul (today’s Trier in Germany). In a letter written soon after his father’s death, Emperor Constantine II stated that his father, Saint Constantine the Great, had sent the Saint to Gaul only to keep him out of danger — and out of the clutches of the Arians.

Soon after the Saint’s banishment, Arius died. He had gone to Alexandria, but did not succeed in being received into communion there. So he went to Constantinople, and the Eusebians determined that here, at least, Arius would not be repelled. Arius appeared before the Emperor and, by hypocrisy, satisfied him by a sworn profession of Orthodoxy, and a day was fixed for his reception into communion. Alexander, the saintly bishop of Constantinople, was greatly distressed. He was heard to

pray in the church that either Arius or himself might be taken from this life before such an outrage to the Faith should be permitted. As a matter of fact, Arius died suddenly the day before his intended reception. His friends ascribed his death to magic, whereas the Orthodox knew it was the judgment of God. According to some accounts, he went into the privy for a physical need and his intestines suddenly herniated and ruptured. The Orthodox breathed a sigh of relief.

Nonetheless, the plots and slanders against our Saint continued for thirty more years.

Allow me to briefly list the exiles he suffered.

His first exile lasted from 335 to 337. He was, as mentioned, sent to Treveri. This exile lasted a little over one year.

His second exile, from 339 to 346, lasted for seven years. He was banished to Sardica (today's Sophia in Bulgaria), and then to Rome. During this time, although the Arians were at the height of their political and ecclesiastical power, they began to bicker among themselves. In 341, they actually held a council at Antioch that ultimately produced four creeds! In fact, their collapse was beginning.

On the 21st of October, in 346, after an absence of seven years, Saint Athanasius was received by his flock as he made his way toward Alexandria by way of Jerusalem. It is recorded that "the people and those in authority met him a hundred miles distant from Alexandria" and escorted him amid splendid rejoicing and Paschal jubilation. He remained there in peace for nine years, three months, and nineteen days. This was called "the Golden Decade."

The opening of this decade was auspicious. Egypt fully participated in the "profound and wonderful peace of the Churches". The bishops of province after province were sending in their letters of adhesion to the Orthodox Synods of Nicea and Sardica, and those of Egypt signed to a man.

The public rejoicing of the Alexandrian Church had something of the character of the feast of Pascha. A wave of religious enthusiasm swept over the whole community. A historian writes: "How many widows and how many orphans, who were before hungry and naked, now through the great zeal of the people were no longer hungry, and went forth clothed;" "in a word, so great was their emulation in virtue, that you would have thought every family and every house a Church, by reason of the goodness of its inhabitants and the prayers which were offered to God." Increased strictness of life, the sanctification of home, renewed application to prayer, and practical charity, these were a worthy welcome to their long-lost shepherd. But most conspicuous of all was the impulse to the ascetical life. Marriages were renounced and even dissolved in favor of the monastic life; the same instincts were at work (but in greater intensity) as had asserted themselves at the close of the era of the pagan persecutions.

Here, perhaps, I should add as a parenthetical comment, that the Orthodox laypeople throughout the Roman Empire played a significant and heroic role in the defense of the Orthodox Faith and defeat of Arianism, even when many of the bishops faltered.

Not only in Alexandria and Egypt, but in Constantinople, Syria, Cappadocia, Edessa, Samosata, Pontus, Armenia, Nicomedia, Paphlagonia, Scythia, Illyria, Rome, Milan, and elsewhere, the simple faithful of the Church showed amazing devotion, courage and tenacity in resisting the Arians.

In Edessa, for example, the Arian Emperor Valens sent a large body of soldiers to massacre all the Orthodox Christians who, in defiance of his orders, had gathered in their church. When the prefect of the army was going towards it with a large military force, a young mother, leading her own little child by the hand, hurried hastily by on her way to the church, breaking through the ranks of the soldiers. The prefect, irritated at this, ordered her to be brought to him, and thus addressed her: "Wretched woman, where are you running in so disorderly a manner?" She replied, "To the same place that others are hastening." "Have you not heard," said he, "that the prefect is about to put to death all that shall be found there?" "Yes," said the woman, "and therefore I hasten, that I may be found there." "And why are you dragging that little child?" said the prefect. The woman answered, "That he also may be vouchsafed the honor of martyrdom." The prefect was stunned. Promptly, he turned back his troops, returned to the Emperor and told him that it would be preposterous to destroy so many people who were so ready to die for their Faith.

In Samosata, the Arian bishop went to bathe in the public baths. Perceiving that no one else was entering the water, but that all stood by, holding their towels and bars of Palmolive soap, he thought that it was out of deference to his person, and so he arose and left the bath. Later, he learned that the people would not enter the water because they believed it had been contaminated by his heresy, and they ordered the water to be drained and fresh water to be supplied. When the Arian bishop learned this, he left the city in shame.

In Rome, when Pope Liberius succumbed to the pressure of the Arians and signed one of their creeds, on his return he found that his former flock shunned him. Here too, whenever he betook himself to the public baths, he found that the whole place would empty out upon his arrival. No one wanted to bathe in the same water in which he had bathed, even though he had succumbed to the Arians unwillingly.

(By the way, when Cardinal Newman recorded this incident in an article he wrote in the last century, the powers-that-be in the Vatican put him on some kind of black list as a suspected heretic. As one layman, Michael Kearney notes, "Apparently Newman's assertion that the Arian heresy was extinguished by a few God-bearing hierarchs and the pious laypeople, and not by the 'infallible' pronouncements of the Roman pope, did not exactly fit the model of 19th century Roman Catholic ecclesiology".)

But to return to our Saint.

Strong as was the position of Saint Athanasius in Egypt upon his return from exile, his hold upon the country grew with each year of the decade. When circumstances set the Arian Emperor Constantius free to resume the Arian campaign, it was against Saint Athanasius that he worked; at first from the remote West, then by attempts to remove or coax him from Alexandria. The extraordinary development of Egyptian monasticism must be placed in the first rank of the causes which strengthened Saint Athanasius in Egypt. The institution was already firmly rooted there, and Saint Pachomius, a slightly older contemporary of Saint Athanasius himself, had converted a spontaneous manifestation of the ascetic impulse into an organized form of community life. Saint Pachomius himself had died on May 9, 356, but Saint Athanasius was welcomed soon after his arrival by a deputation from the brotherhood of Tabenna, which also conveyed a special message from the aged Saint Anthony. Saint Athanasius placed

himself at the head of the monastic movement, and we know that he won the enthusiastic devotion of these ardent monks.

However, the Saint knew that the storm clouds were gathering. The Arians were still at work, and they had the support of the new Emperor Constantius. The Emperor sent a general, named Syrianus, to Egypt. Although initially feigning friendliness and peaceful intentions, on February 8, 356, Syrianus' troops suddenly surrounded the "Church of Theonas" where Saint Athanasius was presiding at a service. The Saint calmly took his seat upon the episcopal throne in the apse and ordered the deacon to begin the 135th Psalm, "O give thanks unto the Lord. . .", while the people responded at each verse, "for His mercy endureth forever. Alleluia." Meanwhile the soldiers crowded into the interior of the church; in spite of urgent entreaties, the Saint refused to escape until the congregation was in safety. He ordered the prayers to proceed, and only at the last moment a crowd of monks and deacons closed ranks around the Archbishop and, shuffling all together towards the exterior exit door of the sanctuary with the Saint in the middle, they managed, in the midst of all the confusion, to convey him out of the church while he was in a half-fainting state out of anxiety and consternation over the faithful who were being beaten mercilessly by the soldiers. From that moment, Saint Athanasius vanished from sight for six years and fourteen days. This was the beginning of his third exile.

On this occasion, the Saint was in an impregnable position, and from his hiding places in Egypt he was completely inaccessible to his enemies, more secure in his defense, more free to attack. This time he vanished into the Nitrian desert, where the monks hid him. For one year during this period, that is, from 357-358, one young consecrated virgin — according to tradition, she was Saint Syncletike — hid him in her house, which was right in Alexandria. The commencement of the Saint's exile was the supreme triumph of Arianism; its conclusion, the collapse of Arianism. From his hiding place the Saint followed each step of Arianism's break-up, and this disintegration was greatly assisted by the Saint's powerful and ready pen, knowing where to strike and where to spare.

Meanwhile, towns, villages, deserts, monasteries — the very tombs themselves were scoured by the Emperor's inquisitors in search of the Saint; but in vain. Tsk, tsk. They forgot the dry-wells!

Back in Alexandria, the disorders continued. Once again, the Arians turned loose the pagan mobs on the Orthodox Christians. On the pretense of "seeking for Athanasius", women were murdered, the churches wrecked and polluted with the very worst orgies of heathenism, houses and even tombs were ransacked throughout the city and the suburbs. Many bishops were driven into exile and Arian bishops and clergy were installed. After a delay of eight and a half months, the most infamous Arian bishop of all time, George, made his miserable appearance as the prelate of Alexandria. His previous career and character were strange qualifications for the second episcopal see of Christendom. He had sold pork in Constantinople, and, according to his many enemies, he was a cheat and a swindler, and the meat he sold was of poor quality. He had amassed considerable wealth and was a zealous Arian. His violent temper perhaps recommended him as the man most likely to crush the Orthodox opposition. He entered Alexandria during the Great Fast in 357, with an armed force. On Pascha he renewed the violent persecution of bishops, clergy, virgins and lay people. During the week after Pentecost, he turned loose the military against a number of Orthodox Christians who were worshipping in cemetery chapels instead of in churches that commemorated him; many were killed, and many more banished. George carried on his tyranny for eighteen months, till August 29, 358. His fierce insults against pagan worship were

accompanied by the meanest and most oppressive rapacity. At last, the pagan populace attacked him, and he was rescued with difficulty. (Doesn't this sound like Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios Metaxakis who was chased out of Constantinople by his flock in 1923?). On October 2, 358, George left town, but foolishly returned back in November of 361, whereupon he was immediately seized and thrown into chains. On December 24th of 361, "impatient with the tedious forms of judicial proceedings," as one historian records, the pagans dragged him from prison and lynched him.

Saint Athanasius meanwhile eluded all search. But his spies were everywhere, listening, watching. Loyal and efficient messengers warned him of danger, kept him informed of events, and carried his letters far and wide. It is during this time that he most likely wrote the Life of Saint Anthony.

Meanwhile, the Arians were sinking into a mire of discordant aims and creeds. The original Arians, now gradually dying out, were all tainted with compromise and political subservience. All, at one time or another, and in different degrees, had been willing to make concessions and veil their more objectionable tenets under some evasive confession. There were now a total of some seven or eight Arian creeds in circulation.

In November of 361, Julian, known as "the Apóstate", became emperor, and he at once openly confessed his espousal of the paganism he had long cherished in secret. On February 9, 362, he recalled from exile all the bishops banished by the former Emperor Constantius. Twelve days later, Saint Athanasius re-appeared in Alexandria and remained there for eight whole months, until October 23rd. Immediately upon his return, he called a Synod, rightly called a "Synod of Saints and Confessors," in order to deal with questions that stood in the way of the peace of the Church. Jerome says that this Synod, through its resolutions, "snatched the whole world from the jaws of Satan". The Saint saw that victory was not to be won by smiting men who were ready for peace, nor was the cause of Christ to be furthered by breaking the bruised reed and quenching the smoking flax. In the strong and calm moderation of the Synod's decree we feel that the Saint is no longer a combatant arduously contending for victory, but a conqueror surveying the field of his triumph and resolving upon the terms of peace. This Council, after the First Ecumenical Council, and the Council of Sardica, is justly recognized as the crown of Saint Athanasius' career.

But, as Yogi Berra, the famous catcher for the Yankees, once said, "It's not over till it's over." Emperor Julian had recalled the Christian bishops from exile, hoping that they would all begin to destroy one another; but, to his extreme annoyance, just the opposite was happening in Alexandria. The results there were, in fact, very different from what he had contemplated. He wrote to the Alexandrians, complaining that Saint Athanasius, who had so many sentences against him, ought to have asked special permission to return, and that he should leave the city at once on pain of severe punishment. Nothing happened. Julian, therefore, again wrote an indignant letter to his prefect, threatening a heavy fine if "Athanasius, the enemy of the gods" did not leave not only Alexandria, but Egypt, at once. He adds an angry comment on the Saint's having dared to baptize "during my reign" some pagan Greek ladies of noble birth. Nothing happened. In a third letter, along with arguments in favor of Serapis and the gods, and against Christ, he re-iterates with growing irritation the order that "Athanasius, that contemptible little fellow" has to leave Egypt by the first of December. His letter ill conceals his evident acknowledgment that Saint Athanasius was in Egypt a power greater than himself. But no man had ever wielded such political power as the Saint with so little disposition to use it. He bowed his head to the

storm and prepared to leave Alexandria once more. His friends and disciples stood round lamenting their loss. "Be of good cheer," he replied, "it is only a little cloud, and will soon pass away."

He took a Nile river boat and set off toward Upper Egypt. But he detected that he was being pursued by government officers, whereupon, when his boat had just rounded a curve in the river, he directed the flabbergasted captain of the boat to make a quick U-turn, and head back down the river. Presently they approached the boat of his pursuers, who suspecting nothing, called out, "Have you seen Athanasius the bishop?" And as the river boats passed one another, going now in opposite directions, the Saint himself called back, "He is not far. . . ."

This time he hid among the hermitages and cells of the monks of Saint Pachomius. As the Saint approached Hermopolis, the clergy and monastics (about 100 in number) lined both banks of the river to welcome him. Then he greeted Abba Theodore, Saint Pachomius' successor, and asked after the brethren. "By thy holy prayers, Father, we are well." He was mounted on an ass and escorted to the monastery surrounded by hundreds of monks carrying burning torches (inadvertently, out of their enthusiasm, says the letter to Abba Ammon, they almost set fire to him); Saint Theodore walked before him on foot. The Saint inspected the monasteries and expressed his high approval of all he heard and saw.

After Pascha, around midsummer, he was travelling near Antinopolis and was praying earnestly to himself while the monks towed his boat from the shore. The date was June 26, 363. The Saint was concerned about the new wave of persecutions under Julian. Abba Pammon, who was with him, spoke an encouraging word to the Saint, and Saint Athanasius replied and spoke of the peace of mind he himself felt under persecution, and of the consolation of suffering and even death for the sake of Christ. Abba Pammon looked at Saint Theodore, and they smiled, barely restraining a laugh. "You think me a coward?" asked Saint Athanasius. "Tell him," said Theodore to Pammon, with a chuckle, "No, you tell him," said Pammon. Theodore then announced to the astonished Archbishop that at that very hour Julian the Apostate had been killed in Persia, and that the Saint should lose no time in getting back to his see. His fourth exile had lasted fifteen months and twenty-two days.

The Saint remained in peace in his see until October of 365. This time the Emperor Valens, the last of the Arian rulers, ordered that all bishops expelled by civil authorities under Julian should be expelled again under pain of a heavy fine. The Saint departed again, on this the last, the shortest and mildest of his five exiles. It lasted but five months, and he spent it in a country house that belonged to him near the "New River". After the citizens of Alexandria threatened to riot, Valens relented and allowed the Saint to return.

So the Saint returned and now entered upon the last eight years of his life, in a well-earned Sabbath of honored peace. During this time, in 370, he began to correspond with a young bishop from Caesarea of Cappadocia, whose name was Basil. Saint Basil speaks to others of Saint Athanasius in terms of unbounded veneration, and Saint Athanasius in turn calls Saint Basil a bishop such as any church would desire to call its own.

Saint Athanasius was active to the last; spiritually "his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated." In his seventy-fifth year, he entered upon the forty-sixth year of his episcopate. Feeling that his end was near, he followed the example of his revered predecessor, Saint Alexander, and named Peter

as the man he judged fittest to succeed him; then, “on the 2nd of May,” records a contemporary, “he departed this life in a wonderful manner.”

References

- Aspects of Church History, Chapters One and Two*, Norland Publishing Co., Belmont, MA 1975, by Fr. Georges Florovsky, pp. 15-62.
- The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century, “Saint Athanasius of Alexandria”*, by Fr. Georges Florovsky, Büchervertrieb — Sanstalt, Belmont, MA 1987, pp. 36-58.
- The Orthodoxy of the Body of the Faithful During the Supremacy of Arianism*, Cardinal John H. Newman, published in an unidentified Roman Catholic periodical in 1859.
- Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, [Saint] Athanasius, Select Works and Letters*.
- Patrology, Vol. III, The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature*, Johannes Quasten, Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland, 1960, pp. 20-79.
- The Great Synaxaristes [Collection of the Lives of the Saints]*, in Greek, Vol. One, January 19.
- The True Vine, Concerning Saint Constantine the Great and the Nicene Creed*, Issue No. 15, Holy Orthodox Church in North America, Boston, 1992, pp. 14-64.
- The True Vine, Concerning Saint Lucian the Martyr*, Issue No. 19, Holy Orthodox Church in North America, Boston, 1994, pp. 2-35.