

# ATHANASIUS

## CHECKLIST: WHAT YOU NEED

- A white board, easel pad, or chalk board with markers/chalk
- Copies of the downloadable “622 service” and “Prayers & Thanksgivings” booklets
- Copies of the lesson handout
- Copy of the leader's notes
- OPTIONAL: Bibles (ESV or similar recommended)
- OPTIONAL: Have notebooks on hand for teens to take home and use as prayer journals if they wish

## ICE BREAKER: CONTRA MUNDUM

Write this phrase on your board: “contra mundum”. Ask the teens to see how many words they can come up with by rearranging the letters.

*Tell your teens at the close of the activity that this is Latin for “against the world” – and that “Athanasius contra mundum” was a common saying when he was alive, indicating that Athanasius often had to stand alone to defend the faith against popular heresies (false teachings) of his day.*

DEPENDING ON YOUR GROUP, YOU MIGHT ASK THE TEENS TO WORK ON THE WORDS INDIVIDUALLY ON THEIR OWN PAPER OR IN TEAMS TO COMPETE FOR THE LONGEST LIST, OR HAVE THEM WORK ALL TOGETHER.

## 622: BEGINNING WITH PRAYER

Begin the formal part of the lesson by saying together the first part of the order for service for young people in the booklet, up to the middle of page 4.

AT THIS POINT IN THE LESSON, ASK IF THE TEENS SUCCEEDED IN DOING LAST WEEK’S CHALLENGE, HOW IT WENT, AND WHETHER THEY HAVE ANYTHING TO SHARE.

## DISCUSSION: WHAT IT’S LIKE TO STAND ALONE

As an introduction to the lesson ask the teens to discuss the following questions.

DEPENDING ON THE COMFORT LEVEL FOR SHARING IN YOUR GROUP, IT MAY BE EASIER TO HAVE THEM VOLUNTEER ANSWERS WITH ALL RESPONSES WRITTEN TOGETHER ON A BOARD.

- Have you ever been in a situation where no one else agrees with you about something important?  
How did it feel? What did you end up doing?  
When it was all behind you, were you glad you had made the choice you did?

*A few things worth pointing out (if they don’t otherwise arise during the discussion):*

- *Most of us have had the experience of being convinced that we are right about something, but surrounded by others who disagree. Sometimes it may be a small matter, but other times it can be about something that is really important. Any time we find ourselves standing alone it can be hard and there can be considerable pressure to give up our conviction and “go with the flow”. This is where there’s a difference between matters of preference and matters of principle. To sacrifice personal preference for others can be a generous and kind gesture. But to abandon moral conviction in order to appease others is the furthest thing from noble and brave. If you’ve ever had to stand alone on a matter of principle, chances are that even if it was difficult, you were glad afterwards that you stood your ground. Perhaps your willingness to speak may have caused others to rethink their conclusions as well.*

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## THE LESSON: HOLD FAST OUR CONFESSION

Lessons 13-42 follow a slightly different format from previous lessons. The story of the saint being studied is interspersed with verses from scripture that provide added perspective. You may prefer to read the lesson text aloud together as a group, or ask the teens to read it silently to themselves.

*“After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.”  
(1 Peter 5:10)*

In the year 306, Constantine the Great became head of the Roman empire. During his reign, persecution against Christians was brought to a halt, and in 325 it was Constantine who called together the Council of Nicaea, a historic meeting of bishops which produced the Nicene Creed.

The Creed represented an important consensus among Christians on the true teachings of the Church, particularly in light of some of the false teachings that were in circulation at that time. The most popular heresy of that day was put forward by Arius, and claimed that Jesus was not God. It is for this reason that our Creed takes such trouble to make the divinity of Christ crystal clear.

Following Constantine’s death in 337, the disputes over right teachings within the Christian Church continued and the emperors that came after used their power to force unity and to punish those whose positions were out of favour – often those who held fast to the Creed.

*“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.”  
(Hebrews 4:14)*

Athanasius was a young deacon and secretary to the bishop of Alexandria in Egypt when the Council of Nicaea was called. He attended with his bishop and argued forcefully against the teachings of Arius. Shortly thereafter, the bishop died and Athanasius was elected to replace him, becoming Archbishop of Alexandria at the age of 28.

This role was not an easy one for Athanasius. He spent the next 47 years enduring attacks by the followers of Arius, often finding himself outnumbered, often in exile, yet working and writing continuously in defense of the faith.

In spite of hardship and struggle, Athanasius had deep pastoral concern for those in his care. One day, as he was presiding over the liturgy in Alexandria, the followers of Arius brought soldiers to break down the doors. When Athanasius heard they were on the way, he calmly called upon the people to recite Psalm 136, with its repeated reminder that “The Lord’s steadfast love endures for ever”, and then to depart quietly. He had wanted to avoid panic and violent resistance, but before the psalm was ended, the soldiers were upon them. Athanasius was able to see most of his flock safely out before some of his own clergy picked him up and whisked him away, though sadly not all escaped being trampled in the chaos.

*“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”  
(2 Timothy 4:7)*

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Athanasius is remembered as one of the great “doctors” or theological teachers of the early Church, a fierce defender of orthodoxy, and an advocate for believers to lead a simple, virtuous and contemplative life. He wrote,

“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.”

Though his life was often turbulent, Athanasius was able to return to Alexandria before his death, continue his work to strengthen and establish the church, and then die peacefully in the company of his flock.

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, “ON THE INCARNATION” | DAVID FARMER, “OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS” | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, “THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 1” | GERARD SAMPSON, “LAYMAN’S BOOK OF SAINTS”.)

Then ask the teens to respond to what they’ve just read. Here are some questions to help guide the discussion.

- What kind of person do you think Athanasius was?
- Do you think Athanasius knew that history would vindicate him?  
(That is, that even though he often stood alone, one day, everyone would come to recognize that he was right).
- What can we learn from Athanasius’ example?

*A few notes and reflections for reference:*

- *Athanasius was someone who believed that the truth mattered and that it had to be safeguarded, both for believers in his day as well as for the Church of the future. He was willing to stand alone and to suffer rather than abandon what he believed to be true. Although Athanasius is remembered as a theologian, he was also someone with a pastoral heart and a concern that believers live holy lives.*
- *“Be on the right side of history” has become a popular saying in our day, but it is usually used to try to persuade people to “go with the flow” rather than to stand alone against the tide. The majority of people in Athanasius’ time would not have believed that history would see him as a saint who stood alone in a confusing time. But Athanasius was not concerned with what other people thought about him. Chances are, he wasn’t concerned about how history would view him either. He was concerned with doing what was right in the sight of God. This is what anchored him to the truth.*
- *There is a great deal to take from his example. We can learn to care for the Church and to lead holy lives, but perhaps most of all we can learn to stand up for the truth, even if that means standing alone and enduring hardship.*

DURING EACH LESSON, IF THE TEENS RAISE THEOLOGICAL OR BIBLICAL QUESTIONS THAT YOU DON’T FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT ANSWERING, SAY SO, BUT LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU’LL FIND THE ANSWER AND RESPOND AT THE NEXT MEETING.

## PREVIEW: AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Take a brief moment to look at the at-home challenge together.

THE WEEKLY “AT-HOME CHALLENGE” IS TYPICALLY A SIMPLE ASSIGNMENT TO SPEND SOME QUIET TIME IN PRIVATE PRAYER. ENCOURAGE THE TEENS TO GET NOTEBOOKS THAT CAN BE USED AS PRAYER JOURNALS. ASSURE THEM THAT THEY WILL NOT BE REQUIRED TO SHOW THEIR JOURNAL OR THEIR PRIVATE PRAYERS TO ANYONE.

**Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.**

(IF YOU DON’T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE “FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES”, WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON’T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER](http://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER).)

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Review today's lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of Athanasius that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you've chosen. Close your time of reflection with a prayer of gratitude for the witness of Athanasius.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following collect.

*O God, our heavenly Father, who didst raise up thy faithful servant Athanasius to be a Bishop in thy Church and to feed thy flock: We beseech thee to send down upon all thy Bishops, the Pastors of thy Church, the abundant gift of thy Holy Spirit, that they, being endued with power from on high, and ever walking in the footsteps of thy holy Apostles, may minister before thee in thy household as true servants of Christ and stewards of thy divine mysteries; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.* (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A BISHOP, P. 312)

## CLOSING PRAYERS (622 AGAIN)

Close with any prayers that might be appropriate in the context of the discussion of the day.

AT THE END OF EACH LESSON, IF YOU FIND THAT YOU STILL HAVE LOTS OF TIME REMAINING, YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO TAKE SOME TIME TO EXPLORE THE "PRAYERS AND THANKSGIVINGS" SECTION IN THE BCP (PAGES 39-62, OR YOU CAN USE THE DOWNLOADABLE BOOKLET). AS YOUR GROUP MEMBERS COME ACROSS PRAYERS THAT THEY FIND RELEVANT, PAUSE AND PRAY THEM TOGETHER. IF YOU'RE PRESSED FOR TIME, YOU MIGHT CLOSE WITH THE THEMED PRAYER FROM THE AT-HOME CHALLENGE.

Then finish with the "Grace", the final prayer in the booklet.