

ATHANASIUS

THE LESSON: HOLD FAST OUR CONFESSION

*“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)*

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”.)

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AT-HOME CHALLENGE

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))

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)