
The Maronite Monks of Adoration

December 2009

God's Big Mouths - Part II: St. Athanasius

During the month of December we celebrate the Feast of the Incarnation (Christmas) which celebrates the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Word of God, taking on flesh from the Blessed Virgin making Him true God and true man. This gives us the opportunity to look at the life of the great defender of Christ's divinity: St. Athanasius, who is also known as the "Father of Orthodoxy" because of his defense of this teaching.

The mystery of the Incarnation (Divinity of Christ) makes Christianity unique among all the religions of the world. Buddha, Confucius, Muhammad did not claim to be divine: Jesus did. "I and the Father are one." (Jn 10:30) and "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (Jn 14:9). Buddha, Confucius, Muhammad and other religious founders performed no miracles and did not rise from the dead. Jesus offered his many miracles and his resurrection as evidence of his divinity. So a Christian is one who believes in the divinity of Christ. Were Jesus just a "special man," a "prophet," then, as St. Paul says, "we are the most pitiable of men" and that "our faith is in vain."

This foundational belief has been under sustained attack ever since the advent of the so-called "Enlightenment:" an attack intensifying in our own day. A well-known (purportedly Catholic) "scholar" wrote the following: "Christ is God's special friend nothing more. The notion of a pre-existing divinity taking on human form is repugnant to modern man." Like much of the supposed "new theology," there is nothing new here but a rehash of some very old ancient heresies. When this heresy first appeared and reeked untold damage, St. Athanasius entered into a life and death struggle with it, suffered much, and ultimately brought about the triumph of Orthodoxy. We now take up his story.

In the early fourth century Arius, a deacon of the church in Alexandria, started to teach that Jesus Christ was in effect a creature and not the

incarnate Son of God. "God has not always been Father; there was a time when he was alone, and was not yet Father: later he became so. The Son is not from eternity." Arius soon gained many supporters particularly among the clergy. Alexander, archbishop of Alexandria, held a public debate between the traditional orthodox believers and the followers of the new theology. One Egyptian bishop asked the Arians, "Can He (Christ) then change from good to evil, as Satan did?" The Arian replied, "Since he is a creature, such a change is not impossible." That response said it all. Arius and his followers were thereupon excommunicated.

Arius, however, had powerful patrons, particularly Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea. His heresy spread to Antioch where riots occurred between the Orthodox and the Arians. With civil disorder now spreading throughout the East, Emperor Constantine called for a Council of the Bishops to settle this issue. Three Hundred Eighteen bishops gathered at the city of Nicaea, near Constantinople. Pope Silvester sent two priests as Papal Legates (his personal representatives). Accompanying Archbishop Alexander of Alexandria was his deacon, Athanasius.

At the council the Arians attempted one of the oldest perennial tricks in the book (still used in this day) by proposing a vaguely worded formula which appeared orthodox, or at least non-threatening, but which they fully intended to interpret as supporting their heresy. Noticing the ploy, the orthodox bishops knew that they had to present the true teaching in a way that allowed for no ambiguities. Bishop Ossius of Cordoba (Spain), sixty-nine years old but full of orthodox fervor, had the right term: *homoousios* — "consubstantial," "one in being" to describe the essential unity of the three persons in the Blessed Trinity. The Arians literally went ballistic over the term. The bishops approved it, the Papal Legates gave Pope Silvester's approval, and Emperor Constantine approved it on June 19, 325.

You would think that the issue was resolved. Unbeknown to all, another 60 years would pass before the orthodox faith would triumph. Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia bided his time. Managing to curry favor with Emperor Constantine, Eusebius returned to court in the year 330. In that same year Bishop Alexander died in Alexandria and Athanasius, his favorite deacon, was chosen to succeed him. His 45 years episcopate would be so marked by struggle against the Arian heresy that the period would be referred to as *Athanasius contra mundum* —“Athanasius against the World.”

Using his newfound influence with the emperor, Eusebius ordered Athanasius to restore Arius and his friends to the Christian communion. Since Arius had given no sign of repentance or submission to the doctrine of Nicaea, Athanasius refused. Eusebius went to Constantine and procured an imperial order ordering Arius to be reinstated under pain of being deposed. And thus began Athanasius’ ordeal. Not content with using the political power of the emperor, Eusebius stirred up trouble in the rest of the East, particularly in Antioch and Egypt. The Arian heresy spreads quickly throughout the East with many bishops becoming Arian.

With the accession of Emperor Constantius, who becomes Arian, a full court press is unleashed on Athanasius. Virtually all the major bishops of the East excommunicated him. On five different occasions he was removed from his see. He spent time hiding in the desert from the emperor’s police and for several years took refuge with Pope Julius I in Rome who consistently supported him. In the end Athanasius, the Pope and the fidelity of the laity ensured the triumph of orthodoxy.

Like the prophets of the Old Testament, Athanasius could have spared himself much trouble by being “flexible” and agreeing to a “compromise solution:” an inoffensive term which would have pleased everybody. When it comes to Truth there is no such thing as a “middle ground.” You either believe or don’t. Athanasius recognized that much more was at stake than simple terminology and he remained faithful while many other bishops succumbed.

While Athanasius certainly takes center stage for his defense of Christ’s divinity, we must not forget the role of the laity in this victory. With

so many bishops adopting Arianism, many of the faithful were shepherdless. Nevertheless, they remained faithful despite the powerful combination of Arian bishops and emperors. When the orthodox Theodosius became emperor in 379, Arianism collapsed. The perseverance of the laity will time and again sustain the Church particularly in difficult moments. The tag-team of St. Athanasius and the laity reinforces the universal call to holiness that Vatican II reminded us of.

And particularly, we see the essential role of the Pope as the Vicar of Christ. Throughout his ordeal, St. Athanasius had the support of the reigning Pope. Without the Pope, Arianism may have well triumphed. But one again Christ’s promise to Peter holds true.

So what was all the fuss? Or what’s the big deal about some theological terminology? In a word, it’s the Truth. If Christ is not divine, then there is no salvation. If He were merely a prophet, a great teacher, reformer or “man for all seasons”, he would never have saved us from our sins. Only God can do that. Remember that all the apostles, with the exception of St. John, were martyrs. Would they willingly allow themselves to undergo a horrible death if this were not true? They testified with their blood. You can’t have a surer witness than that.

At Christmas, technically the Feast of the Incarnation, we are commemorating this great mystery. As a mystery we cannot fully understand it. Nevertheless this is what makes us Christians. Even in the most difficult of times, Almighty God will raise up His “big-mouths” to remind us of truths that we have grown slack over or want to discard because they’re inconvenient. Their example inspires us to fidelity even in the most trying of times. And while they certainly had big mouths, they also possessed in a heroic degree that most essential of Christian virtues — humility. You see them represented at Bethlehem by Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the Magi. A famous early icon of the Devil shows him as a man without knees because that’s the one thing he won’t do: kneel before his God. Jeremiah and Athanasius had a good set of knees to go along with their mouths because faithfulness to the Truth and humility go together. You can’t have one without the other. May our adoration of the Christ child inspire us to both virtues. ✠