St. Athanasius the Great of Alexandria 295-373AD

The Incarnation of the Word

Early Life and Formation

Saint Athanasius the Great was born into a Christian family in Alexandria, Egypt, probably between AD 295 and 297. One account of his childhood tells how he and other Christian children, while playing by the seashore, baptized children who were not Christians. Alexander, the Patriarch of Alexandria, reportedly witnessed the event from a window and invited Athanasius and the other children into his home or office. There he instructed them in the proper meaning and administration of baptism. Although the ceremony had taken place in an unusual setting, Bishop Alexander recognized it as valid.

Following this encounter, Athanasius came under Bishop Alexander's teaching and mentorship. In the bishop's household, he received instruction in grammar, rhetoric, and the Holy Scriptures.

Early Ministry

- Athanasius began his ministry as a deacon and secretary to Bishop Alexander between AD 316 and 318. Soon afterward, the Arian controversy erupted. In his role as the bishop's secretary, Athanasius accompanied Alexander to the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.
- Bishop Alexander died in AD 328. Athanasius reluctantly succeeded him as Bishop of Alexandria.

Conflict, Exile and Defense of Orthodoxy

- As bishop, Athanasius assumed responsibility for addressing both the rigorist Meletian schism and the Arian movement, which continued to surge even after it had been explicitly refuted and condemned at Nicaea. He contended for the faith amid opposition from both within and outside the Church.
- The death of the Roman emperor Constantine in AD 336, the division of the empire among his sons, and the growing influence of Arian theologians made Athanasius's service as Bishop of Alexandria especially difficult. He faced sustained theological and political pressure. He was exiled approximately five times, repeatedly deposed and restored, and forced to spend about seventeen years away from his Alexandrian see. At one point, he remained the only orthodox bishop in the region after the others had embraced heresy. Councils composed of Arian bishops also falsely deposed him from office.
- Despite years of persecution, Athanasius continued to defend the purity of the orthodox faith. He produced numerous letters and treatises opposing the Arian heresy.

God and Creation

- But that out of nothing, and without it having any previous existence, God made the universe to exist through his word, as he says firstly through Moses: *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*"

St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 3. 1

- For God is good, or rather is essentially the source of goodness, nor could one that is good be niggardly of anything; whence, grudging existence to none, has made all things out of nothing by his own Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.

St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word, 3*.3

The Origin of Humanity

- And among these, having taken special pity, above all things on earth, upon the race of men, and having perceived its inability, by virtue of the condition of its origin, to continue in one stay, He gave them a further gift, and He did not barely create man, as He did all the irrational creatures on the earth, but made them after His own image, giving them a portion even of the power of His own Word; so that having as it were a kind of reflection of the Word, and being made rational, they might be able to abide ever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise.
- St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 3.3

On Sin

- For even in their misdeeds men had not stopped short at any set limits; but gradually pressing forward, have passed on beyond all measure: having to begin with been inventors of wickedness and called down upon themselves death and corruption; while later on, having turned aside to wrong and exceeding all lawlessness, and stopping at no one evil but devising all manner of new evils in succession, they have become insatiable in sinning. 4. For there were adulteries everywhere and thefts, and the whole earth was full of murders and plundering. And as to corruption and wrong, no heed was pa.id to law, but all crimes were being practiced everywhere, both individually and jointly. Cities were at war with cities, and nations were rising up against nations; and the whole earth was rent with civil commotions and battles; each man vying with his fellows in lawless deeds. 8. Nor were even crimes against nature far from them, but, as the Apostle and witness of Christ.
- St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word, 5:3*

The Impact of Sin

- Now, if there were merely a misdemeanor in question, and not a consequent corruption, repentance were well enough. But if, when transgression had once gained a start, men became involved in that corruption which was their nature, and were deprived of the grace which they bad, being in the image of God, what further step was needed? or what was required for such grace and such recall, but the Word of God, which had also at the beginning made everything out of nought? 5. For his it was once more both to bring the corruptible to incorruption, and to maintain intact the just claim of the Father upon all. For being Word of the Father, and above all, he alone of natural fitness was both able to recreate everything, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all, and to be ambassador for all with the Father.

Incarnation as Necessary

- For in speaking of the appearance of the Savior among us, we must needs speak also of the origin of men, that you may know that the reason of His coming down was because of us, and that our transgression called forth the loving-kindness of the Word, that the Lord should both make haste to help us and appear among men. 3. For of His becoming Incarnate we were the object, and for our salvation He dealt so lovingly as to appear and be born even in a human body. 4. Thus, then, God has made man, and willed that he should abide in incorruption; but men, having despised and rejected the contemplation of God, and devised and contrived evil for themselves (as was said in the former treatise), received the condemnation of death with which they had been threatened; and from thenceforth no longer remained as they were made, but were being corrupted according to their devices; and death had the mastery over them as king.
- St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word,* 4. 2-4

The Divinity of the Word

- God is divine, hence the Word
  - *The divinity of the Word of the Father* 1:1
  - *He alone, the Word of God, was God*, 1:15
  - *Christ on the cross was God* 1:19
  - *He is God* 1:32
  - *Christ alone if true God and Lord,* 1:45
  - Therefore, we must *worship Christ alone, and through Him come rightly to know the Father*, 1:45

The Word came to restore the lost Imago Dei—to/in humanity

Christological Anthropology

…the Word submitted to being revealed through the body, in order that he might bring men to himself as a man and turn their senses to himself, and that thenceforth, although they saw him as a man, he might persuade them through the works he did that he was not merely man but God, and the Word and Wisdom of the true God.

- St. Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, edited by Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: University Press, 1971),173

Incarnation

- For God has not only made us out of nothing; but He gave us freely, by the Grace of the Word, **a life in correspondence with God.** But men**, having rejected things eternal, and, by counsel of the devil, turned to the things of corruption, became the cause of their own corruption in death,** being, as I said before, by nature corruptible, but destined, by the grace following from partaking of the Word, to have escaped their natural state, had they remained good. 2. For because of the Word dwelling with them, even their natural corruption did not come near them, as Wisdom also says : God made man for incorruption, and as an image of His own eternity; but by envy of the devil death came into the world. But when this had come to pass, men began to die, while corruption thence forward prevailed against them, gaining even more than its natural power over the whole race, inasmuch as it had, owing to the transgression of the commandment, the threat of the Deity as a further advantage against them.
- St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word, 5:1-2*

Christological Anthropology

Believers are in the image of Christ; to be human is to bear the image of Christ

Christ—likeness now with a future consummation—we shall be godlike