

winning in conversation, beloved by his flock, unwearied in labors, prayer and mortification, eloquent in speech, and unsurpassed in zeal for souls. From his places of exile he wrote many great works for the instruction and strengthening of his flock, writing rich in thought and learning, clear, keen and stately in expression. He is honored as one of the greatest of the Doctors of the Church.

Athanasius is also the first person to identify the same 27 books of the New Testament that are in use today; up until his Easter letter, various similar lists were in use. However, his list was the one that was eventually ratified by a series of synods and came to be universally recognized as the New Testament canon.

He also wrote a biography of Antony the Great that later served as an inspiration to Christian monastics in both the East and the West. The Athanasian Creed is traditionally ascribed to him, though it is likely not his work.

His admirers told the story of his response to a search party pursuing him downstream, as he retreated by boat. Knowing of their approach, he ordered the captain to change direction and return. When he crossed the search party on the river, they hailed him and asked whether he had seen the bishop of Alexandria pass by. He replied, "Continue; he is not far from here." Restored to his see by the emperor Valens for fear of a popular uprising, the stormy life of the saint closed in peace on May 2nd of the year 373. The saint was originally buried in Alexandria. His holy body was later transferred to Italy where it remained until 15 May 1973, when it was returned to Egypt. It is currently preserved under the new St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Deir El-Anba Rowais, Abbassiya, Cairo, Egypt.

*(excerpted from: www.ccel.org; www.magnificat.ca; and [//orthodoxwiki.org](http://orthodoxwiki.org))

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Saint Athanasius of Alexandria

Feast Day May 2



**O God,
the Rewarder of faithful souls,
grant that by the prayers of blessed Athanasius,
Thy confessor and bishop,
whose venerable festival we celebrate,
we may obtain pardon.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son,
Who liveth and reigneth with Thee
in the unity of the Holy Ghost, world without end. Amen.**

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria

*Saint Athanasius was born in Alexandria, Egypt in ca. 297 and died on May 2, 373. Of his family, circumstances, or early education nothing can be said to be known, although a legendary story has been preserved by Ruffinus of Aquileia as to the manner in which he came, while yet a boy, under the notice of his predecessor, Alexander, who became his patron, and took him as a youth into his house, and employed him as his secretary. This was around 313, and from this time on Athanasius may be said to have been devoted to the Christian ministry. He was no doubt, a student in the "Didascaleion," or famous "catechetical school" of Alexandria, which included amongst its already illustrious teachers the names of Clement and Origen. He may have studied grammar, logic, and rhetoric. His mind was certainly well disciplined, and accustomed to discuss from an early period the chief questions both in philosophy and religion. The persecution under which the Alexandrian Church suffered at this time, and his intimacy with the great hermit Antony of which he himself has told us, had all their effect upon his character, and served to nurture in him that undaunted fortitude and high spirit of faith by which he became distinguished.

Before the outbreak of the Arian controversy, which began in 319, Athanasius had made himself known as the author of two essays addressed to a convert from heathenism, one of them entitled *Against the Gentiles*, and the other *On the Incarnation of the Word*. Both are of the nature of apologetical treatises, arguing such questions as monotheism, and the necessity of divine interposition for the salvation of the world; and already in the second may be traced that tone of thought respecting the essential divinity of Christ as the "God-man" for which he afterwards became conspicuous...

While still a deacon, he was chosen by Saint Alexander, his bishop, to go with him to the First Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325. There he attracted the attention of all the prelates by the learning and ability with which he defended the Faith. The council produced the Nicene Creed and anathematized Arius and his followers. The Coptic church maintains a tradition that Athanasius was the main author of the

Nicene Creed, and has therefore given him the title of *Defender of the Faith*. Five months later, as Saint Alexander was dying, he recommended Athanasius for his successor as Patriarch of Alexandria, and in that office for forty-six years the new Patriarch bore the whole brunt of the Arian assault, often virtually alone and undefended.

When the invincible Athanasius refused to restore Arius to Catholic communion, he was exiled to Treves in France, and the Emperor ordered the Catholic Patriarch of Constantinople to receive the heresiarch. The end of that man of error is very instructive. He took an oath that he had always believed as the Church believes, though he taught that there was a time when the Word of God WAS NOT. Thereupon the Catholic Patriarch of Constantinople, with Saint James of Nisibe, who was in Constantinople at that time, Saint Athanasius in France and the Catholics everywhere, had recourse to fasting and prayer, that God would avert from the Church the frightful sacrilege. The day came for the solemn entrance of Arius into the great church of Saint Sophia. The heresiarch and his party set out, elated, in triumph. But before he reached the church, death smote him in an exemplary, swift and terrible way, and the dreaded sacrilege was averted.

He spent 16 of the 46 years in exile due to the Arian controversy. He would be banished from Alexandria only to be later restored on at least five separate occasions, perhaps as many as seven. This gave rise to the expression *Athanasius contra mundum* or "Athanasius against the world." During some of his exiles, he spent time with the Desert Fathers, monks and hermits who lived in remote areas of Egypt.

Saint Athanasius stood unmoved against four Roman emperors, who banished him five times, he was the butt of every insult, calumny and wrong the Arians could devise, and lived in constant peril of death. Though strong as diamond in defense of the Faith, he was meek and humble, pleasant and