

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Saint Athanasius Day  
May 2, 2019  
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Alexandria, Egypt was probably a wonderful city at the beginning of the Fourth Century. It had enormous water frontage on three sides, with the Mediterranean Sea out front, a lake behind, with a wonderful harbor. There were canals connecting the sea to the harbor. The city itself was long and narrow. From the description I have it reminds me of Plum Island at Newburyport, only much larger. The residents were never very far from the shore.

As a boy, Saint Athanasius appeared on the stage of history in a rather dramatic way. The archbishop was entertaining some of his clergy. When he happened to look out his window onto the shore below, there were boys at play. Nothing unusual about that! But then the archbishop noticed they were “playing church” and he saw one of the boys baptizing the others. So the archbishop sent one of his clergy to find out what was going on and to bring the leader back to the house. That leader was Athanasius, and the archbishop became convinced this boy had indeed validly baptized his playmates! So he ordered them to be enrolled in the Church. That is the traditional story, and it ends with the duly-impressed archbishop taking the young Athanasius into his own home to direct his education, and subsequently made him his secretary, and finally, chaplain, archdeacon, and diocesan theologian.

Athanasius lived at one of the most fateful moments in Christian history. He was born at the end of a period of persecutions. The Catholic Church understandably enjoyed the resulting peace, but opted for a “live and let live” approach regarding her beliefs about Jesus Christ. With the old hatred of Christianity gone, it was considered a mark of superiority to be tolerant of all religions. Some years ago a well-meaning Anglican archbishop of Cape Town argued in a lengthy *New York Times* piece that his church should “broaden the tent” to allow more people under its cover. Athanasius in the fourth century would have heard similar arguments. Then, as now, the important battles were being fought against the enemy *within*.

During the lifetime of Athanasius, and with him sometimes standing *contra mundum*, the Church fought and won the battle of her essential conviction that Jesus Christ is *final*, and behind Him is no appeal. If He were not co-equal with the

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Father but a creature, even one cloaked in Divine language, Almighty God could produce another such creature.

Blessed John Henry Newman called Athanasius the “keen visioned seer.” Athanasius could look far into the ideas behind words. He recognized that only by being uncreated, “God *from* God, and God *with* God” could Christ discharge the functions of a Redeemer. Only a Son of God by *nature*, not a Son by adoption and grace, could provide the restoration and sanctification of the fallen human race. Edmund Gibbon once perceived, if Christ were “of *like* substance” with the Father, Christianity would have dwindled away into a legend. In the Fourth Century Athanasius insisted Christ was “of the *same* substance” with the Father.

Athanasius had a personality which combined keen intellect, faithfulness, sensitiveness, tenderness, and courage, and he carried the day. He was banished from Alexandria so many times. But each time he returned from exile, the people would carpet the streets and illuminate the city to welcome him.

Both the Empire and the Church took fifty years before finally owning up to the faith in Christ to which Athanasius had responded in heart and mind and soul when no more than a boy at the beach. This great saint had been faithful to that conviction without a shadow of vacillation to the day of his death. And anytime we recite the Nicene Creed we affirm that Athanasius was right.