

May 2

ON SAINT ATHANASIUS

120.1 First Point

Saint Athanasius was one of the principal defenders of the Church against Arius and those of his sect, who denied the divinity of Jesus Christ, and he always opposed them and silenced them everywhere by the holiness of his life, by the wisdom of his conduct, and by his excellent writings. Even before he was made a Bishop he attended the Council of Nicea, where he displayed his deep learning and opposed Arius so forcefully that he proved to him as well as all the others present that his teaching was false and heretical. Throughout the years of his episcopate he always fought all the partisans of this heretic.

Though you do not have sufficient learning to defend the Church against heretics, you are obliged in your ministry to have enough learning to teach the children in your care the good and sound doctrine of the Church. Is one of your main concerns, then, to instruct yourself concerning these teachings and to possess them well? God will ask you to give an account of this responsibility. Failure in this would make you unworthy of your state.

120.2 Second Point

The Arians always looked upon Saint Athanasius as their enemy and always opposed him, first at his election, which they tried their best to prevent, because they could not tolerate that the one who had so strongly opposed their leader might be in a position to halt the progress of their heresy. This he would quite easily be able to do clothed with the authority of a Bishop, and especially as Patriarch of Alexandria.

It is impossible to work for the destruction of erroneous teaching without gaining the enmity of those who maintain it. If no heretics oppose you because there are perhaps none in the places where you teach, still you can be sure that as long as you have a solid piety and keep your distance from the world, dissolute and worldly people will speak out against you. But just as Saint Athanasius always had God as his protector, do not doubt that he will take your side and will be your defender.

120.3 Third Point

It is a surprising thing how far the enemies of Saint Athanasius carried their anger against him. There were no calumnies, injuries, deceptions, persecutions, evil treatments, and tribulations that the Arians did not try to use in order to destroy him. They accused him of all kinds of crimes, murder, violence, injustice, but all these charges were completely and publicly dismissed in the presence of his accusers, who were put to shame because of all their lies.

Be ready to endure injuries, outrages and calumnies in return for all the good you have tried to do for others.⁶²⁰ This is the main reward that God promises in this world and often the only one we receive from the poor in compensation for the good we do for them. Prepare your heart to accept these trials with love.

Athanasius (ca 295 - May 2, 373) was born in Alexandria and received an excellent education in the classics as well as in Scripture. He also spent some time as a hermit, becoming a close friend of the abbot Saint Anthony (see De La Salle's meditation for January 17). As De La Salle mentions in his meditation, Athanasius was very influential in opposing the heresy of Arius at the Council of Nicea when he was only 30 years old. Later as Patriarch of Alexandria, he continued his staunch defense of the true faith and endured exile three times. He wrote the Life of Saint Anthony, which had a great influence on the development and spread of monasticism. He is a Doctor of the Church, though his feast was not introduced into the Roman liturgy until the late Middle Ages.