

### Reflection Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> Week of Easter St Athanasius 2022

**Saint Athanasius (295 - 373)** was born in Alexandria. He assisted Bishop Alexander at the Council of Nicaea and later succeeded him as bishop. He fought hard against Arianism, enduring much suffering and spending 17 years in exile. He wrote outstanding works explaining and defending orthodoxy.

Athanasius' passion for the truth might seem tactless to us. Some Catholic devotional works even express embarrassment over it. Before congratulating ourselves on being gentler and more civilised than Athanasius and his contemporaries, we should look at the lack of charity that characterize academic controversies today. The matters in dispute with the Arians were more important than current scientific questions. They were vital to the very nature of Christianity, and, as Cardinal Newman wrote, at that time the laity tended to be champions of orthodoxy while their bishops (*seduced by closeness to imperial power*) tended not to be. Henry Chadwick adds that the situation became entangled with matters of power, organization and authority, complicated by cultural differences between East and West. Athanasius was accused of treason and murder, embezzlement and sacrilege. In the fight against him, any weapon would do.

Arianism taught that the Son was created by the Father and in no way equal to him. This was in many ways a "purer" and more "spiritual" approach to religion, since it did not force God to undergo the indignity of being made of meat. Islam is essentially Arian, granting Jesus a miraculous birth, miracles, death (though not crucifixion) and a resurrection, but portrays God demonstrating his power by performing more spectacular miracles than usual.

Arianism leaves an infinite gap between God and man, and ultimately destroys the Gospel, leaving it either as a fake or as a cruel parody. It leaves the door open to Manichaeism, which mixes Zoroastrian, Buddhist and Gnostic elements with Christianity, so that God is good but creation is bad (*or at worst, a mistake*) and the work of an evil anti-God. Only by being orthodox and insisting on the identity of the natures of the Father, the Son and the Spirit can we truly understand the goodness of creation and the love of God, and live accordingly.