

THE HOLY TRINITY

ANNO † DOMINI 2022

John 3:16-17

In the year of our Lord 325, the Roman Emperor Constantine called a meeting of bishops, or pastors, in the ancient Greek city of Nicaea. Having successfully united the Empire *politically* after a time of civil war, Constantine was disappointed to find disunity within the *church*. He himself had played a role in legalizing the Christian faith about a decade earlier. Thanks to him, Christians could no longer be persecuted. They were to be treated kindly. They could build churches and, for the first time in a long time, worship openly without fear. So, what was the problem?

The problem was that shortly after this, a North African priest named Arius began teaching that Jesus Christ was not true God. How could He be? "The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*," according to Moses in Deuteronomy (6:4). Well, if God is one, then how could He be two? Or three, for that matter? The Trinity didn't make sense to Arius. God is unique, immutable, unchanging, and His glory He gives to no other (Isaiah 42:8). Therefore, Arius concluded that Jesus, even though He is *called* God in many places in Scripture, is not *truly* God, but something *less* than God, a perfect *creature*. "There was a time when He was not," his followers would say. After all, if the Father had begotten a Son, then the Son *began* to exist, didn't He? And therefore there was a point at which He did *not* exist. He had a beginning, just like everyone else.

As Arius' views began to spread, he was called to task by his superior, a man named Alexander. Alexander countered Arius by affirming the Bible's teaching that the Son is *not* a creature, but true God, "begotten from the substance of the Father before all ages" (Athanasian Creed, 29). In other words, the Son was *always* the Son, just as the Father was *always* the Father. There was no change, but "the whole three persons of the Trinity are coequal with each other and coeternal, so that in all things...the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity is to be worshiped" (Athanasian Creed, 25). There *is* one God in *three persons*, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It may not make logical sense to us, but that's what the Bible says, and so that's what we believe, teach, and confess. We *embrace* the mystery. After all, God's ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts higher than our thoughts, higher than the heavens are above the earth (Isaiah 55:9). But Arius wasn't swayed. He refused to repent. So, Alexander effectively excommunicated him, and the church was thrown into chaos.

Finally, the conflict reached the desk of Constantine, who basically told both Alexander and Arius to knock it off, writing in a letter, "For as long as you continue to contend about these small and very insignificant questions, I believe it indeed to be not

merely unbecoming, but positively evil, that so large a portion of God's people which belongs to your jurisdiction should be thus divided." When the problem *didn't* go away, that's when he called the meeting known as the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, in order to resolve these "small and very insignificant questions" once and for all.

But *are* they small and very insignificant? Maybe, like Constantine, you find yourself a bit skeptical about the relevance of questions pertaining to Jesus' person and nature. "All that theological mumbo jumbo we just confessed in the Athanasian Creed, for example, what's that got to do with me? I believe that Jesus died and rose again for my sins. What does it matter if 'He is God,' or if, like Arius said, there really *was* a 'time when He was not'?"

Enter Athanasius. Athanasius was a deacon under Alexander at the time of the Council of Nicaea. And while he is not the author of the Athanasian Creed, it was named *for* him, because he was such a staunch defender of the faith it confessed. He devoted his *life* to combating the Arians, even to the point of being exiled *five times* by various emperors, and it wasn't because of "small and very insignificant questions." For Athanasias, what was at stake when it came to questions about Christ's divinity was nothing less than salvation itself. Consider the last verse of today's Gospel lesson: "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him" (John 3:17). Jesus identified Himself as the means, the instrument, of our salvation. For, and these are Athanasius' own words, "man sinned and is fallen, and by his fall all things are in confusion; death prevailed from Adam to Moses; the earth was cursed, Hades was opened, Paradise shut, heaven offended, man, lastly, corrupted and brutalized, while the devil was exulting against us."¹ God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, because the world stood condemned *already*. It didn't need any further judgment. We were in enough trouble as it was.

And from where did our help come? From man? A human creature? Is that all the help God was willing to send? A man cannot conquer death, not even for himself. A man cannot reverse the curse, since he himself is a victim of it. Adam and Eve could not force their way back into Paradise (Genesis 3:24). What makes us think one of us could? By Adam's fall, *all* things are in confusion. The *whole creation* longs with eager groaning for redemption (Romans 8:22-23). And if there was a time when Jesus was not, when He did not exist, then that includes Him, too. If Christ was just a man, albeit a perfect one, then none of us is saved from anything.

But if He is also perfect *God*, then we have hope. "Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life" (Psalm 49:7). But God *can*. Truly *He* can

¹ *Commentary on Luke 10:22 (NPNF 4:87).*

ransom us. *He* can pay the price. He is *almighty*, the Maker of heaven and earth. There is *nothing* He can't do! So, if Jesus is God, then we have a chance. We have a Savior. If not, then we are nothing but lost and condemned sinners, holding onto a false hope. And so, those "small and very insignificant questions" turn out to be *big* and *very* significant. Nothing less than salvation itself is at stake.

And while we agree with Arius that "The LORD our God, the LORD is one," we also acknowledge that He is *three*. "The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; and yet there are not three gods, but one God" (Athanasian Creed, 15-16). And that's not a bunch of mumbo jumbo, it's the *Gospel itself*, the good news that God Himself took on human flesh, He assumed our humanity, in order to redeem us lost and condemned sinners. He traded Himself for us, paying our ransom with His own blood. A radical problem calls for a radical solution, and God giving His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life, was it. And this didn't compromise God's "oneness." It didn't *change* Him. Christ is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). He is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). This is *always* who He was. This was *always* the plan.

And it was *effective*. Again, in the words of Athanasius, "All things were set right and perfected. Earth received blessing instead of a curse, Paradise was opened to the robber, Hades cowered, the tombs were opened and the dead raised, the gates of heaven were lifted up to await Him."²

"Therefore, it is the right faith that we believe and confess that our Lord, Jesus Christ, is at the same time both God and man" (Athanasian Creed, 28). It's not just true, it's what makes us *Christian*. The true divinity of Christ is a non-negotiable for us. It's right up there with the belief that God is the Creator of the universe and that the Holy Spirit as the Lord and Giver of life. The Holy Trinity is a team. All three persons work *together* for us and for our salvation. If one goes, the whole thing goes. Arius tried to remove one side of the triangle. That's why we stand with the ones who held it up.

In the end, truth won, and Arius lost. He limped home nursing both his ego and his left cheek, thanks to one St. Nicholas of Myra.³ Unfortunately, the unity Constantine hoped to achieve by the Council was short-lived. There is always another heretic. But it *did* give us the Nicene Creed—and the Athanasian, too, eventually. Thanks to the faithfulness of men like Athanasius, we have clear words with which to contend ourselves for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3), words

² *Commentary on Luke 10:22 (NPNF 4:87-88).*

³ St. Nicholas, on whom our modern day Santa Claus is based, was one of the bishops/pastors present at the Council of Nicaea. It is reported that in the middle of Arius' presentation, St. Nicholas got up and slapped him across the face. "You better watch out..."

about who Christ is and what He's done. These are not small and very insignificant questions. They matter. They are *necessary*. "Whoever desires to be saved *must*, above all, hold the catholic [universal] faith" (Athanasian Creed, 1), because there is salvation in no one else (Acts 4:12). God loved you by giving His only Son to die for you. It doesn't have to make sense. It only has to be true. Embrace the mystery. There was *never* a time when He was not, so there will never be a time when He cannot save you. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, but behold, your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.

In † Jesus name. Amen.

Soli Deo gloria