A WORD FROM THE FATHERS

The Divine Dilemma & Its Solution in the Incarnation

St. Athanasius the Great
THE DIVINE DILEMMA
AND ITS SOLUTION
IN THE INCARNATION

by

SAINT ATHANASIUS
THE GREAT & HOLY LUMINARY OF EGYPT

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Published by Eighth Day Institute, *A Word from the Fathers* is inspired by the desert tradition of disciples asking their spiritual masters, “Father, give me a word of salvation.” It’s mission is to curate living words of salvation from the Fathers and Mothers of the Church for the renewal of soul and city.

Most issues will introduce the common Tradition of the early Church by offering brief words of salvation from the undivided Church through patristic homilies, treatises, hymns, letters, poems, and biblical commentaries. Occasionally, post-schism authors will be included whom we consider worthy of the title “Father.” Intentionally catechetical, each issue will include introductory material, patristic notes, study questions, ancient prayers, and occasional annotations. Initially issued on a quarterly basis, as soon as resources become available we plan to publish twelve issues per year. Eighth Day Patrons and Pillars will automatically receive them.

Series Editor
Erin Doom
His epitaph is Athanasius contra mundum, “Athanasius against the world.” Athanasius stood against the world. He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, “whole and undefiled,” when it looked as if all the civilized world was slipping back from Christianty into the religion of Arius—into one of those “sensible” synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times; it is his reward that he now remains when those times, as all times do, have moved away.

~C. S. Lewis
SOMETIME BETWEEN 318 and 320 A.D., a crisis erupted in the Christian Church of Egypt that eventually enveloped the entire Roman Empire. A charismatic priest in Alexandria named Arius began popularizing his teaching that the Son of God was subordinate to the Father through a melodic jingle: “There was a time when he was not.” In other words, Arius argued there was a time when Christ the Son of God did not exist as a distinct, eternal person of the Trinity.

In the year A.D. 325, Emperor Constantine summoned Christian bishops to the city of Nicaea. Their task was to deal with an issue that had grown from a local controversy in Alexandria (between the priest Arius and the bishop Alexander) into an empire-wide debate. Acting as secretary to Bishop Alexander, the young Athanasius attended this Council of Nicaea. The fruit of this council was an early version of what we now know as the Nicene Creed. This creed was not a comprehensive summary of orthodox belief. Instead, it was a particular response to a particular controversy. It doesn’t tell us what a Christian should believe, but rather
what we should believe about the Son of God: He is begotten, not made; Light of Light, very God of very God, not a subordinate creature; of the same substance as the Father, not a creature.

Consecrated bishop on in the year of our Lord 8 June 238, Athanasius was the bishop of Alexandria for forty-six years. During this time he was exiled five times for his staunch commitment to the Nicene creed. While exiled he developed important relationships with the West and with Egyptian monks, especially St. Anthony the Great. While he contributed to ascetic theology and the development of monasticism through his Life of St. Anthony, his most important contribution was the development of his bishop Alexander’s ideas into a full exposition of Nicene theology, most clearly articulated in his defining work On the Incarnation.

Seven years after his death, St. Gregory the Theologian delivered a eulogy on “The Great Athanasius” to demonstrate his alliance with St. Athanasius’ Nicene theology. And so, on the eve of the Council of Constantinople in 381, which defended the divinity of the Holy Spirit and edited the creed of 325 to provide us the form used today, Fr. John Behr has noted that Athanasius was canonized and an image of him was “enshrined that portrayed him as a steadfast saint, a model pastor, and an unerringly theologian, whose very name was synonymous with orthodoxy.”

If you are nervous to dive into the Nicene theology of St. Athanasius, skip to the “Patristic Note” by C. S. Lewis on page 12. Lewis will give you the confidence and the inspiration to not only read this small selection from Athanasius’s On the Incarnation, but to boldly tackle the full and fairly short treatise! That’s a promise.

Erin Doom
Feast of St. Habakkuk the Prophet
Anno Domini 2019, December 2

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HEN GOD THE Almighty was making mankind through His own Word, He perceived that they, owing to the limitation of their nature, could not of themselves have any knowledge of their Artificer, the Incorporeal and Uncreated. He took pity on them, therefore, and did not leave them destitute of the knowledge of Himself, lest their very existence should prove purposeless. For of what use is existence to the creature if it cannot know its Maker? How could men be reasonable beings if they had no knowledge of the Word and Reason of the Father, through Whom they had received their being? They would be no better than the beasts, had they no knowledge save of earthly things; and why should God have made them at all, if He had not intended them to know.
Him? But, in fact, the good God has given them a share in His own Image, that is, in our Lord Jesus Christ, and has made even themselves after the same Image and Likeness. Why? Simply in order that through this gift of God-likeness in themselves they may be able to perceive the Image Absolute, that is the Word Himself, and through Him to apprehend the Father; which knowledge of their Maker is for men the only really happy and blessed life.

But, as we have already seen, men, foolish as they are, thought little of the grace they had received, and turned away from God. They defiled their own soul so completely that they not only lost their apprehension of God, but invented for themselves other gods of various kinds. They fashioned idols for themselves in place of the truth and reverenced things that are not, rather than God Who is, as St. Paul says, “worshipping the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). Moreover, and much worse, they transferred the honor which is due to God to material objects such as wood and stone,
and also to man; and further even than that they went, as we said in our former book. Indeed, so impious were they that they worshipped evil spirits as gods in satisfaction of their lusts. They sacrificed brute beasts and immolated men, as the just due of these deities, thereby bringing themselves more and more under their insane control. Magic arts also were taught among them, oracles in sundry places led men astray, and the cause of everything in human life was traced to the stars, as though nothing existed but that which could be seen. In a word, impiety and lawlessness were everywhere, and neither God nor His Word was known. Yet, He had not hidden Himself from the sight of men nor given the knowledge of Himself in one way only; but rather He had unfolded it in many forms and by many ways.

God knew the limitation of mankind, you see; and though the grace of being made in His Image was sufficient to give them knowledge of the Word and through Him of the Father, as a safe-guard against their neglect of this grace, He provided the works of creation also as means by which the Maker might be known. Nor was this all. Man’s neglect of the indwelling grace tends ever to increase; and against this further frailty also God made provision by giving them a law, and by sending prophets, men whom they knew. Thus, if they were tardy in looking up to heaven, they might still gain knowledge
of their Maker from those close at hand; for men can learn directly about higher things from other men. Three ways thus lay open to them, by which they might obtain the knowledge of God. They could look up into the immensity of heaven, and by pondering the harmony of creation come to know its Ruler, the Word of the Father, Whose all-ruling providence makes known the Father to all. Or, if this was beyond them, they could converse with holy men, and through them learn to know God, the Artificer of all things, the Father of Christ . . . The law and the prophets were a sacred school of the knowledge of God and the conduct of the spiritual life for the whole world.

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persecuted. The law and the prophets were a sacred school of the knowledge of God and the conduct of the spiritual life for the whole world.
So great, indeed, were the goodness and the love of God. Yet, men bowed down by the pleasures of the moment and by the frauds and illusions of the evil spirits, did not lift up their heads towards the truth. So burdened were they with their wickedness that they seemed rather to be brute beasts than reasonable men, reflecting the very Likeness of the Word.

What was God to do in face of this dehumanizing of mankind, this universal hiding of the knowledge of Himself by the wiles of evil spirits? Was He to keep silence before so great a wrong and let men go on being thus deceived and kept in ignorance of Himself? If so, what was the use of having made them in His own Image originally? It would surely have been better for them always to have been brutes, rather than to revert to that condition when once they had shared the nature of the Word. Again, things being as they were, what was the use of their ever having had the knowledge of God? Surely it would have been better for God never to have bestowed it, than that men should subsequently be found unworthy to receive it. Similarly, what possible profit could it be to God Himself, Who made men, if when made they did not worship Him, but regarded others as their makers? This would be tantamount to His having made them for others and not for Himself. Even an earthly king, though he is only a man, does not allow lands that he has colonized to pass into other hands or to desert to other rulers, but sends letters and friends and even visits them himself to recall them to their allegiance, rather than allow His work to be undone. How much more, then, will God be patient and painstaking with His creatures, that they be not led astray from Him to the service of those that are not, and that all the more

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because such error means for them sheer ruin, and because it is not right that those who had once shared His Image should be destroyed.

What, then, was God to do? What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His Image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Savior Jesus Christ? Men could not have done it, for they are only made after the Image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father, Who could recreate man made after the Image. In order to effect this re-creation, however, He had first to do away with death and corruption. Therefore He assumed a human body, in order that in it death might once for all be destroyed, and that men might be renewed according to the Image. The Image of the Father only was sufficient for this need.

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according to the Image. The Image of the Father only was sufficient for this need. Here is an illustration to prove it.

You know what happens when a portrait that has been painted on a panel becomes obliterated through external stains. The artist does not throw away the panel, but the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material. Even so was it with the All-holy Son of God. He, the Image of the Father, came and dwelt in our midst, in order that He might renew mankind made after Himself, and seek out His lost sheep, even as He says in the Gospel: “I came to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk. 19:10). This also explains His saying to the Jews: “Except a man be born anew…” (Jn. 3:3). He was not referring to a man’s natural birth from his mother, as they thought, but to the re-birth and re-creation of the soul in the Image of God.

Nor was this the only thing which only the Word could do. When the madness of idolatry and irreligion filled the world and the knowledge of God was hidden, whose part was it to teach the world about the Father? Man’s, would you say? But men cannot
run everywhere over the world, nor would their words carry sufficient weight if they did, nor would they be, unaided, a match for the evil spirits. Moreover, since even the best of men were confused and blinded by evil, how could they convert the souls and minds of others? You cannot put straight in others what is warped in yourself. Perhaps you will say, then, that creation was enough to teach men about the Father. But if that had been so, such great evils would never have occurred. Creation was there all the time, but it did not prevent men from wallowing in error. Once more, then, it was the Word of God, Who sees all that is in man and moves all things in creation, Who alone could meet the needs of the situation. It was His part and His alone, Whose ordering of the universe reveals the Father, to renew the same teaching. But how was He to do it? By the same means as before, perhaps you will say, that is, through the works of creation. But this was proven insufficient. Men had neglected to consider the heavens before, and now they were looking in the opposite direction. Wherefore, in all naturalness and fitness, desiring to do good to men, as Man He dwells, taking to Himself a body like the rest; and through His actions done in that body, as it were on their own level, He teaches those who would not learn by other means to know Himself, the Word of God, and through Him the Father.
He deals with them as a good teacher with his pupils, coming down to their level and using simple means. St. Paul says as much: “Because in the wisdom of God the world in its wisdom knew not God, God thought fit through the simplicity of the News proclaimed to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21). Men had turned from the contemplation of God above, and were looking for Him in the opposite direction, down among created things and things of sense. The Savior of us all, the Word of God, in His great love took to Himself a body and moved as Man among men, meeting their senses, so to speak, half way. He became Himself an object for the senses, so that those who were seeking God in sensible things might apprehend the Father through the works which He, the Word of God, did in the body. Human and human-minded as men were, therefore, to whichever side they looked in the sensible world they found themselves taught the truth. Were they
awe-stricken by creation? They beheld it confessing Christ as Lord. Did their minds tend to regard men as gods? The uniqueness of the Savior’s works marked Him, alone of men, as Son of God. Were they drawn to evil spirits? They saw them driven out by the Lord and learned that the Word of God alone was God and that the evil spirits were not gods at all. Were they inclined to hero-worship and the cult of the dead? Then the fact that the Savior had risen from the dead showed them how false these other deities were, and that the Word of the Father is the one true Lord, the Lord even of death. For this reason was He both born and manifested as Man, for this He died and rose, in order that, eclipsing by His works all other human deeds, He might recall men from all the paths of error to know the Father. As He says Himself, “I came to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk. 19:10).

The Word submitted to appear in a body, in order that He, as Man, might center their senses on Himself, and convince them through His human acts that He Himself is not man only but also God, the Word and Wisdom of the true God.

When, then, the minds of men had fallen finally to the level of sensible things, the Word submitted to appear in a body, in order that He, as Man, might center their senses on Himself, and convince them through His human acts that He Himself is not man only but also God, the Word and Wisdom of the true God. This is what Paul wants to tell us when he says: “That ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the length and breadth and height and depth, and
to know the love of God that surpasses knowledge, so that ye may be filled unto all the fulness of God” (Eph. 3:17ff.). The Self-revealing of the Word is in every dimension: above, in creation; below, in the Incarnation; in the depth, in Hades; in the breadth, throughout the world. All things have been filled with the knowledge of God.

For this reason He did not offer the sacrifice on behalf of all immediately when He came, for if He had surrendered His body to death and then raised it again at once He would have ceased to be an object of our senses. Instead of that, He stayed in His body and let Himself be seen in it, doing acts and giving signs which showed Him to be not only man, but also God the Word. There were thus two things which the Savior did for us by becoming Man. He banished death from us and made us new; and, invisible and imperceptible as in Himself He is, He became visible through His works and revealed Himself as the Word of the Father, the Ruler and King of the whole creation.
HERE IS A strange idea abroad that in every subject the ancient books should be read only by the professionals, and that the amateur should content himself with the modern books. Thus I have found as a tutor in English Literature that if the average student wants to find out something about Platonism, the very last thing he thinks of doing is to take a translation of Plato off the library shelf and read the *Symposium*. He would rather read some dreary modern book ten times as long, all about “isms” and influences and only once in twelve pages telling him what Plato actually said. The error is rather an amiable one, for it springs from humility. The student is half afraid to meet one of the great philosophers face to face. He feels himself inadequate and thinks he will not understand him. But if he only knew, the great man, just because of his greatness, is much more intelligible than his modern commentator. The simplest student will be able to understand, if not all, yet a very great deal of what Plato said; but hardly anyone can understand some modern books on Platonism. It has always therefore been one of my main endeavors as a teacher to persuade the young that first-hand knowledge is not only more
worth acquiring than second-hand knowledge, but is usually much easier and more delightful to acquire.

This mistaken preference for the modern books and this shyness of the old ones is nowhere more rampant than in theology. Wherever you find a little study circle of Christian laity you can be almost certain that they are studying not St. Luke or St. Paul or St. Augustine or Thomas Aquinas or Hooker or Butler, but M. Berdyaev or M. Maritain or M. Niebuhr or Miss Sayers or even myself.

Now this seems to me topsy-turvy. Naturally, since I myself am a writer, I do not wish the ordinary reader to read no modern books. But if he must read only the new or only the old, I would advise him to read the old. And I would give him this advice precisely because he is an amateur and therefore much less protected than the expert against the dangers of an exclusive contemporary diet. A new book is still on its trial and the amateur is not in a position to judge it. It has to be tested against the great body of Christian thought down the ages, and all its hidden implications (often unsuspected by the author himself) have to be brought to light. Often it cannot be fully understood without the knowledge of a good many other modern books. If you join at eleven o’clock a conversation which began at eight you will often not see the real bearing of what is said. Remarks which seem to you very ordinary will produce laughter or irritation and you will not see why—the reason, of course, being that the earlier stages of the conversation have given them a special point. In the same way sentences in a modern book which look quite ordinary may be directed “at” some other book; in this way you may be led to accept what you would have
indignantly rejected if you knew its real significance. The only safety is to have a standard of plain, central Christianity (“mere Christianity” as Baxter called it) which puts the controversies of the moment in their proper perspective. Such a standard can be acquired only from the old books. It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones.

Every age has its own outlook. It is especially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook—even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it. Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we should now absolutely deny. They thought that they were as completely opposed as two sides could be, but in fact they were all the time secretly united—united with each other and against earlier and later ages—by a great mass of common assumptions. We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century—the blindness about which posterity will ask, “But how could they have thought that?”—lies where we have never suspected it, and concerns something about which there is untroubled agreement between Hitler and President Roosevelt or between Mr H. G. Wells and Karl Barth. None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew

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already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction. To be sure, the books of the future would be just as good a corrective as the books of the past, but unfortunately we cannot get at them.
I HAVE BEEN a servant of Christ from my youth to old age. I will not stop blessing Him and His beloved Son, whose successor I have been all my life, who is as glorious as You, Christ, whom everyone wishes to see. You are Jesus, the mighty power of the Father, the child conceived by the Virgin from no man. I will never stop blessing You, Holy Pearl, You who will endure forever.

You are Jesus the Son of the Father. Yea. Amen.
You are the one who commands the Cherubim and Seraphim. Yea. Amen.
You have existed with the true Father, at all times. Yea. Amen.
You rule the angels. Yea. Amen.
You are the power of the heavens. Yea. Amen.
You are the crown of the martyrs. Yea. Amen.
You are the counsel of all the saints. Yea. Amen.
You are He in whom the counsel of the Father is concealed. Yea. Amen.
You are the mouth of the prophet. Yea. Amen.
You are the tongue of the angels. Yea. Amen.
You are Jesus my life. Yea. Amen.
You are Jesus, the pride of the world. Yea. Amen.

Jesus Christ, the hope of everyone who sets his mind on you, who is as glorious as You or can be compared with You? You are the king who sits on the Cherubim, while the Seraphim stand before you. Heaven and earth await your mercy. You give life to men and cattle, wild beasts and birds, and feed them all.
You are the one named Emmanuel, meaning “God is with us.” You are called Raboune, God and Master, of low birth but great in divinity. Your holy blood gathered them into one flock. You have gathered them into one fold, which the wolf will never find. You have appointed faithful shepherds over them, who will care for them justly. Do not be distant from me, Christ, for You are a merciful lover of souls. You saved me from neglect and made me the shepherd of Your people, and I have shepherded them according to Your will.

I will bless You, my Saviour.
I will bless You, of whom the saints are proud, Jesus the power of the Cherubim and Seraphim.
I will bless You who make fat the earth, which increases, Jesus the wise one of the strong.
I will bless You, scepter of just kings, crown that never fades, the life of everyone.
I will bless You, the resurrection of everyone and the light that comes from light.

Heaven and earth hang upon His word, as a drop of water hangs from a jar. You are the Father of the universe, who ruined Amente and destroyed Edom and brought up Adam and his sons, crushed the enemy and all his power, gave light to the sun and ordained the revolutions of the moon. He named the multitude of the stars. He established the seven heavens and seven firmaments and laid the foundations of the earth upon the water. He put water on earth and the abyss under the earth. I will bless You who made all creation by Your word and rested on the seventh day. I will bless You the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will not stop blessing You, Jesus, into whose hands I am about to come, for You are my helper and the strength of my salvation, do not shame me, for I trust You. Listen to my prayer this day and send me to Michael Your archangel that he may receive my soul in rest, and may You establish it in the city of Your love, for Yours is the glory and power, for ever and ever. Amen.
**A Morning Prayer:** Arising from sleep I thank Thee, O Holy Trinity, because of the abundance of Thy goodness and long-suffering Thou wast not wroth with me, slothful and sinner as I am; neither hast Thou destroyed me in my transgressions; but in Thy compassion raised me up, as I lay in despair; that at dawn I might sing the glories of Thy Majesty. Do Thou now enlighten the eyes of my understanding, open my mouth to receive Thy words, teach me Thy commandments, help me to do Thy will, and confessing Thee from my heart, singing and praising Thine All-holy Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

**Before Meals:** O Christ our God, bless the food and drink of Thy servants, the hands that have prepared it, and those who will partake of it. Multiply it throughout the world for the poor. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

**After Meals:** We thank Thee, O Christ our God, that Thou hast satisfied us with Thy earthly gifts, deprive us not of Thy Heavenly Kingdom; but as Thou entered into the midst of Thy disciples, O Savior, and gave them peace, enter also among us and save us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

**An Evening Prayer:** O Christ our God, if during this day I have sinned, whether in word or deed or thought, forgive me all, for Thou art good and lovest mankind. Grant me peaceful and undisturbed sleep and deliver me from all influence and temptation of the evil one. Raise me up again in proper time that I may glorify Thee; for Thou art blessed with Thine Only-begotten Son and Thine All-holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.
STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What was the heretical jingle used by Arius and what did it mean?

2. What Ecumenical Council did St. Athanasius serve as secretary? And in what year did the council meet?

3. What does the Nicene Creed tell us about the Son of God?

4. In what work does St. Athanasius provide a clear exposition of Nicene theology?

5. In what four ways did God make Himself known to men?

6. What did God do so that men might once more come to know Him? And what illustration does St. Athanasius use to explain it?

7. How is the Self-revealing Word found in every dimension: above, below, depth, and breadth?

8. Why did Christ not offer the sacrifice on behalf of all immediately when He came?
Glory be to the Father,
to the Son,
and to the Holy Spirit
for all things.
Amen.