BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: May 2

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IN BRIEF

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria

Bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373, defender of the faith of Nicaea against Arianism, Father and Doctor of the Church.

Feast day	May 2
Born	c. 298, Damanhur, near Alexandria (Egypt), according to tradition
Died	May 2, 373, Alexandria (Egypt)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	4th century

In this booklet

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Prayer to Saint Athanasius to Keep the Faith

Novena to Saint Athanasius of Alexandria

Church of San Zaccaria, Venice

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, called "the Great", was born in Egypt around 298 and died in Alexandria on May 2, 373. Bishop of Alexandria for forty-five years, he was the chief defender of the faith of the Council of Nicaea against Arianism, to the point of being driven from his see five times. A Father and Doctor of the Church and the author of the Life of Saint Antony, he is celebrated on May 2.

Who was Saint Athanasius?

Athanasius lived through the passage from a persecuted Church to a Church protected by the emperors. This change did not bring peace: in the 4th century, the teaching of the priest Arius, who made the Son of God a creature, deeply divided Christians and found support at the imperial court. Athanasius devoted his whole life to defending the faith proclaimed at Nicaea in 325: the Son is true God, of the same substance as the Father. He was nicknamed "Athanasius against the world", because at times he seemed almost alone in holding firm. His energetic, sometimes rough temperament earned him enemies, but also the unfailing loyalty of the people of Alexandria and the monks of Egypt. The Catholic Church counts him among its Fathers and Doctors; the Eastern Churches venerate him as one of their greatest teachers.

Key dates in the life of Athanasius

- **c. 298**: Born in Egypt, at Damanhur, near Alexandria, according to tradition; some sources say he came from a pagan family.
- **c. 320-322**: Deacon and secretary to Bishop Alexander, he probably drafts the letter explaining the condemnation of Arius.
- **325**: He accompanies Alexander to the First Council of Nicaea.

- **June 8, 328**: He becomes Bishop of Alexandria, at about thirty years of age.
- **335-337**: Condemned by the Synod of Tyre, he is exiled to Trier by Constantine.
- **339-346**: Second exile, in Rome, with Pope Julius I, who recognizes his innocence.
- **356-362**: Third exile; hunted, he hides among the monks of the Egyptian desert.
- **362-363 and 365-366**: Two more exiles, under the emperors Julian and then Valens.
- **May 2, 373**: Dies in Alexandria, after forty-five years as bishop.

Secretary to Bishop Alexander

Athanasius received a solid Greek education in Alexandria, literary and philosophical. He entered the clergy of the city young, serving as a lector, then became a deacon and the trusted assistant of Bishop Alexander. This was the moment the Arian crisis broke out: Arius, a priest of Alexandria, taught that the Son is not eternal like the Father. A synod condemned him around 321, and Athanasius probably wrote the letter setting out its reasons to the other bishops. In 325, he accompanied Alexander to the Council of Nicaea, which proclaimed that the Son is "consubstantial with the Father". Before dying in 328, Alexander designated him as his successor.

Five exiles for the faith of Nicaea

As soon as he was elected, Athanasius toured his immense diocese as far as Upper Egypt; he ordained as a priest Abbot Pachomius, the father of communal monastic life. But the supporters of Arius regained favor at court, allied with the schismatic party of Meletius. They accused Athanasius of violence and even of having had a bishop, Arsenius, murdered; Arsenius was

found alive. In 335, the Synod of Tyre condemned him all the same, and Constantine exiled him to Trier, on the Moselle, where Bishop Maximinus welcomed him.

Back in 337, he was driven out again in 339 and took refuge in Rome. Pope Julius I received him into his communion and a Roman synod declared him innocent. The Council of Serdica, in 343, confirmed this decision. He returned in triumph to Alexandria in 346 and spent ten fruitful years there. In 356, under Emperor Constantius II, soldiers burst into the church where he was celebrating a vigil; he escaped and hid for six years among the monks of the desert, who protected him. It was then that he wrote several of his great works. Emperor Julian, an enemy of Christians, exiled him in turn in 362; Valens drove him out one last time in 365. In all, Athanasius spent about seventeen years far from his Church.

Friend of the monks and author of the Life of Antony

Athanasius understood very early the importance of the monks who peopled the deserts of Egypt. He supported them and bound them to the Church. After the death of Saint Antony in 356, he wrote the Life of Antony, which made the father of monks known throughout the Christian world and became a model of monastic life. This book left its mark on generations: Saint Augustine tells how the story of this life played a part in his own conversion. Athanasius is also the author of major theological treatises, such as On the Incarnation of the Word, and of letters in which he was the first to affirm clearly the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. He summed up his thought in a famous sentence: the Word of God became man so that we might become God.

The last years and the cult

Back for good in 366, Athanasius devoted his last years to the peace of the Church. He supported Saint Basil of Caesarea through his letters and opposed the errors of Apollinaris of Laodicea. In 368, he celebrated forty years as bishop. He died on May 2, 373, after designating his successor, Peter. His relics have been venerated in Venice, in the church of San Zaccaria; in 1973, part of them was given to the Coptic Church and rests in Cairo, in St. Mark's Cathedral. The Catholic Church celebrates him on May 2, the Byzantine Churches on January 18. He is depicted in the vestments of an Eastern bishop, often with the Book of the Gospels.

What can we learn from Saint Athanasius?

Athanasius reminds us that faith in Christ, true God and true man, is not a detail of theology: it is at the heart of salvation. If Christ were not God, he said, man would not be saved. He held firm when almost everyone was giving way, without ever abandoning his Church or his faithful. We can pray to him to keep the faith in times of confusion, for those who are exiled or unjustly accused, and for monks and nuns.

Where to pray to Saint Athanasius

- **Church of San Zaccaria** (Venice): his relics rest there in a marble altar, beside those of Saint Zechariah.
- **St. Mark's Cathedral** (Cairo): the Coptic cathedral that received part of his relics in 1973.
- **Trier** (Germany): the city of his first exile, where he was welcomed by Bishop Maximinus.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Athanasius to Keep the Faith

Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373, defended all his life the faith of the Council of Nicaea: Jesus is true God, of the same substance as the Father. For this faith, he went into exile five times. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to him faithfulness in belief, those who are unjustly accused and all who seek the truth.

Prayer to Saint Athanasius

Saint Athanasius,
Bishop of Alexandria and witness to the faith,
you proclaimed tirelessly
that the Son of God is true God from true God,
and that he became man to save us.
Strengthen my faith in Jesus Christ
and keep me from all that darkens it.

Driven from your Church, slandered, hunted,
you never abandoned your people.
Sustain those who are exiled or wrongly accused,
and give me steadfastness
when I must stay faithful against everyone's opinion.

Friend of the monks of the desert,
you made known the life of Saint Antony.
Teach me to seek God in silence
and to love the Church as a mother.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Athanasius

- On May 2, his feast day and the anniversary of his death.
- When your faith is tested by doubt or confusion.
- For those who are exiled, slandered or unjustly condemned.
- For bishops, theologians and catechists.
- For monks, nuns and those who seek God in solitude.

An invocation of faith

Saint Athanasius loved to recall that the Son of God became man so that we might share in the life of God. You can say:

> *Lord Jesus, eternal Son of the Father,*
> *you became man to give me your life.*
> *I believe in you, increase my faith.*
> *Saint Athanasius, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Athanasius from April 24 to May 2, and read the life of Saint Athanasius.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Athanasius of Alexandria

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It follows the life of Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, defender of the faith of Nicaea and Father of the Church. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, May 2, begin on April 24. It often falls during the Easter season, which suits a man who spoke so much of Christ's victory over death.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Athanasius, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely. You can also recite the Nicene Creed each day, the profession of faith that he defended.

Day 1: A young man in the service of the Church

Very young, Athanasius entered the clergy of Alexandria. A lector, then a deacon, he became the secretary of Bishop Alexander. He put his intelligence at the service of the Church.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the talents you have given me. Teach me to place them at the service of others and of your Church.

Act of the day: Offer your help for a practical service in your parish.

Day 2: The faith of Nicaea

In 325, Athanasius attended the Council of Nicaea, which proclaimed that the Son is of the same substance as the Father. All his life he would defend this confession of faith.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, true God from true God, I believe in you. Strengthen my faith and make it living.

Act of the day: Slowly recite the Nicene Creed.

Day 3: Shepherd of a people

A bishop at thirty, Athanasius traveled his diocese as far as Upper Egypt. He visited the communities and ordained Abbot Pachomius a priest. He knew his people.

Prayer: Lord, bless our bishop and our priests. Give them a shepherd's heart, close to each person.

Act of the day: Pray by name for your bishop and for the priest of your parish.

Day 4: Facing slander

His enemies accused him of crimes, even of having a bishop, Arsenius, killed; Arsenius was found alive and well. Athanasius endured unjust trials without losing heart.

Prayer: Lord, defend those who are wrongly accused. Keep me from judging too quickly and from repeating rumors.

Act of the day: Refuse today to take part in any gossip.

Day 5: Exile in Trier

In 335, Constantine exiled him to Trier, far from Egypt. Bishop Maximinus welcomed him as a brother. In times of trial, God places friends on our path.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who welcomed me when I was alone. Make me a brother or sister to the stranger and the exile.

Act of the day: Welcome or help someone who is alone or has come from elsewhere.

Day 6: Communion with Rome

Driven out again, Athanasius took refuge in Rome with Pope Julius I, who recognized his innocence. In the storm, the communion of the Church is a support.

Prayer: Lord, keep your Church in unity. Bless the pope and grant that I may love the Church despite her wounds.

Act of the day: Pray for the pope and for Christian unity.

Day 7: Hidden among the monks

In 356, hunted by soldiers, Athanasius hid for six years among the monks of the desert. They protected him, and he wrote for his people. The desert became a place of fruitfulness.

Prayer: Lord, when I cross a desert, remind me that you are there. Make my times of trial bear fruit.

Act of the day: Take a time of silence and prayer, away from noise.

Day 8: The life of Saint Antony

Athanasius wrote the Life of Antony, the father of monks. This book gave rise to countless vocations and touched Saint Augustine. The witness of a saint can change a life.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the saints who draw me toward you. Give your Church religious vocations.

Act of the day: Read a few pages of the life of a saint.

Day 9: God became man

Athanasius died in peace in Alexandria on May 2, 373. His whole life rests on this conviction: the Son of God became man so that we might share in the life of God.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you became man to save me. Through the intercession of Saint Athanasius, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Take part in Mass and, during the Creed, bow with faith at the words "and became man".

Living the novena with Saint Athanasius

Saint Athanasius did not have a peaceful life. He was driven out, slandered, pursued. But he never stopped proclaiming that Jesus is true God and that in him God has come close to us. During these nine days, you can pray for those whose faith is wavering, for Christians who suffer for their faithfulness, for exiles and for monks. If you pass through Venice, you can pray before his relics in the church of San Zaccaria.

Concluding prayer

Saint Athanasius,
faithful bishop and defender of the faith,
you loved Christ more than your own peace.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Keep me firm in faith,
patient in trial
and faithful to the Church to the end.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Athanasius at any time, and read the life of Saint Athanasius.

PILGRIMAGE

Church of San Zaccaria, Venice

The church of San Zaccaria stands in Venice, in the Castello district, a few steps from St. Mark's Square. Dedicated to Saint Zechariah, the father of Saint John the Baptist, it keeps in a marble altar the relics of this saint and those of Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, the great defender of the faith of Nicaea. It is one of the most beautiful churches of the Venetian Renaissance, rich in masterpieces of painting.

A church a thousand years old

A first church dedicated to Saint Zechariah is said to have been founded in the 7th century. At the beginning of the 9th century, the doges Agnello and Giustiniano Partecipazio had a monastery of Benedictine nuns built beside it, which received the remains of Saint Zechariah given by the Eastern Emperor Leo V. The church was rebuilt several times, notably after the fire of 1105. The present building, raised between the middle of the 15th century and 1515, is the work of Antonio Gambello and then of Mauro Codussi, who designed the facade. For centuries, the doge came here every year at Easter. The monastery, one of the richest in Venice, was suppressed at the beginning of the 19th century, but the church remains a place of worship.

What you can see

The white stone facade, with its tiers of niches and windows and its rose window, is one of the masterpieces of the early Renaissance in Venice. Inside, the choir is surrounded by an ambulatory lit by tall Gothic windows, something unique in the city. The walls are covered with paintings: one admires in particular a Sacred Conversation by Giovanni Bellini, painted in 1505, on the left side of the nave.

On the right side stands the altar of Saint Zechariah, in polychrome marble, designed by Alessandro Vittoria. It holds the tombs of Saint Zechariah and Saint Athanasius. Above it, a painting by Palma the Younger shows Saint Zechariah in glory. Farther on, the Chapel of Saint Athanasius keeps carved choir stalls from the 15th century and canvases by Tintoretto, Palma the Elder and Tiepolo. The Chapel of Saint Tarasius, the apse of the earlier church, and the Romanesque crypt, where eight doges were buried, preserve the memory of the older buildings.

Praying there

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Athanasius. Before the altar of Saint Zechariah, entrust to him your faith and those who are seeking it, then say the prayer to Saint Athanasius or the Nicene Creed. You can also pray to Saint Zechariah for families and for parents expecting a child. Part of the relics of Athanasius was given to the Coptic Church in 1973: praying here is also praying for the unity of Christians of East and West. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Practical information

San Zaccaria is in the sestiere of Castello, behind the Riva degli Schiavoni, a few minutes' walk from St. Mark's Square; the nearest vaporetto stop bears its name. The church is a place of prayer: modest dress and silence are requested. Opening hours for the church, the chapels and the crypt may vary: check on site or with the parish before your visit.

Credits and sources

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