Victim becomes victor in the ancient world's biggest-ever manhunt

The whole world groaned to discover itself Arian, Jerome laments—but in their hour of triumph Nicea's foes are foiled by doctrinal feuds

The year was 356. Christianity could now be considered Arian. The emperor, Constantius II, was Arian, and he ran the church. The bishop of Rome had been compelled under duress to sign an Arian creed, or so the jubilant Arians contended. Nearly all the other bishops in the west had been thrashed into line. Any who refused had been banished to the wilderness, and more intellectually sophisticated clergy named in their place. Most of the bishops in the east were in line already. Only the Egyptian hierarchs were still holding out, and once they were converted or removed, Christians would no longer believe that Jesus Christ, the man whom John's Gospel called "the Word made flesh," was actually of the same "substance" or "essence" as God.

Beyond its pragmatic and political advantages, Arianism had something else in its favor, less tangible, but more potent. It accorded with the spirit of the age. It was trendy—what twentieth-century Americans would call the "in thing." Fashionable people in Constantinople were Arian Christians; the senior imperial bureaucracy was Arian, as were the most distinguished preachers and the educated elite—in short, the inner circle of both government and church. Arianism, writes the twentieth-century Christian apologist C. S. Lewis, "was 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."

These attributes lent it a quality of inevitability. It was going to happen anyway, so what was the point of resisting? "An atmosphere of resignation and heavy defeatism reigned over the entire western church," writes the historian Victor de Clercq in his biography of Hosius of Cordoba, "and communicated itself even to those few courageous men who had chosen exile above dishonor."

Bringing the recalcitrant Egyptian Christians into line, however, did entail one last task: capturing and silencing their patriarch, the bishop of Alexandria, the troublesome Athanasius. He had somehow escaped the massive military raid on St. Theonas Church, and would no doubt be trying to get out of the city. However, Duke Syrianus had five thousand men under his immediate command, and every road was blocked, every wagon searched, every departing vessel ransacked. Athanasius's leading supporters were rounded up, beaten and

Arianism, says C. S. Lewis, was one of those 'sensible, synthetic' religions, so popular today, which then as now attract 'many highly cultivated clergymen.'

ferociously questioned. Yet nobody seemed to know where he was.

He was in fact hiding, as one might have expected, in the desert monasteries. But which one? By now, in no small measure due to his ministry, there were scores of monasteries. The monks revered him. He was a particular favorite of the sainted Anthony, who now lay near death. Athanasius knew the monks would never betray him. Among them, he demonstrated that he could live as frugally as they, as much at home in their self-imposed poverty as he was in the courts of kings.

Moreover, in the desert he had time to write, and this was bad news for his pursuers. Every communication from him represented a triumph in itself, signifying that officialdom had not silenced him, and his letters and treatises were copied and copied again. They circulated everywhere, clandestinely passing from Christian to Christian. The magnificence of his prose stirred the hearts of the faithful, while his lethal logic cast doubt on both the learning of the ostensibly learned and the authority of the ostensibly authoritative.

People wondered: Were these exalted imperial pronouncements, these enunciations from what Lewis would call "highly cultivated clergymen," as sound as they made themselves out to be? To the unlettered laity, they seemed unnecessary. Was it all that preposterous to believe in a God who suffered and died? And if the Word was God, as the Gospels had said, would he not share the "substance" or "essence" of God, as the Creed of Nicea declared?

Athanasius's first letter in this, his third exile, was to the emperor himself. Constantius, he was sure, would never have authorized the outrages being perpetrated by Syrianus in Alexandria. After all, Constantius had pledged his support for Athanasius, and the emperor was assuredly an honorable man. "I know your long-suffering goodness," Athanasius wrote. "These men earnestly wish that I should suffer death. . . . You will be astonished, Augustus, most beloved of God, when you hear it."

But the emperor was not astonished, as Athanasius soon learned, for the sole and simple reason that he had authorized the persecution. A letter from the augustus to the citizens of Alexandria disabused Athanasius of all confidence in—and respect for—Constantius. Not only did the letter command his arrest and declare all who continued to support him "enemies of the emperor," it also pronounced him dethroned as bishop—and named his successor.

More blows kept falling. The Arians said that the bishop of Rome had gone over to them. Even ancient Hosius, one of the central architects of the Nicene Creed, and champion of Athanasius's cause since the beginning, had at one point briefly capitulated. Apart from a few loyal bishops, all in exile, and his huge flock in Alexandria and the Nile Delta, Athanasius seemed to be standing largely alone. It was *Athanasius contra mundum*—"Athanasius against the world"—a saying that would live on for untold centuries, inspiring countless crusaders for any number of causes to defy supposedly authoritative opposition in defense of what they believed to be true.

Meanwhile, the search for him raged across the desert. Monastery after monastery was ransacked by the troops, the monks beaten to make them talk. Their meager food supplies were confiscated, their buildings were destroyed, some were burned alive. They spirited him from place to place; not a single monk betrayed him. He lived in caves, tracked the desert by night, and hid with the hermits. "I endured everything," he later wrote. "I even dwelt among wild beasts." That he was more than sixty years old at the time, he did not mention.

His successor arrived in Alexandria on February 24, 357, with an army detachment assigned to reinforce ecclesiastical orders. This man, known as George the Cappadocian, had somewhat unusual qualifications for the leadership of the second biggest pastorate in Christendom. He had never been a priest or

To this day, monasteries large and small dot the bleak landscape of the Nitrian Desert west of the Nile Delta, as here at Wadi al-Natrun. At the time of Athanasius their number and their isolation would have made them logical hideouts for the fugitive.

Numerous contenders sought control of the episcopal see of Alexandria in the third and fourth centuries, and occupancy of its marble throne of St. Mark was often short. A sixth-century version of the Alexandrian bishop's throne (right) is now in St. Mark's Basilica, Venice. First taken from Alexandria to Constantinople, it was transported from there to Venice by pillaging crusaders.

deacon, but he had a well-established reputation (or so his many adversaries later attested) for greed, dishonesty, cruelty and brutality. He had been, in fact, a Constantinople meat broker with a contract to supply pork to the army, and he possessed a notorious temper. But he was a zealous Arian, and had been sent to Alexandria for one purpose only: to bash the stubborn Alexandrians into conformity.

Bishop George's first act was to turn all the churches over to Arian clergy, and forbid the faithful to meet anywhere else. Protests followed immediately, particularly from St. Theonas Church, scene of two attempts to arrest Athanasius. For the task of terrorizing St. Theonas, the new bishop recruited a gang of pagan youths, and turned them loose on the congregation. The gang arrived after most of the worshipers had departed, only a few women and older men remaining behind. Athanasius writes in his *History of the Arians*:

> A piteous spectacle ensued. The women had just risen from prayer and had sat down, and the youths, stripped naked, suddenly came upon them with stones and clubs. The godless wretches stoned some of them to death. They lashed the holy virgins, tore off their veils and exposed their heads. When they resisted this insult, the cowards kicked them with their feet.
>
> This was dreadful, exceeding dreadful, but what ensued was worse, more intolerable than any outrage. Knowing the holy character of the virgins, and that their ears were unaccustomed to any pollution, and that they were better able to bear stones and swords than any obscenity, they assailed them with such language. This, the Arians had suggested to the young men, and laughed at all they said and did; while the holy virgins and other godly women fled from such words as they would from the bite of snakes.
>
> After this, that they might fully execute the orders they had received, they seized upon the seats and throne and the table that was of wood, and the curtains of the church, and carried them out and burnt them before the doors in the great street, and cast frankincense upon the flame.

One young pillager, Athanasius notes with undisguised satisfaction, suffered God's vengeance on the spot. After seating himself on the bishop's throne and singing obscene songs, he tried to pull the throne out to the fire. It toppled over and killed him.

Soon afterwards, another group of holy women, denied access to their churches, met for worship in a cemetery. A large contingent of soldiers under a commander named Sebastian, known for his fierce temperament, descended upon them and demanded that they forthwith embrace Arianism. When they refused, he had them stripped and beaten so severely that some died, and then denied them a Christian burial.

A new governor, Cataphronius, then appeared, and sixteen bishops were sent into exile in the desert, the hope being, says Athanasius, that many would be unable to survive the conditions and would perish, as some no doubt did. This was followed by the banishment of thirty more bishops and the arrest and impoverishment of any leading laity suspected of supporting Athanasius. From his hideout, Athanasius poured scorn on the crackdown. He wrote:

> Where is there a house that they did not ravage? Where is there a family they did not plunder on pretense of searching for their opponents? Where is there a garden they did not trample under foot? What tomb did they not open, pretending they were seeking for Athanasius? How many men's houses were sealed up? The contents of how many persons' lodgings did they give away to the soldiers who assisted them?

All this and more was laid to the ministrations of Bishop George, whom contemporary historians denounced with fervor. Epiphanius, for example, describes him as steeped in vice, scrupling at nothing violent or disgraceful, robbing people of their inheritance and endowing himself with monopoly

The search raged across the desert. Monasteries were ransacked by troops, the monks beaten and burned alive, but none would talk. They spirited him from one hiding place to another.

control over the sale of papyrus (the antecedent of paper), fertilizer and salt. Most galling of all, George ordered that all burials be made in high-priced coffins of his own manufacture.

People bitterly recalled the letter from the emperor Constantius that had commended this man to them. He had placed them "under the guidance of the most venerable George," the emperor had written, "than whom no man is more perfectly instructed." Under George "you will continue to have good expectations, respecting the future life, and will pass your time in this present world in rest and quietness."

Constantius was to be disillusioned. Soldiers or no soldiers, eighteen months after George arrived he was mobbed by an infuriated crowd and rescued only "with difficulty." He soon departed from the diocese on an extended leave. Immediately, the faithful reclaimed their churches. But the return of Sebastian with the main body of troops, after a fruitless search for Athanasius in the desert, quickly restored the churches to Arian control.

The same process was going on all over the empire. At Milan, the Arian Auxentius of Cappadocia was arbitrarily appointed, and the Nicene bishop Dionysius exiled. At Nicomedia, the Arian Cecropius was made bishop. At Sirmium, Arles and Lisbon, the story was the same. At Trier, Toulouse, Vercelli and Cordoba, bishops were deported and their sees left vacant. An Arian bishop was

dispatched even to distant Ethiopia. At Alexandria, laments Athanasius, "profligate heathen youths" were being made bishops to supplant those banished to the desert.

In 357, when Leontius, the bishop of Antioch died, the fervent Arian Eudoxius was installed in his place, putting Antioch firmly into Arian hands. Three years later, when Eudoxius became bishop of Constantinople, his successor at Antioch, Ananias, displayed theological ideas dangerously close to the Niceans. He was promptly banished in favor of someone more reliably Arian. When this man likewise proved to be too orthodox, he also was deposed, and the Arian Euzoius brought in. Euzoius's Arianism proved sufficiently dependable to keep him in office for the next seventeen years. At

In Athanasius's new perspective, Constantius is worse than Saul, Ahab or Pilate. He is a man who slays his kin, who breaks his oaths, who sends old bishops to perish in the wild.

Constantinople, says the historian Socrates, people who refused to take communion from Arian clergy were persuaded otherwise by propping their mouths open with pieces of wood and forcing it down their throats.

Unable to find Athanasius, the authorities decided to discredit him by declaring him a coward. How, they asked, could he justify abandoning his flock to the horrors they were enduring on his account? Why would he not come forward like an honorable man and surrender? He delivered his answer in another historic missive, *Defense of His Flight*, and it, too, spread everywhere.

Jesus himself had at one point escaped his persecutors (John 8:59), Athanasius writes, as had both Peter (Acts 12:7–10) and Paul (Acts 21:35–40). In each instance, no good purpose would have been served by their surrender, and this was true of his own case. When the time came, Jesus faced death and endured it, as did the apostles. He must do the same, if and when the time came. He made two other points: The real reason his pursuers sought his voluntary surrender was their humiliation over failing to find him. Moreover, if flight from persecution is cowardice, then what of the conducting of persecution? That would be diabolical, he writes, but his foes were doing it all over the empire.

Gone by now is all condescension to the emperor. In Athanasius's new perspective, Constantius is worse than Saul, Ahab or Pilate. He is a man who slays his uncles and cousins, who breaks his oaths, who sends old bishops to perish in the wilderness, who has no sympathy even for his own suffering kinsmen. After two military victories, Constantius had formally declared himself "eternal," sneers Athanasius, and adds, "Those who refuse to allow eternity to the Son (of God) have the boldness to declare it for the emperor."

It was now the year 358, and soon Constantius would have ruled as sole emperor for ten years. Like heads of state both before and after him, he leaned toward government by anniversary. How magnificent it would be if he could mark the decennial by announcing that he had persuaded the bishops of the Christian church to cease their interminable wrangling over the identity of Jesus Christ and finally to come together in unity. He, Constantius, would have achieved what his legendary father had notably failed to do.

Apart from the Athanasius problem, however, another was rapidly emerging, though Constantius was slow to recognize it. It arose out of one of the sad certainties of human experience, namely that the negative case is easier to make than the positive one. It is always easier to attack a belief than to defend one, and consensus among the opposition survives only until the enemy falls and the rebels themselves get to take charge. Then they disintegrate.

As long as the central task was to attack the Nicene Creed, agreement among Arians was relatively easy. But when it came to proposing an alternative creed, cracks began appearing—cracks which developed first into crevasses and then into canyons. Over the next six years, the Arians would produce some eighteen new creeds, or variations of creeds, not one of which could even begin to gain sincere and wide acceptance.

The first such attempt had been the Creed of Sirmium, described in the last chapter. Far from producing unity, however, the "Blasphemous Creed," as even the moderate opponents of Nicea termed it, inflamed the eastern bishops into opposition. Most grouped themselves around the brilliant and acerbic Basil of Ancyra. They became known as the "semi-Arians," and adopted the term *homoiousion*, declaring the Second Person to be "of like substance" with the Father, rather than *homoousion*, "of the same substance," as declared in the Nicene Creed. The letter "i" (in Greek *iota*) in the middle of the word made a difference, enunciating their belief that the Word, whom John's Gospel said "was God," was a "like thing" to God, but not the "same" thing.

ATHANASIUS ON THE SEA OF LIFE

For the world is like the sea to us, my brethren. . . . We float on this sea, as with the wind, through our own free will, for everyone directs his course according to his will, and either, under the pilotage of the Word, enters into rest, or enticed by pleasure, he suffers shipwreck.

Swiftly from the desert came the message that Athanasius regarded these as "brothers in the faith." He described them as "those who accept everything else that was defined at Nicea and doubt only about *homoousion*." These "must not be treated as enemies," he said. "Nor do we attack them as 'Ariomaniacs,' nor as opponents of the Father, but we discuss the matter with them as brother with brothers, who mean what we mean, and dispute only about the word."[1]

The semi-Arians had signed the creed at Nicea, but only reluctantly, because they considered the *homoousion* clause suggestive

1. For an explanation of the terms homoiousion and homoousion, see the earlier volume, *By This Sign*, page 243, and chapters 8 and 9 on the development of the Arian heresy and the subsequent Council of Nicea. The readiness of Athanasius to accept those of the homoiousian school (with the letter "i," the iota, in the middle of the word) was at odds with the attitude of some of the creed's defenders back at the Nicene council. When three Arian bishops at Nicea saved themselves from deposition by surreptitiously inserting the iota, the historian Philostorgius branded them "hypocrites." Now, Athanasius was calling them "brothers." If nothing else, it showed he could not be described as uncompromising.

Artist's challenge: the face of Christ

Just as theologians struggled for centuries to define the nature of Jesus, artists struggle age after age to reflect the two aspects of his nature

From ancient catacomb frescoes to contemporary movies, the face of Jesus has always been an intriguing subject for artists, both Christian and non-Christian. That this is true is inevitable, writes the twentieth-century English author Dorothy L. Sayers: "To forbid the making of pictures about God would be to forbid thinking about God at all, for man is so made that he has no way to think except in pictures."

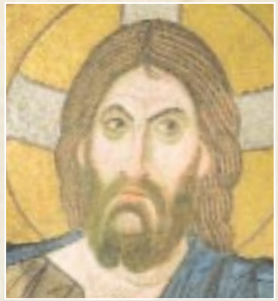
In the catacombs, the earliest frescoes paid little attention to detail, but by the fourth century, artists were beginning to decorate churches with more than simple, sketchy representations of biblical scenes. Even in the stylized art that would later be called Byzantine, Christian craftsmen were asking, "How should he appear? How ought he to be presented?"

The length and color of Jesus' hair became standardized, with appropriate postures worked out. The primary concern was not the "historical accuracy" of the face—after all, there were no historic descriptions to serve as models. He was generally represented as Semitic or at least Mediterranean. But of growing significance to artists was how his face could show his divinity or humanity, his compassion as Savior or his dispassion as Judge.

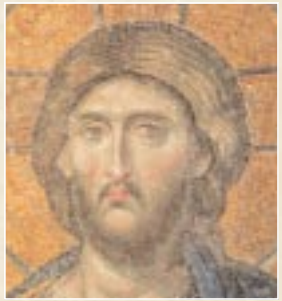
In the sixth century, the artist who painted the Sinai Christ (right) tried to resolve the paradox of Christ's nature by portraying him as loving and caring on one side of his face, stern on the other. Something of the search for the "soul" of Jesus can be found in virtually every depiction since, to the extent that even his race and ethnicity became optional.

After the late nineteenth century, some artists would attempt to depict a historically "probable" Christ, while others put him in modern forms. Sallman's *Head of Christ* (below right), was a Sunday School favorite in the mid-twentieth century, forerunner of a number of views of Jesus in various modern guises including laughing youth, Cuban revolutionary, enlightened guru or Rasta-man.

The advent of movies brought new visions of Jesus: moving, talking, suffering and dying on screen. But the essential problem remained for filmmakers as well: Who is Jesus, and what would a glimpse of his face reveal? ■



The Pantocrator (All-Sovereign Ruler) from the Daphni Monastery, Greece (ninth century).

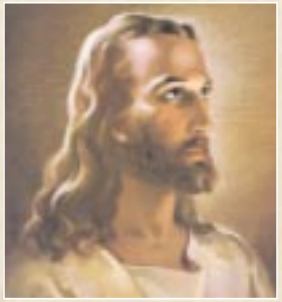


The Pantocrator, twelfth century, Hagia Sophia Church, Istanbul.

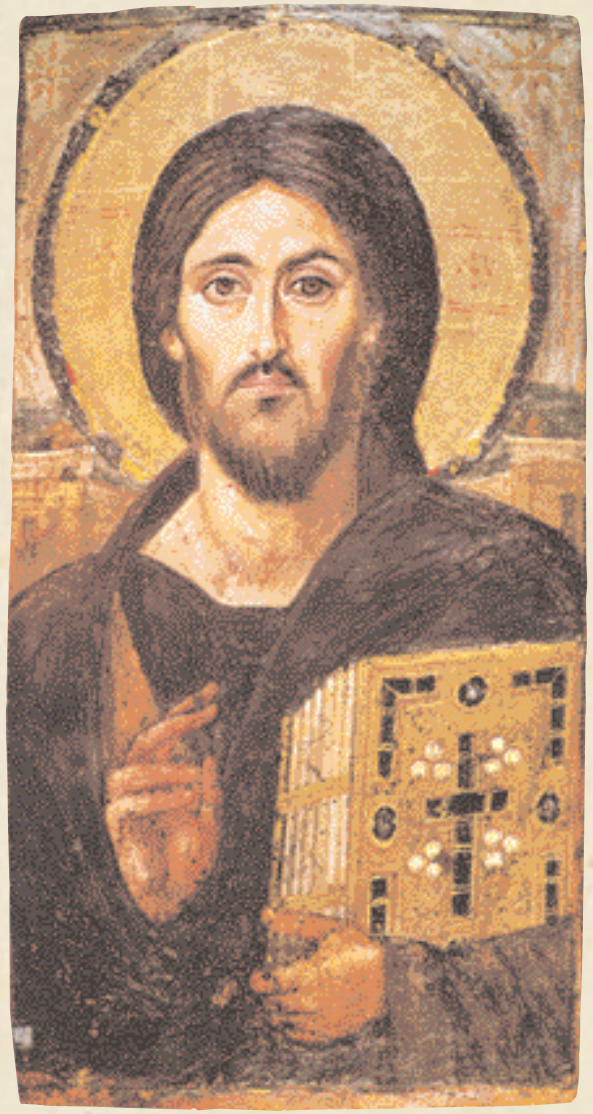
Detail, Sacred Heart of Jesus, Anonymous, nineteenth century, private collection.

Face of Christ, Jean Auguste Ingres, nineteenth century, Museu de Arte, Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Detail, Head of Christ, Rembrandt, ca.1648, Metropolitan Museum of Art, N.Y.



Head of Christ, Warner Sallman, 1941, Wilson Galleries, Anderson University.

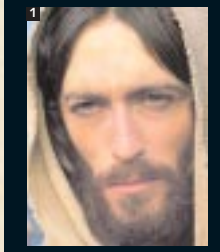


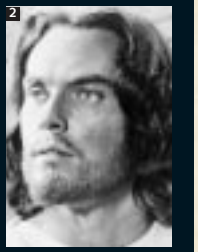
The Sinai Christ, sixth century, St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

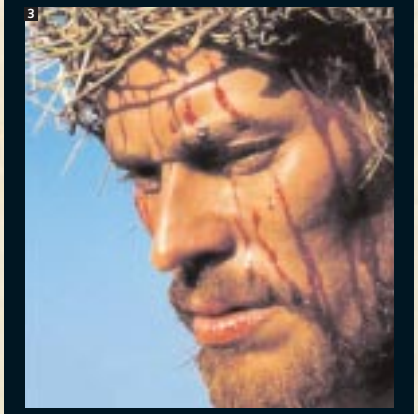
Hollywood's Jesus

From De Mille to Scorsese, the movie-Christ sometimes parted from the biblical portrayal

Director Cecil B. De Mille treated Jesus reverentially in his 1927 silent movie "King of Kings," setting the standard for a rash of cinema "spectacles" that followed, including a 1961 "King of Kings" remake with Jeffrey Hunter (2). Though respectful portrayals would continue in such movies as Franco Zeffirelli's 1977 "Jesus of Nazareth" (1), some overcautious filmmakers depicted Jesus as meek, mild and even effeminate—a woefully inaccurate rendering of his powerful New Testament personality. Perhaps in reaction, the end of the century brought iconoclastic tales of Jesus to the big screen and to television. Martin Scorsese's "The Last Temptation of Christ" 1988 (3), sparked worldwide protests with its scene of Christ living out visions of a "normal," which is to say sexual, life with a tattooed Mary Magdalene. In 2003, actor/director Mel Gibson's "The Passion" drew charges of anti-Semitism for its account of some Jewish leaders' involvement in the Crucifixion. ■







of the Sabellian heresy.[2] When the rebellion against Nicea broke out, they had joined it, though they were far more anti-Sabellian than they were pro-Arian. The historian B. J. Kidd in *A History of the Church* (Oxford, 1922) describes them as "a party of high motives and conscientious scruples, very nearly orthodox." The nineteenth-century British scholar Archibald Robertson, who remained for the entire twentieth century the most widely read translator of Athanasius, was less generous. They shared "the empirical conservatism of men whose own principles are vague and ill-assorted and who fail to follow the keener sight which distinguishes the higher conservatism from the lower," he writes. However, they had the numbers. Vague they might be, but they represented the views of most eastern bishops.

At the opposite end of the spectrum stood the extreme Arians, like the notorious George of Cappadocia, Athanasius's arbitrarily appointed replacement. Whatever the Bible called him, they held, Jesus was in the end a mere creature and nothing more. In other words, God did not die on a cross. Theologically, these people were known as the Anomoeans.[3] Their leader in the west was Bishop Valens of Mursa, a pupil of Arius himself, and who from Nicea onward had been the archenemy of Athanasius. His reputation was that of the complete ecclesiastical politician, entirely capable of repudiating today a position that he had taken yesterday, if it furthered his ultimate goal—which was the destruction of both Athanasius and the Nicene Creed.

By far the most formidable Anomoean spokesman was of a very different stripe, however. Aetius was not by profession a clergyman; he was a philosopher, an authority on Aristotle. Nor was he what a much later generation would call "smooth." Self-made and self-confident, he did not equivocate, and under the future emperor Julian, he would be made a bishop. "His loud voice and clear-cut logic," writes Robertson, "lost none of their effect by fear of offending the religious sensibilities of others." This inclination served Athanasius well, if only because Aetius's brash assertions horrified the moderate semi-Arians, to whom he was simply "godless."

Between these two groups stood what Robertson calls "the political Arians." Their leader was Acacius, bishop of Caesarea. Their party was named for him, the Acacians. "In the main," writes Robertson, "he had a rooted dislike of principle of any kind," though he was sure of one thing, namely "the union of all parties of the church in subservience to the state." The Acacian objective was to hold together the rapidly fragmenting Arian movement long enough for Constantius to proclaim at his decennial that the Christian church was at last united. To accomplish this, they must somehow gain universal approval for a creed whose language was so unspecific that it would adroitly avoid all the issues, while resolving none of them.

This was certainly not the Creed of Sirmium, which had caused the uproar that in turn produced the whole semi-Arian phenomenon. The Acacian leader, Basil of Ancyra, therefore boldly approached the emperor with a better idea. Why not have another council, another Nicea, which would correct the shortcomings of the original creed? To Basil's astonishment, Constantius heartily agreed. Basil found himself suddenly basking in the imperial favor, which he swiftly exploited by securing the ouster of several Anomoean bishops.

These developments quickly activated the political Arians, along with the devious Valens. In one huge council, they feared, an accord could develop between Basil's semi-Arians and those still tacitly in favor of the Nicene Creed, resulting in the, to them, ghastly possibility of Nicea's reaffirmation. To divorce Constantius from his infatuation with Basil's ideas, they proposed instead that there be two councils, one in the east and one in the west. The western would be held at Rimini in Italy (then known as Ariminum) on the Adriatic, east of Rome and twenty miles south of Ravenna.

The eastern meeting proved more problematic. Hold it at Nicea, some suggested. No, that would tend to confuse the old creed with the projected new one. Better to choose Nicomedia, capital of Bithynia, at the eastern end of the Sea of Marmara, seventy-five miles from Constantinople: Invitations were sent out,

It became obvious—to the horror of the emperor—that despite all his efforts at 'cleansing,' only about 80 of the 400 bishops who assembled were Arian. Real disaster was to follow.

the eastern bishops embarked, and then nature intervened. Nicomedia was wrecked by an earthquake.[4] The site finally settled on was Seleucia (modern Silifke, Turkey), a mountain fortress with a reassuring concentration of troops, in case the bishops got out of hand.

But first, the new creed must be prepared. Drawn up with fastidious care, it was presented first to the Council of Rimini, where more than four hundred western bishops assembled in the summer of 359.[5] It not only eliminated the word *homoousion* (of the same substance) but also denounced it as "something the fathers used in their simplicity," and which "has become a cause of scandal." Instead, it proclaimed the Son to be "like the Father." But how like him? Everything was like him to a degree, some argued, since everything was made by him. The wording had to be more specific. Some wanted "like him in all respects." Others objected that this merely affirmed Nicea.

The proposed preamble also made many uneasy, since it suggested the emperor must authorize the creed of the church. It read: "The Catholic Faith has been set forth in presence of our master, the most pious and triumphant Emperor Constantius Augustus, eternal and venerable." Accompanying it was the emperor's order to the bishops to sign the creed, which became known as the "Dated Creed" because it was on this date that the Christians, under orders from the emperor, finally declared what they believed. Or so it was supposed.

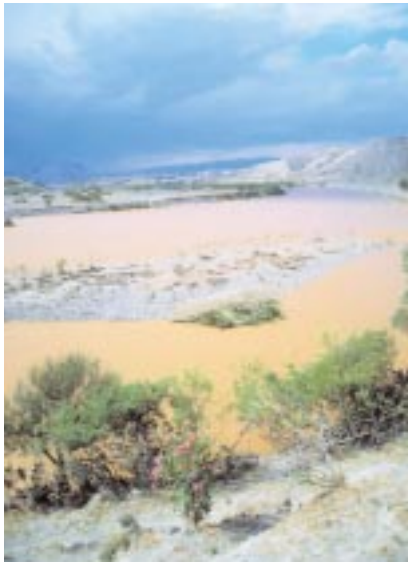
Events shortly proved otherwise. Like most compromises intended to please everybody, observes the historian J. R. Palanque in *The Church in the Christian Roman Empire* (Paris, 1949) the Dated Creed pleased nobody. Worse still, it soon became obvious—to the horror of Valens and the emperor—that despite all their efforts at "cleansing" the episcopate, only about eighty of the four hundred assembled bishops were fully Arian. Real disaster, from their point of view, then followed. This episcopal majority, still harboring a loyalty to Nicea, took over

2. Sabellianism, sometimes called Modalism, was the belief that the One God appeared in successive "modes" or operations, first as Father, then as Son, then Holy Spirit, but actually was always the same One God. The theory was rejected, because it failed to adequately distinguish between the "Persons" in God, all three of whom were deemed to be eternal.

3. The word Anomoeans, used to identify the radical Arians, derives from a Greek word, *anomoios*, which means "not like." It signified that the substance or essence of Jesus, the Divine Word, was "not like" that of the Father.

4. The historian Sozomen preserves an anecdote about the Nicomedian earthquake. A Persian zookeeper named Arcasius, he writes, was converted to Christianity at Nicomedia, and thereafter lived within the city as a hermit, reputedly able to cure the insane. Foreseeing the earthquake in a vision, he warned an assembly of clergy to get their people out of town. When they scoffed at him, he returned to his dwelling, prostrated himself before God, and there perished in the quake and ensuing fire that leveled most of Nicomedia, as he had foreseen. "He preferred death," his friends explained, "to beholding the destruction of a city in which he had first known Christ."

5. Although four hundred western bishops were at the Council of Rimini, the bishop of Rome was not one of them, probably because the council occurred during the time of the two bishops, Felix and Liberius, a confusion that neither side wanted to visit upon the council. (See previous chapter.)



The emperor Constantius II assembled councils in the east and the west to render the Nicene Creed more palatable to Arians. Neither of the sites he chose, however, was meant to put attending bishops at ease. Seleucia (right—now Silifke in Turkey, on the Goksu River), was a military outpost in desolate mountain terrain. Rimini, on Italy's Adriatic coast (above), although a sometime imperial resort, was infamous for heat and humidity.

the council, excommunicated Valens and other Anomoean extremists, and sent a delegation to Constantius to inform him of what they had done. Valens immediately followed, at the head of an opposing delegation of Arians.

Constantius refused to see the former, but warmly welcomed the latter and ordered them to talk the rival delegation around. Meanwhile, the remaining three hundred and more bishops awaited word at hot and humid Rimini, while the living conditions grew intolerable and the food began running out. Under pressure of argument and threat, the delegates finally surrendered to Valens's wishes and signed. Constantius then informed the main body back at Rimini that they must remain there until they, too, acquiesced. With the food supply by now very low indeed, they finally gave in, and thus did the Dated Creed become the creed of the western church. The Acacians, the political Arians, had triumphed.

They did not triumph at Seleucia, however. Here 150 eastern bishops met under the watchful eyes of a representative of the emperor. It immediately became plain that about 90 percent of those present were semi-Arians, firmly opposed to the Dated Creed and the emperor's plans. On the first day, they proposed adoption of the old creed formulated twenty years before at Antioch, which they saw as best representing their viewpoint. One hundred and five bishops promptly signed it, in effect resolving the debate before it got started.

Acacius and eighteen of his fellow political Arians walked out, returning two days later with another creed, similar to the one soon to be forced on the western bishops at Rimini. The defiant semi-Arians refused even to discuss it. "If the strengthening of the faith consists in allowing everyone to put forward a particular opinion every day," declared their new leader, Sophronius of Pompeiopolis, "there can be no more certainty as to the truth."

At that, the political Arians, accompanied by the emperor's representative, hastened to Constantinople to confer with Constantius. The remaining bishops, carrying on with the meeting, excommunicated and deposed eight radical Arian bishops, George of Alexandria among them. They also consecrated a new bishop for Antioch (who was seized by the army and banished before he could take office). Finally, they appointed a ten-man delegation to report *their* decisions to the emperor.

The situation had now reversed. The western bishops, the supposed champions of Nicea, had been browbeaten and starved into signing a creed repulsive to them. The eastern bishops, the supposed opponents of Nicea, had brazenly defied the imperial authority in its favor. This was too much for the outspoken Hilary of Poitiers, Athanasius's firm supporter in the west, who in a ringing indictment denounced his fellow western bishops for disloyalty:

> A slave—not even a particularly good slave, but an ordinary one—will not support an injury to his master. He avenges it, if he can do so. A soldier defends his king, even at the peril of his life, and even making a rampart of his own body. A dog barks at the slightest alarm, and leaps forward at the slightest suspicion. But you hear it said that the Christ, the true Son of God, is not God, yet you remain silent. Your silence is an adhesion to this blasphemy. In fact you even protest against those who do cry out, and join in with those who try to stifle them.

Even the easterners, however, finally caved in—or anyhow, their ten-man delegation did. These unfortunates were put under every form of pressure—promises, threats, intrigue—in a race against the deadline of December 31, 359,

Officers crossed the eastern empire with the same ultimatum for every bishop: Sign or be banished. Since most signed, Constantius declared that the church was united at last.

the eve of the year of Constantius's decennial. The tenth signature was wrested from the final reluctant signatory in the middle of the last night.

It was still necessary, however, for something resembling a new eastern council to ratify what its delegates had accepted on its behalf. This was arranged for the following week at Constantinople, and consisted of a gathering of bishops from nearby Thrace and Bithynia who were considered reliable. Its business moved briskly. The Dated Creed, adopted at Rimini, was ratified as a replacement for the Nicene. Various bishops were deposed, particularly the semi-Arians who had proved so hostile at Seleucia. The radical Arians known as the Anomoeans were likewise deposed as troublemakers, and the fiery Aetius deposed from the diaconate and told to quit writing books and articles. George of Alexandria was reprimanded, but recalled to office.

Imperial officers then spread out across the eastern empire to secure the signature of every bishop, always with the same ultimatum: Sign or be banished.

Most eventually did sign, although some few stubbornly refused and accepted exile. With that, Constantius declared the church united, the Nicene Creed supplanted, and the new faith established. "The world groaned to find itself Arian," Jerome would later write. Still, one very significant bishop had emphatically *not* become Arian, and had not been caught either: Athanasius remained at large. His powerfully reasoned denunciation of the imperially ordained creed soon appeared, to be clandestinely spread far and wide by sympathizers.

By now, it was April of the fateful year 360, and once again overwhelming political and military events suddenly dictated the affairs of the Christian church. Two young nephews of Constantine the Great had survived the bloodbath of the year 337. Gallus, the elder, had been about eleven years old when the soldiers arrived to execute his father and elder brother. Gallus may have been spared because he was a sickly child, expected to die shortly anyway; his younger half brother Julian was only six. Julian's mother had died soon after her son's birth. The two boys were raised thereafter in highly guarded isolation, lest they be seized by some ambitious military usurper and used to figurehead a revolt.

Each responded differently to these traumatic events. They left Gallus depraved, ferocious and utterly unstable. They left Julian with a rooted hatred of everything associated with his cousin Constantius, whom he regarded as the murderer of his family. He despised the man, and also the eunuchs and sycophant bishops who surrounded him. But most of all, he distrusted Constantius's religion, Christianity, whether Arian, Nicene or any other variety.

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Constantius II was determined that the Rimini decisions would write the final chapter on Athanasian opposition to Arianism. He sent soldiers to every bishop in the eastern empire with orders to secure, under threat if necessary, the signature of each. Bishops were forced to sign wherever they were found, even if that meant being roused from bed.

This eventually led him back to paganism, a fact he long kept secret. Constantius, either unaware of these facts about his cousins, or compelled to disregard them, would vest each in turn with enormous responsibilities, and he also gave one of his sisters to each of them as a wife.[6]

Constantius's civil war against the usurper Magnentius, with its toll of fifty-four thousand Roman troops killed, had dangerously weakened the whole Rhine-Danube frontier. The barbarians, largely inactive since their "pacification" by Constantine the Great, resumed their raids across the Rhine and Danube with greater success than ever. Constantius, up to then preoccupied with the Persian front, had to turn his attention westward. But who could replace him in the east? It was time to see what his cousin Gallus was made of. On March 15, 351, Constantius named him caesar of the east.

Gallus's new wife, Constantina, who was Constantius's sister, was the widow of another cousin, Hannibalian, who was also a victim of the bloodbath of 337. She was a "fury in human shape," writes the historian Ammianus, and she

Constantina was a 'fury in human shape' and exacerbated Gallus's worst tendencies. The consequence was a regime of brutality conducted from a palace known as a 'house of horrors.'

exacerbated Gallus's worst tendencies. The consequence was a regime of brutality conducted from their palace at Antioch, a place British historian Edward Gibbon describes as a "house of horrors." "Judicial procedure was disregarded and informers honored. Men were condemned to death without trial, and members of the city council imprisoned," writes Norman H. Baynes in the *Cambridge Medieval History*. Both husband and wife exhibited "a brutal lust for a naked display of unrestrained authority."

When the praetorian prefect sent word of all this to Constantius, Gallus had the prefect imprisoned and set the mob against him. They broke into the prison and tore him to pieces. Exasperated at last, Constantius summoned his caesar-cousin to appear before him in Milan. En route west, Gallus's wife Constantina was seized and murdered. Constantius, that is, must have ordered his own sister put to death. Gallus became the prisoner of his guards, and as the journey continued, was stripped of the imperial purple robes. In Italy, he was presented before a commission headed by Eusebius, the emperor's chief eunuch and administrator, who formally examined his record in imperial office and pronounced the death penalty. Gallus was beheaded in the Italian town of Polo, a place of ill memory in the Constantinian family. It was here that Crispus, eldest son of Constantine the Great, had been executed on his father's orders twenty-eight years earlier.

By now, the situation on the Rhine-Danube front had grown much worse, with one barbarian horde after another wreaking ruin on the Roman towns. In the north, the Salian Franks had taken full possession of a vast tract of Gaul.

6. Marriage between cousins was legal in Rome, as it later would be in the civil law of many American states, in Canada and in all European countries. It is forbidden by the canon law of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, although there is a process of dispensation. Most Protestant churches simply follow the laws of the state in which they are located.

The Alamanni had overrun much of central Gaul, and captured Strasbourg, Worms and Mainz. The Franks had captured Cologne. Some forty-five Roman towns in the Rhine Valley had been pillaged and burned, and barbarians had formed settlements as much as fifty miles west of the river. Meanwhile, soldiers who had supported the usurper Magnentius had formed themselves into gangs and ravaged far and wide.

Constantius faced a dilemma. If a victorious general were assigned to subdue the tribes, and succeeded, he might become another Magnentius, and once again create civil war. Yet Constantius could not personally direct the defense of all three fronts—the Rhine, the Danube and the Euphrates. He was driven therefore to turn to the last surviving nephew of Constantine: Julian, now thirty years old. This, too, was dangerous, of course, since a triumphant Julian could also proclaim himself a rival augustus. But this seemed unlikely; the young man had become a philosopher, buried in his books.

Whatever the risk, Constantius had no alternative. On November 6, 355, he proclaimed his cousin caesar in the west, gave his sister Helena to him in marriage, and assigned him to the Rhine frontier. Julian, although dreading the job, surrendered to the will of the gods. He secretly had himself inducted into Mithraism, the pagan religion of the Roman army, served briefly under another general, and then launched a military career that within the next five years would rival that of his renowned grandfather, the great Constantine.

The unfortunate George chose that month to return to Alexandria. The faithful executed him, paraded his body through the streets on a camel, and dragged his enforcer behind in the dirt.

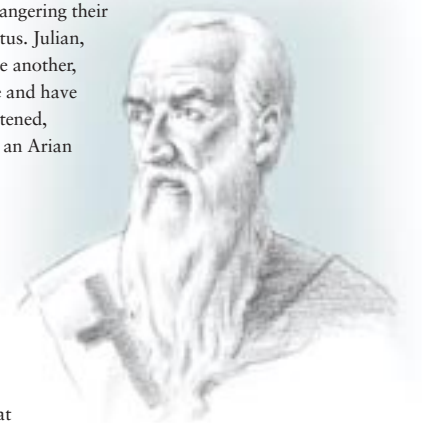
Julian's victories followed one upon the other in quick succession. A brilliant defense of the fortress of Sens won him the loyalty of his troops. Then Cologne was recovered. Next, the Franks were smashed in a stunning series of defeats at and around Strasbourg, and their king was sent as a prisoner to Constantius. After a further drubbing the following spring, they too made peace, which put the whole lower Rhine back in Roman hands.

In the following summer, Julian completed the reconquest of the upper Rhine, and used his barbarian prisoners to rebuild the Roman forts there. He reopened the supply of British grain to Roman towns, and forced the barbarians to yield up twenty thousand prisoners and slaves they had taken while they had free rein in Gaul. He restored the civil administration, refused military pressure to raise taxes, fired crooked tax collectors and replaced them with his own men, and reduced special tax breaks for the wealthy.

Constantius had meanwhile subdued the tribes on the Danube, but on the Euphrates had met with failure. Sapor II, the Persian king, aware of Rome's problems in the west, suddenly required that the Romans vacate all of Mesopotamia and turn Christian Armenia over to Zoroastrian Persia. It was an outrageous demand, which Constantius rejected outright. Sapor's invasion promptly followed, thwarted initially by a heroic seventy-three-day Roman defense of Amida in Mesopotamia. When the town finally surrendered, Sapor murdered or enslaved the entire population, but he had lost thirty thousand men in the siege, and had to withdraw and regroup for a second attack the next year.

Constantius knew he could not hold the Persian front without reinforcements from the legions on the Rhine. He sent his own general to lead them to the east, rather than entrust the task to Julian, but the troops balked. Fearing that their departure would set the barbarians on the warpath again, thus endangering their own families, they rose in rebellion and proclaimed Julian as augustus. Julian, knowing that if he refused they would probably kill him and choose another, donned the purple robes and prepared to march on Constantinople and have it out with his cousin. But fate intervened. Constantius was disheartened, desperate and so stricken with fever that he accepted baptism from an Arian bishop at Mopsuestia (now Misis in Turkey) and died the next day, November 3, 361.

The unfortunate George, as it happened, had chosen that very month to return to his duties as bishop of Alexandria. Scarcely had he arrived when the faithful heard of Constantius's death. They clapped Bishop George smartly into irons and conducted him to prison. One morning, about three weeks later, they dragged him out again, executed him and paraded his body through the streets on the back of a camel, with the corpse of his latest military enforcer dragging through the dirt behind him. That afternoon, they burned both bodies.



ATHANASIUS ON JESUS AS MAN

When the Word became man, he did not cease to be God; nor because he is God does he avoid what is human. Far from it. Rather, the all-holy Word of God bore our ignorance so that he might bestow on us the knowledge of his Father.

Julian, meanwhile, issued orders that all banished bishops were to be returned to their cities. Athanasius, as if out of nowhere, appeared unannounced at an evening service in one of his churches, causing a sensation. Where had he been? How could he have returned so soon from the desert? The explanation then came out. He had been for some time under the care of a very devout virgin, a woman so beautiful (writes the Christian historian Sozomen) "that men of gravity and reflection kept aloof from her, for fear of giving rise to slander, or of exciting disadvantageous reports." That a bishop should live in her home seemed so preposterous, not only to the Christians but the Roman authorities as well, that in perfect safety she was able to provide him with shelter, food and writing materials.

Restored to office for the third time, Athanasius acted quickly. He called a council of his bishops at Alexandria, and set forth one simple basis for the restoration of church unity: acceptance of the Nicene Creed. Those who had departed from it, or signed other creeds, the council decided, must be instantly forgiven—once they had made that acceptance. When his old friends, the monks, attacked the semi-Arians, he told them to show charity and they did. When his longtime supporter, Lucifer of Calaris, created a new schism at

Antioch by taking a harder line, Athanasius repudiated him. Long regarded as the chief troublemaker, Athanasius became the chief pacifier overnight.

Far and wide, east and west, Christians answered his call. Arianism, so recently perceived as inescapable, had suddenly become very escapable indeed. Apparently, it could prevail only so long as it had something to attack. Having gained the ascendancy, it fatally fragmented. The battle was not over, for much of the imperial circle and high-ranking clergy remained Arian, but Christians everywhere, both lay and clerical, were uniting behind Nicea. The struggle came to resemble the old conflict of imperial officialdom against the Christians, especially in view of a new factor.

Julian, who now succeeded Constantius, made his paganism public as soon as he knew he was in charge. Neither Arian nor Nicene, he was opposed to them all. When he learned what the tireless Athanasius, now about sixty-five years old, was doing at Alexandria, he wrote in wrath to the prefect of Egypt:

> Even though you do not write to me on other matters, you ought at least to have written about that enemy of the gods, Athanasius, especially since, for a long time past, you have known my just decrees. I swear by mighty Serapis that, if Athanasius the enemy of the gods does not depart from that city [Alexandria], or rather from all Egypt, before the December kalends, I shall fine the cohort which you command a hundred pounds of gold. And you know that, though I am slow to condemn, I am even much slower to remit when I have once condemned.
>
> [*The remainder is added in the emperor's own hand.*] It vexes me greatly that my orders are neglected. By all the gods, there is nothing I should be so glad to see, or rather hear reported as achieved by you, as that Athanasius has been expelled beyond the frontiers of Egypt. Infamous man! He has the audacity to baptize Greek women of rank during my reign! Let him be driven forth!

The emperor Julian hoped to restore the empire's virility by eradicating Christianity and returning Roman citizens to their pagan roots. His personal renunciation of the Christian faith earned him forever the title "Julian the Apostate." This striking fourth-century statue of Julian is now in the Louvre, Paris.

He then wrote to the people of Alexandria, calling Athanasius "a meddlesome man, unfit by nature to be a leader of the people," and warning them that he wanted Athanasius out of the city. So their bishop was banished again. His sojourn in Alexandria this time had lasted eight months, but that was enough to set the restoration of Nicea in motion. "Be of good cheer," he told his weeping flock, as he prepared to leave the city. "This is a cloud that will very soon blow away." His prophecy was to prove altogether correct.

At that, Athanasius vanished from the city for the fourth time, as usual narrowly dodging plans to arrest him, but on this occasion, with comic consequences. For a change, he headed up the Nile by boat; when warned that imperial authorities were following him in another vessel, he came about and sailed back downstream. Soon his pursuers came in sight, and hailed his crew with an urgent question: Had they seen Athanasius? Indeed they had, the bishop's men shouted back, "and he's not far from here." At that, the authorities redoubled their upstream efforts. After they returned without him, Athanasius secretly ascended the Nile once again, and spent the next eighteen months visiting the ancient cities of the Pharaohs and the monasteries that were appearing all around the lower valley.

One scene on that voyage particularly moved him. As his vessel tracked along the bank by night near Hermopolis, about midway between Thebes and Memphis, he came upon an assembly of hundreds of monks, clergy and bishops, standing under torchlight to greet him. He came ashore, mounted a donkey and made his way among them. "Who are these," he intoned, echoing Isaiah (60:8) "that fly like a cloud, and as doves to their windows?" Then he answered the question. It was not the bishops like him, but these men of prayer, humility and obedience, who carry the cross in their own being. These, he said, are the real "fathers of the church."

Something else happened to him on that journey. He became obsessed with what he foresaw as his own impending martyrdom, and found himself dreading it. The monks again took him into hiding, but could do nothing to allay his horror. Finally, the abbot Theodore came to him and said he had no cause for fear. But the emperor was clearly determined to execute him, Athanasius argued. Not so, said Theodore, because the emperor, Julian I, had been killed in battle on the Persian front. Quietly back to Alexandria came its weary bishop, now about sixty-seven and restored to his see for the fourth time.

But the death of Julian in 363 ended the era of the Constantinian family. Since no kindred claimant remained, the army searched its own senior officer corps for a successor. One candidate turned down the job, pleading that he was too old. Attention then focused on a certain Jovian, the thirty-two-year-old commander of Julian's bodyguard. The son and son-in-law of two accomplished officers, he himself had done nothing of note except advance on the merits of his family connections. He was, however, Christian.

Long regarded as the chief troublemaker, Athanasius became the chief pacifier overnight. Far and wide, Christians answered his call. Arianism had suddenly become very escapable indeed.

Jovian had immediate and urgent problems. Julian's death had left the Roman army trapped on the eastern frontier, in imminent danger of total destruction by Persian forces. Sapor offered crushing terms to free them. Rome must abandon the five provinces east of the Tigris that it had gained under Diocletian, and must give up three frontier fortresses, and half of Armenia as well. Jovian had to agree, so that the bedraggled legions, the Christian symbol now back on their shields, could begin the grueling trek back to Antioch.

Meanwhile, Athanasius and rival bishops representing the various Christian parties hastened thence to meet the new emperor. "The highways of the east were crowded with Homoousion and Arian, and semi-Arian and Anomoean bishops," sneers the skeptic Gibbon. These all "struggled to outstrip each other in the holy race; the apartments of the palace resounded with their clamors, and the ears of the prince were assaulted, and perhaps astonished, by the singular mixture of metaphysical argument and passionate invective." However, Athanasius had come at the specific invitation of the emperor, and the rest were soon informed of Jovian's position. His Christianity was defined by the Nicene Creed, he said. Athanasius returned triumphant to Alexandria, bishop once again.

The fugitive Athanasius, pursued up the Nile by imperial soldiery, has ordered his crew to turn back downstream, toward Alexandria. With his head covered against the blistering sun, and detection, they pass the pursuing vessel still upbound. An officer shouts a request for information as to the bishop's whereabouts. Cunningly—and truthfully—the captain of Athanasius's ship shouts back, "He is not far." The pursuers redoubled their efforts to ascend the river.

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But not for long. Jovian made speed for the capital where he knew his reign was in imminent danger, if only because of the catastrophic treaty with the Persians. At a little-known town called Dadastana, however, on the boundary between the provinces of Bithynia and Galatia, he was found dead in his bed one morning. He had been poisoned either by fumes from newly laid plaster, or possibly by eating mushrooms, or by overeating and drinking the night before. Murder was, of course, rumored, although no strong case for it was ever made. His reign had lasted eight months.

The popular choice of the army now fell on another officer, Valentinian, age forty-three, an accomplished general of commanding presence who had distinguished himself in the service of both Julian and Jovian. He, in turn, named his brother Valens, seven years his junior, as augustus for the east. Valens had in no way distinguished himself, however, and could speak no Greek, the language of the empire he was to govern.

Both brothers rapidly established a reputation for brutal authoritarianism, enforced by the swift beheading, burning or clubbing to death of any suspected conspirator or malefactor. Some few, it was said, were torn to pieces by bears caged in Valentinian's bedroom, to amuse him as he fell asleep. In his more refined moments, however, inspired by his Christian moral principles, he introduced a remarkable social program. This provided child medical care, prohibited the killing of unwanted infants by abandoning them to the elements, and laid the foundations of a public school system. In addition, Valentinian restored Constantine the Great's policy of toleration for all non-Christian religions except those involving criminal practices, and the Nicene Creed was soon well-re-established in the western churches.

Things were otherwise in the east, however, where younger brother Valens

was chronically fearful for his own safety, both spiritual and physical, and especially of the horrors of continuing warfare against the barbarians. He therefore had himself instructed and baptized by the bishop of Constantinople, who persuaded him to become a committed and determined Arian. Thereafter, Arian bishops continued to gain the major eastern sees, often through rigged elections.

This conflict frequently became violent, even homicidal. When some forty-eight Nicene clergy (one historian puts the number at ninety) sought an audience with Valens, he provided them with transport by sea. No sooner was the vessel well off shore than fire engulfed it. The crew all reportedly escaped, which suggests the blaze was deliberately set, quite likely on the emperor's orders. The clergy all perished.

At Alexandria, political fortune once again turned against the aging Athanasius. In 365, Valens ordered all the clergy who had been banished under Constantius to be banished again. For the fifth and final time, Athanasius was ordered out, occasioning the usual hairbreadth escape. The imperial prefect assured him that the deportation order would be appealed and he should wait and see, but Athanasius did not believe him. He immediately departed. Next day, the prefect and troops ransacked his church in vain.

However, this time the faithful had had enough. The fifth eviction of their bishop set off a riot in the city. Valens, just then confronted with a usurpation attempt and also with major problems on the Danube, had no stomach for another rebellion in Alexandria. He relented, and four months after Athanasius's disappearance, a written order arrived from the emperor, restoring him to his see. This time, though, Athanasius had not even left town. He had hidden himself in the family crypt in a suburb of Alexandria.

He had seven years left to live, and they were rewarding ones. Notwithstanding continued loyalty to Arianism in high places, it was becoming

The trio who came to the rescue

The Cappadocians carry the Nicene Creed to its final victory, while one of them lays down the rules for a monastic life and service to the helpless

For the aging Athanasius, battling for years against emperors, bishops, bureaucrats, the military and the mob to preserve the Nicene Creed, the reports emerging from the east in the mid-360s must have come as the pale promise of dawn. Three men, he was told, all fearless, all magnificent preachers, all in their mid-thirties, had taken up his cause against the religion of Arius. Ironically, they came from Cappadocia, home of the notorious George, who had imposed Arianism on Alexandria with bludgeon and sword.

Two of the three were brothers, the third their close friend. The foremost was Basil, who would become bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia. His brother Gregory, renowned for his lucid presentation of Trinitarian theology, would be bishop of nearby Nyssa. Their friend, another Gregory, this one from another Cappadocian town, Nazianzus, a persuasive preacher in the Nicene cause, would serve briefly as bishop of Constantinople. Both Gregorys would play key roles at the Council of Constantinople in 381, which decisively upheld the Nicene Creed.

The three are known to Christian history as "the Cappadocians." Basil is remembered by Christians as "Basil the Great," the man who laid down the structure and ethos of eastern monasticism, making prayer, holiness and the care of the sick and helpless the central work.

He and his brother would exemplify another phenomenon that would recurrently appear in Christian history, that of the Christian family, serving Christ for generation after generation. Their maternal grandfather had been executed as a Christian under Maximian. Both paternal grandparents had been forced to hide for seven years in the wilderness.

Their father, a lawyer and devout Christian, had ten children—five boys, three of whom became bishops, and five girls. Macrina, eldest of the ten, was so beautiful, wrote her brother and biographer Gregory, that "a great swarm of suitors crowded round her parents." To end the clamor, they betrothed her at age twelve. Following the premature death of her fiancé, she announced that she considered herself married, already and always. After caring for her siblings and the extensive family estate, she joined her widowed mother in establishing a monastery.

Basil was sent to law school at Athens. Precocious, prissy and acutely aware of his superior intellect, he presented a tempting target for student hazing. But he met Gregory at the university, son of the bishop of Nazianzus, who protected him, and the two formed a famous friendship. But an unequal one, writes John McGuckin in his *St. Gregory of Nazianzus* (New York, 2001). Gregory "suffered the unfortunate disability of loving his friend more than his friend loved him."

While Gregory reveled in the university life, Basil found the place frivolous. He returned from university insufferable, writes his brother, "puffed up beyond measure with the pride of oratory, and excelling—in his own estimation—all the leading men in town." It was Macrina who brought him to his senses. He could take no credit for his intellect, she said. God had given that to him, and it should be employed in the service of God. In short, he should consider the monastic life.

Her words, Basil would later recall, awakened him as from a deep sleep. He began visiting religious communities in Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia, and on the basis of what he saw, he founded his own. His brother joined him. So, briefly, did Gregory his friend, by now disillusioned with Athens, but he found the ascetic life too difficult, and returned to Nazianzus to assist his father, the bishop.

Basil refined his approach to the monastic life in the 360s, preaching it throughout Asia Minor and codifying it in what came to be called "The Long Rules." His monks began their day at midnight, with prayer. There was but one meal. However, the outstanding feature of Basil's monasticism from the outset was its emphasis on good works, bestowed especially on the poor and afflicted.

Basil and friend Gregory collaborated on a major academic work intended to claim for the Nicene cause the concurrence of the great theologian Origen, who himself had once taken refuge at Cappadocian Caesarea. This established them as theologians. Both were soon fully involved in the Nicene controversy as staunch allies of Athanasius.

It was not a comfortable role. With the emperor Valens fervently, often violently, advancing the Arian cause, Basil took refuge in his monastery, sleeping on the ground in a hair shirt, possessing just a single cloak and a single tunic, eating only bread, drinking only water, his heat the sun alone, and dogged by the ill health that attended him all his life. He was "without a wife, without property, without flesh and almost without blood," wrote his brother. But it was there in his monastery that he composed one of the great works on the Nicene controversy, *Against Eunomius*, re-arguing the debate from the Nicene viewpoint.

In 362, he helped elect an orthodox layman named Eusebius as bishop of Caesarea and became his adviser, tirelessly promoting clergy who supported the creed to senior church offices. He also became the dependable friend of the unfortunate. When famine struck, he fed the poor of Caesarea out of his personal wealth.

Eusebius died in 370, and a struggle developed over the succession. Caesarea was a provincial capital, its prelate a

Now considered "fathers of the church," the three Cappadocian bishops (left to right) Basil the Great, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, did not always see eye-to-eye on matters of ecclesiastical administration.

apparent that even in the east the Arian cause was in sharp decline. In 365, the semi-Arians agreed to sign the Nicene Creed, thereby uniting with Athanasius. The following year, Acacius died, and the "political Arians" began to fragment and dissolve. In 369, a council at Alexandria confirmed the decision of another council at Rome to excommunicate the bishops Valens and Ursacius, who headed the Arian cause in the west. Aetius, leader of the radical Arians known as Anomoeans, died in or about 370, leaving no effective successor.

However, the greatest encouragement for Athanasius came from Cappadocia, the same region that had produced the deplorable George. Basil, a relatively young man, became bishop of Cappadocian Caesarea, and rapidly established

Tourists nowadays explore cells and churches carved from the sandstone formations of Cappadocia in eastern Turkey, first by Christians fleeing persecution, and later by monks as well. The artwork in some of these chapels (above) is remarkably well-preserved.

metropolitan, holding authority over some seventy bishops. Prior to Eusebius, it had been an Arian stronghold. Would the new bishop support the creed or the Arian emperor? Basil wanted the job himself, but it was unseemly to campaign for it. So he pretended illness and appealed urgently to his old friend Gregory to come to his bedside. There followed one of the frequent spats that characterized the trio, though never seriously divided them.

Gregory, by now a monk himself, left Nazianzus immediately to aid his stricken friend. On the road, however, he discovered (a) that his friend was not sick, (b) that his friend wanted to become bishop, and (c) that he wanted Gregory to run his campaign. In disgust, Gregory turned back and told his father what had happened. The father, a keen supporter of Athanasius and the creed, rebuked his son and wrote an appeal to the people of Caesarea, convincing enough to win the election for Basil.

Basil's ministry in Caesarea would produce a bountiful legacy. He developed there a whole complex of buildings known as the Basileiad. It included a hospital, a home for the elderly, an orphanage, a school to train the unskilled, plus chapels and churches, becoming a monastic model that would be imitated across both eastern and western Europe.

To the see of Nyssa, a ramshackle little town not far from Caesarea, he appointed his brother, occasioning another altercation. His brother loved solitude and was highly reluctant to become a bishop anywhere, let alone in dreary Nyssa. Under protest, he took the post anyway. In a similar circumstance, Gregory of Nazianzus was far less acquiescent. When Basil made the miserable little village of Sasima into a diocese (to gain an extra vote for the Nicene side) and coerced Gregory into becoming its bishop, an angry exchange of letters followed, and Gregory never once visited the place.

A year after Basil's election, the emperor Valens, more determined in his Arianism than ever, began a brutal procession through Asia Minor, and a systematic persecution of the creed's supporters. Recalcitrant bishops were ousted from their sees, one of them Gregory of Nyssa, who went into exile.

Basil met the emperor's mission defiantly. He refused communion to the emperor's advance party. When Demosthenes appeared, once the emperor's cook, now his spokesman and strong-arm enforcer, Basil told him to go back to his pots and pans. Next came the prefect Modestus, threatening confiscation, torture and death. Basil replied tartly: "How can I suffer torture since I barely have a body left?" Modestus, astonished, said he'd never before met such defiance. "Perhaps," retorted Basil, "that's because you've never before met a true bishop."

Finally, the emperor Valens himself arrived. Brother Gregory describes the scene. With his courtiers, Valens crashed his way into Basil's cathedral. High drama followed in full costume, the emperor in his robes of state, the bishop in those of a metropolitan. Flanked by their seconds, the two faced one another across the sacred altar, the haunting tones of the Liturgy echoing through the church.

The emperor, suddenly awestruck, fell to his knees, holding out the accustomed imperial offering to the church. Basil refused it. Abashed, the emperor departed. He returned the next day as a penitent. He knelt. Basil threw his stole across the imperial head, and pronounced absolution in the name of Jesus Christ.

The two men began quietly discussing the Nicene issue. It seemed serious. The imperial aides became alarmed. Demosthenes sought, with an ungrammatical interjection, to halt the discussion. "Behold," quipped Basil, "we have a Demosthenes who can't speak Greek." The emperor roared laughing. Basil had won. His defiance was overlooked. Valens later cut Cappadocia in two, halving Basil's territory, but unquestionably Basil had captured the emperor's respect.

As the influence of the three grew, so did the force raised against them. Brother Gregory was accused of misappropriating church funds, Basil of extorting money from a rich widow. Both charges were so absurd that when the prefect Modestus came to take Basil into custody, all Caesarea rose to defend him, and prevented the arrest. Then Basil was attacked theologically, accused of diminishing the role of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. His treatise in response asserting the equality of the Three Persons became a classic.

In 378, when Valens fell in battle and was succeeded by the committed Nicene Theodosius I, radical change began. Basil died in 379, mourned by Christians, Jews and pagans alike, but his friend Gregory was invited to Constantinople by Theodosius to champion the Nicene cause in the Arian heartland. He was escorted into the city by an armed guard and took up residence in a small house. There he wrote the sermons that played a major role in turning opinion.

But not without sharp resistance. He was mocked by his foes for his rural accent and his ascetic's rags. He was stoned in the streets, even in his own cathedral. Nevertheless, five of his orations stand as landmarks of Trinitarian doctrine, listing and countering each Arian argument in turn, and earning him the title "the Theologian." There was another curious incident. A would-be assassin penetrated his little house at night. Encountering his intended victim, he suddenly felt conscience-stricken, fell to his knees and asked Gregory's forgiveness. Gregory acceded, and his would-be assassin became his supporter.

Both Gregorys would preach at the Council of Constantinople in 381, where the Nicene Creed triumphed. Gregory of Nazianzus was made bishop of Constantinople. But the connivance and fury over the appointment of a bishop for Antioch so dismayed him that he resigned within a month and retired to his monastery. There he died in 389. Gregory of Nyssa preached and wrote theological treatises until his death in 395.

A fitting eulogy for all the Cappadocians could be taken from Gregory of Nazianzus's so-called *Last Farewell*: "This was my field," he wrote. "It was small and poor, unworthy not only of God, who has been and is cultivating the whole world . . . but not deserving to be called a field at all." Even so, the harvest was "great and well-eared and fat in the eyes of him who beholdeth hidden things."

One fact, of course, Gregory did not know. That field, meager as it was, would be harvested century after century through all the ages of Christian monasticism. ■

himself as the new and extremely effective champion of the Nicene Creed. Basil's defense of it was rooted in the principles that Athanasius had battled to preserve, and Basil could pursue them with the vigor of youth.

To Basil, the old man became, even while still living, a "father of the church," and Basil urged him to continue working, in whatever time he had left, to restore the church's shattered unity. "The more the disorders of the church increase, the more do we turn toward your perfection," Basil wrote to Athanasius, describing his advice as "safer from error, both by virtue of your age and experience in affairs, and also because you have the guidance of the Spirit beyond other men."

Athanasius had indeed become a champion of unity, steadfastly insisting that anyone who could now ascribe to the Nicene Creed, whatever his previous errors, must be welcomed back as fully Christian. There must be no penalties for

past mistakes. Consequently, people were returning to the Nicene fold in ever-greater numbers. Athanasius's life came to a tranquil end in 373, at his little house in Alexandria, nearly half a century after Nicea, probably on May 2. He "ended his life in a holy old age," writes Gregory of Nazianzus, "and went to keep company with his fathers, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs, who had fought valiantly for the truth, as he had done."

Not everyone viewed Athanasius so fondly, of course, then or later. In some respects, he would remain almost as controversial in the view of future generations as he was in his own. For example, Paul Johnson's *History of Christianity* (New York, 1976) cites against him assorted charges of violence, with no effort to refute them. One document that came to light in 1922 would certainly support Johnson's charge. A letter from a Meletian Christian, the schismatic group that broke away from the Alexandrian church in the previous century, charges Athanasius with either conducting, or at least countenancing, a crackdown in which some were beaten up and others imprisoned. If so, he was clearly capable of violence himself.

This massive statue of Valentinian I, now in Barletta, Italy, is thought to have been lost in a storm while en route from Byzantium. At some time in the Middle Ages, it was discovered on a beach, minus its legs, which have since been restored.

University of Toronto historian Timothy D. Barnes, in his *Athanasius and Constantius* (Cambridge Massachusetts, 1993), goes farther. He accuses Athanasius of being such "a subtle and skillful liar" that for generations he held historians in thrall. On the other hand, Barnes notes, the skeptical Edward Gibbon in his classic anti-Christian polemic, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, unaccountably presents a virtual panegyric on Athanasius. But Athanasius, says Barnes, "could not have cut such an impressive figure had he not been conspicuously lacking in the Christian virtues of meekness and humility." However, the same could be said, and was said, of Jesus himself.

Critics of Athanasius find less to deplore in what he did than in how he did it. He was deeply convinced that in the Arian controversy, the central message of Christianity was under attack. In its defense, he was brazen, fearless, confident, and unimpressed by established authority, and very possibly did not on occasion shrink from violence either.

Such unshakable certainty evokes disgust in some people but admiration in others, which explains why the fault line on Athanasius does not lie along the Catholic-Protestant divide. He is a hero to both Protestants and Catholics, writes his biographer R. Wheeler Bush—although he should have said to *some* Protestants and *some* Catholics. Johnson, who is critical in almost every reference, is Roman Catholic; Bush himself, whose attitude is close to adulation, was an Anglican clergyman. Perhaps the most perceptive summation of Athanasius's accomplishment comes from Mark Noll, professor of history at Wheaton College, Illinois:

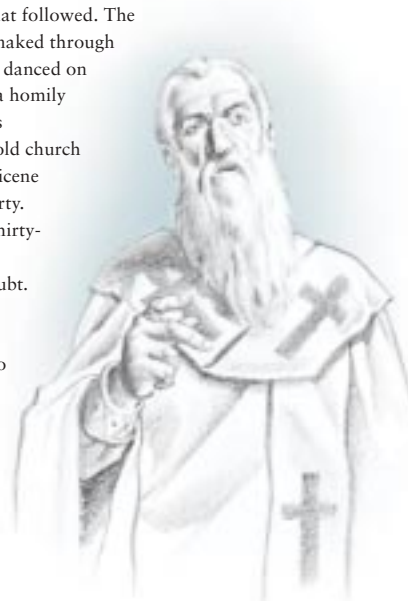
> Athanasius did not consider Arius's arguments as philosophical curiosities. Rather, he viewed them as daggers aimed at the very heart of the Christian message. His memorable treatise, *On the Incarnation* . . . summarized the case he would continue to make for the rest of his life: If Christ were not truly God, he could not bestow life on the repentant, and free them from sin and death. Yet this work of salvation is at the heart of the biblical picture of Christ, and it has anchored the church's life since the beginning. What Athanasius saw clearly was that unless Christ was truly God, humanity would lose the hope that Paul expressed in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God." (From: *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, Grand Rapids, 1997.)

But whatever his virtues and faults, few would deny that Athanasius was the chief barrier to the Arian heresy. When Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and many other Christians recite the Nicene Creed, they can properly thank God for the stubborn, cantankerous and heroic bishop of Alexandria, and his astute realization that the alternative to the Nicene Creed was a downward slide in the content of the Christian faith, with each concession calculated to widen its intellectual appeal, eventually to the point where there remained scarcely anything to believe at all.

Athanasius could die satisfied that Arianism would soon die, too—which it did, though not gently. In fact, his death set off a new round of persecution, first in Alexandria, then elsewhere in the east. To assure the continuity of the Nicene cause in Egypt, he had nominated his longtime supporter Peter to succeed him. But the Arians had already chosen a candidate for the see, and before Peter could be consecrated, they once again invaded St. Theonas Church, with a gang of pagan ruffians who offered the usual displays of obscenity.

The historian Theodoret preserves Peter's account of what followed. The holy women were "insulted, assassinated, violated and led naked through the town." A young man, painted and dressed as a woman, danced on the altar, while another, stark naked, delivered crudities as a homily from the bishop's chair. In the midst of these festivities, says Theodoret, the Arian candidate was led into the venerable old church to be proclaimed bishop. Executions and banishments of Nicene supporters followed, along with confiscation of their property. Peter sought refuge in Rome, just as Athanasius had done thirty-four years earlier.

The source of this latest anti-Nicene fury was never in doubt. The emperor Valens, who early in his reign had survived one usurpation attempt, remained ever alert to the dangers of another. He saw those Christians loyal to Nicea as one of two likely sources. His other and even more acute fear was any whiff of the magic and divination aspect of paganism. Discovering that some pagans at Antioch had concluded from a mystical Delphic rite that the name of the next emperor would begin with *Theo*, and that others by a different magical formula had come to the same conclusion, he unleashed a slaughter of every conceivably eligible candidate unfortunate enough to possess such a name. Ammianus says the purge was conducted "with the utmost ferocity," and the tortures and executions resembled the



ATHANASIUS ON OUR DESTINY

[God] was made man that we might be made God.

What a creed is—and what it is not

'Creeds are not set forth as the conditions for membership in some club,' says a noted Christian dramatist, 'but as statements of fact that are either true or false'

Dorothy L. Sayers, the twentieth-century British detective story writer, classics scholar and Christian dramatist, in an examination of the creeds of the Christian church, describes a misunderstanding of their nature and function, which remains as common today as it was when she wrote this sixty years ago. The essay is taken from her book on the triune nature of human creativity.

Volumes of angry controversy have been poured out about the Christian creeds, under the impression that they represent, not statements of fact, but arbitrary edicts. The conditions of salvation, for instance, are discussed as though they were conditions for membership in some fantastic club like the Red-Headed League. They do not purport to be anything of the kind. Rightly or wrongly, they purport to be necessary conditions based on the facts of human nature.

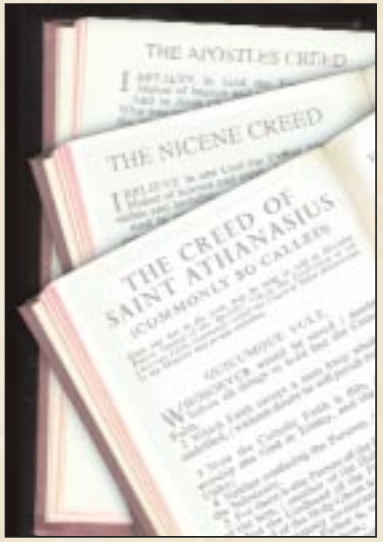
We are accustomed to find conditions attached to human undertakings, some of which are arbitrary and some not. A regulation that allowed a cook to make omelettes only on condition of first putting on a top hat might conceivably be given the force of law, and penalties might be inflicted for disobedience; but the condition would remain arbitrary and irrational. The law that omelettes can be made only on condition that there shall be a preliminary breaking of eggs is one with which we are sadly familiar. The efforts of idealists to make omelettes without observing this condition are foredoomed to failure by the nature of things. The Christian creeds are too frequently assumed to be in the top hat category; this is an error; they belong to the category of egg-breaking.

The proper question to be asked of any creed is not, "Is it pleasant?" but "Is it true?" Christianity has compelled the mind of man, not because it is the most cheering view of man's existence, but because it is truest to the facts. It is unpleasant to be called sinners, and much nicer to think that we all have hearts of gold—but have we? It is agreeable to suppose that the more scientific knowledge we acquire the happier we shall be—but does it look like it? It is encouraging to feel that progress is making us automatically every day and in every way better, and better, and better—but does history support that view? "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men were created equal"—but does the external evidence support this *a priori* assertion? Or does experience rather suggest that man is "very far gone from original righteousness and is of his own nature inclined to evil?"

A creed put forward by authority deserves respect in the measure that we respect the authority's claim to be a judge of truth. If the creed and the authority alike are conceived as being arbitrary, capricious and irrational, we shall continue in a state of terror and bewilderment, since we shall never know from one minute to the next what we are supposed to be doing, or why, or what we have to expect. But a creed that can be shown to have its basis in fact inclines us to trust the judgment of the authority; if in this case and in that it turns out to be correct, we may be disposed to think that it is, on the whole, probable that it is correct about everything.

The necessary condition for assessing the value of creeds is that we should fully understand that they claim to be, not idealistic fancies, not arbitrary codes, not abstractions irrelevant to human life and thought, but statements of fact about the universe as we know it. Any witness—however small—to the rationality of a creed assists us to an intelligent apprehension of what it is intended to mean, and enables us to decide whether it is, or is not, as it sets out to be, a witness of universal truth. ■

From *The Mind of the Maker*, by Dorothy L. Sayers, Harper Brace, New York, 1941. Reprinted by permission of the Estate of Dorothy L. Sayers and the Watkins/Loomis Agency.



slaughter of animals. Valens himself so enjoyed these spectacles, Ammianus adds, that he became a connoisseur of torture, and would be visibly saddened when the victim escaped it by dying.

His brother Valentinian had another failing, an uncontrollable temper. On November 17, 375, he became so enraged at what he considered the cocky arrogance of a delegation of barbarians admitted to his presence, that he collapsed in a fit of apoplexy and died before doctors could calm him down. His heirs in the west were two juveniles: his sons Gratian, sixteen, and Valentinian II, four. The effect was to bolster the power of Valens as senior augustus, and the confidence of the phalanx of Arian bishops he had installed throughout the east.

But this power was soon to prove a facade. Led by the skillful Basil and two Cappadocian colleagues (see sidebar, page 60), the rank and file of the Christian church, along with almost all its younger clergy, saw Arianism only as an unworkable attempt to avoid the unavoidable. Either Jesus the Word was substantially and essentially God, or as Augustine was about to declare, he was "not a good man." Arianism and all the other "in-between" expedients could not be rationally, historically or theologically sustained. Valens's successor, whose name incidentally would indeed begin with *Theo*, would before very long call the church into formal council and declare Arianism dead. Only among the barbarian nations would it long survive, and even there it would gradually perish over the next two hundred years.

As for Valens, he too was about to perish, in a battle that many historians view as the greatest catastrophe ever suffered by the army of the Roman Empire. ■

Athanasius was very much an Alexandrian, fiercely dedicated to his flock in that city, as well as to the things he held to be true. In his stained glass window at St. Athanasius Episcopal Church, Brunswick, Georgia, artist Jon Erickson encapsulates the saint's life. Athanasius stands on a Nile riverboat, recalling the many times he fled along that river. The triangular sail is a figure of the doctrine of the Trinity he so tenaciously upheld. The dove on his stole symbolizes the Holy Spirit, who inspired his teaching.

Mass exodus to the wilderness

Stories of Anthony's recurrent battles with the devil draw men to follow him, first as hermits, then in communities, and the monastic ideal spreads far

It was not easy to surprise, astonish or even mildly impress the citizenry of Alexandria; their appetite for thrill was distinctly jaded. Riots were commonplace there, big fires were a constant problem, hideous plague was not infrequent, public torture and death by crucifixion were regular spectacles. Alexandria had seen it all, again and again. Yet on this day, probably in the year 311, it was to see something definitely novel.

A crowd, mostly Christians, had assembled at the docks along the harbor known as the Kibotos. A river vessel from up the Nile, fitted with sails but now under oar, threaded its way among the triremes, galleys and feluccas riding at anchor, then eased gently toward the jetty. Standing serenely among the grain bags piled high upon it was a curious assembly of about a dozen men, skeletal but sinewy, skin burnt black, barefoot, dressed in ragged woolen cloaks. Keen-eyed and cheerful, they were chanting the words of a song:

> Behold how good and joyful a thing it is
>
> For brothers to dwell together in unity. . . .

Although few of the onlookers had seen them before, they recognized them as the strange individuals who had abandoned ordinary life for a solitary existence in that least hospitable of all habitats, the desert. There, they were said to live alone in barren caves, tombs, ancient ruins and hovels, subsisting on dates, dry bread and practically undrinkable water. They had no physical comforts, they never even washed themselves, and all the while they wrestled against demons that attacked them from within and without. Not everyone who tried it could endure this life; many a hopeful ascetic gave up and went home. As for those who triumphed, they were rarely seen again; they lived and died in the wilderness.

Very occasionally they left their hermitages, however, and came together to sing praises to God. "Behold how good and joyful" was their favorite chant, and if any of the Christians on the dock spoke Coptic, the language of backcountry Egypt, they would have recognized the opening verse of Psalm 133. Today, these eccentrics had broken their self-imposed exile and come to the great city for a very special reason. The worst persecution in the history of Christianity was under way, and they were here, they said, to comfort those who would suffer martyrdom, and if they should be so favored, to suffer martyrdom themselves.

The onlookers were particularly eager to greet one man, whose reputation had preceded him. "Anthony! Anthony! Anthony!" they shouted when the vessel neared the dock, and one of the travelers raised his hand as though in a blessing. Anthony of the Desert, he was called. He was said to have lived ten years in an empty tomb, and twenty more walled in one room of an ancient fort. Thence he had emerged some five years ago to instruct and strengthen those who kept coming to the desert seeking to follow his example. And now he was here in Alexandria for all to see.

What the enthusiasts on the dock could scarcely realize, however, was that this man was developing a religious vocation, which over the next twelve hundred years, would be central to the worldwide propagation of Christianity. For Anthony of the Desert goes down in history as the first Christian monk, and the men with him were among his earliest followers. He was not the first to adopt a desert life of contemplation; others preceded him there. But it was he who first came to public attention, who enthralled the Christians of Alexandria, and who was to inspire their patriarch, Athanasius, to write the biography of Anthony.

Almost everything known about Anthony is based on Athanasius's vivid, but spare, *Life of Anthony*. Yet for untold generations, his story would inspire young people throughout the Christian world. It has captivated artists like Hieronymus Bosch, writers like Gustav Flaubert, and later biographers like Catholic academic and essayist Henri Queffélec, recipient of the French Academy's 1958 Grand Prize in Literature. In the introduction to his *Saint Anthony of the Desert* (New York, 1954), Queffélec explains his aim: to write as accurate a book as possible, and where necessary, to offer his speculations as such.

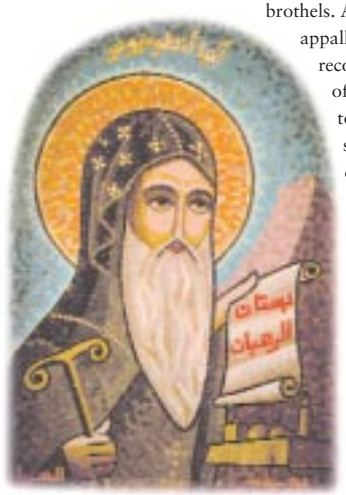
Some of the vivid details of Anthony's momentous visit to Alexandria, for instance, although not the basic facts, fall into the latter category. The monks disembarked that day, and were soon confronted by the city's belligerent downtown hoodlums, who jeeringly surrounded them, and threatened to beat them to death. Could this, they wondered, be the martyrdom they coveted? It certainly seemed possible. Go ahead, cried the monks, by all means go ahead—they would truly be grateful! So the

In a scene substantially unchanged in two thousand years, a monk in search of a solitary place for prayer and contemplation climbs a hill in the parched desert of modern Jordan.

hoodlums abandoned them as crazies.

But the crowd was enraptured. The monks then marched to the jails in search of Christians imprisoned in the current Galerian persecution, in order to bow before them. Encouraging them to hold fast to the faith, even to death and the glory that lies beyond, the monks accompanied them to their executions. Afterwards, the monks gathered up their bodies like treasure and conducted their funerals in awestruck reverence, as befits the entry into paradise of great saints.

Anthony and his monks then proceeded to launch an evangelical mission in the city, attracting hundreds of admirers. They went everywhere—to the beauty parlors, the philosophic salons, the homes of high officials, the brothels. Although at first people were appalled by them, many came to recognize the spiritual emptiness of their own lives in contrast to the material poverty and spiritual wealth of these confidently joyous men. Officialdom, dismissing them at first as absurd, began to regard them as dangerous to the public peace. The crowds were growing too large, and there was talk of other young men, and even women, following these fellows back into the desert. So the order came down: They must leave the city.



The Monastery of St. Bishoi in Egypt enshrines this Coptic icon of Anthony the Great. A disciple of Macarius of Egypt, another pioneer of communal monasticism, Bishoi (or Paisius) also greatly admired Anthony. He took to the desert with his followers late in Anthony's life.

Instead, writes Queffélec, Anthony did something he had never done before. He washed his woolen cloak, which turned it brilliant white. Then he stood calmly on one of Alexandria's main streets, surrounded by a hushed crowd, and waited for the prefect and guard to pass. That official, ordering his litter bearers to pause, stared at this white-cloaked man with the beatifically tranquil face, and apparently decided that no purpose would be served by arresting and executing him. It might even set off yet another riot. So he went on his way. Soon afterward, so did the monks, back to the desert—but they were drawn to it, not driven. There they knew they would always find God, and there was home.

The story of Anthony, as many Alexandrians knew, had begun some thirty years earlier, in the village church at Heracleopolis. One Sunday, he was powerfully affected by the appointed Scripture reading, Jesus' injunction to the rich young ruler in the nineteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Pondering deeply on this, Anthony concluded that he must take it literally.

By the standards of the grain-growing farmers of the Nile Delta, Anthony himself was rich, young, and the ruler of a sizable property. He was in his early twenties. His parents, both Christian, were dead, and he had inherited the estate they spent a lifetime creating, along with responsibility for their only other child, his younger sister. His father, typical of the rural Coptic Christians, distrusted the Greek culture of Alexandria, and had therefore safeguarded his son against book learning. Hence, Anthony could neither read nor write, but he had memorized vast passages of the Bible.

Persuaded that Jesus' words were directed squarely at him, he sold the farm, the house and the furniture, and placed his sister in the care of some holy women, friends of his family. Thus far, he was satisfied; he had obeyed the Lord's command. But now what? What should he do next? He recalled that an aged recluse, a holy man, lived nearby in the borderland between the Nile Delta and the desert. This individual, according to Athanasius's biography, agreed to take him on, and his instruction was explicit. In order to become one of Jesus' spiritual "athletes," Anthony must closely watch and imitate him, the holy hermit, as his mentor.

He sold his house and farm and placed his sister in the care of holy women.

The recluse earned a meager living by weaving baskets and carpets, so Anthony did, too. When the old man sang psalms, Anthony sang along. Sometimes his mentor would set a time for their meal of bread and dates and then ignore it, or he would precede a meal with a seemingly endless prayer, or eat only half the meal. Anthony never protested, and always did likewise. The old man would wake up at intervals in the night to chant a psalm eight or nine times over; Anthony accompanied him. Each time, it seemed, he passed a sort of test. Finally, his master pronounced him an "athlete," and they parted. Anthony would use the same syllabus on those who followed him in the years to come.

For a time, he lived in a small hut he built in the garden of his former home, later moving to a more distant location. He did not beg. He made his mats and baskets, leaving his hut from time to time to sell them, to buy a supply of bread, and to give anything left over to the poor. Visiting the other ascetics in the vicinity of his village, he discovered they all had individual specialties. One labored long to achieve, and overcome, exhaustion. Another specialized in charity, another sought to be endlessly joyful, still another studied long into the night.

Anthony found himself trying to outdo them all, each in his individual pursuit, until he realized he was acting out of envy, and also falling into pride, the worst of sins. Then he began to hear voices, urging him to abandon his strange quest and return to his village, to serve Christ in more practical ways. As soon as he fought off these temptations, the attack shifted. Was he in fact refusing to go home because he was too proud to admit defeat? Would not capitulation represent true humility? These suggestions he also rejected.

Then his imagination took fire, and lust assailed him. He saw himself as a young soldier: brawling, drunken, abandoned to sensual pleasure. By fasting, prayer and meditation, he was able to defeat these attacks as well, bringing his imagination under control, but not before there appeared to him in his hut a little black boy, who described himself as the spirit of fornication. Recounting in seductive detail his past conquests, the boy wanted to

1

2

3

The account of the temptations suffered by Anthony in his desert isolation proved a rich source of inspiration for artists from his own time to the present. (1) In one of the best-known, now at the Prado in Madrid, Hieronymus Bosch (late fifteenth century) presents a wonderfully bizarre interpretation of this spiritual battle. (2) Bosch's imagination might well have been fired by a slightly earlier work by Schongauer, in the Fondazione Magnani (Rocca, Italy). And while Domenico Morelli's late nineteenth-century version of the temptation (3) notably lacks visible monsters, it is no less faithful to Anthony's account (Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Rome).

know whether Anthony realized what delights he was missing, but when Anthony laughed at him, the creature departed. After that, he was beset by wanderlust, tempting him out of his hut. No, he decided, the place for a hermit is his hermitage, and one more temptation was defeated.

Finally came the worst assault of all. Other recluses had warned him about this, describing it with horror, as a dread assault on the very citadel of the soul. In English it is called "acedia," from a Greek word meaning negligence or indifference. But the hermits, and the monks who would follow them through the Middle Ages, understood acedia as a far more insidious thing than mere laziness. They experienced it as a dreary, restless, debilitating moodiness—an aimless spiritual torpor in which they could focus their minds neither on prayer nor on anything else.

Scores of medieval essays and manuals would be written on acedia, often linking it with the "midday demon" of Psalm 91:6. Later still, ranging far outside monasteries, it would be romantically featured in English novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as "melancholy." And in the twentieth, pernicious as ever, some would say it would acquire new credentials as a psychological condition or chemical imbalance, and would afflict millions under the name "depression."

The ancient Christians who regarded acedia as temptation and sin, however, also realized it had physical as well as spiritual aspects, and prescribed physical as well as spiritual remedies. In the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (a collection of anecdotes and aphorisms attributed to the monks and hermits of Egypt), the recommended antidotes include drinking more water, eating more bread, and taking long walks. And at worst, the fathers acknowledged, the sufferer might have to give up the ascetic life altogether, rather than permanently succumb to loss of faith in prayer and in God.

Anthony was not spared this experience either, of course, and he emerged with a profound conviction that the power of evil is not a blind force. On the contrary, he concluded, it is an intelligent entity, possessed of purposes and objectives—in fact, the being the Bible refers to as the devil. To contend against this entity was an integral part of his vocation as an ascetic, so now he must seek out the devil and confront him.

Not far from his village a high ridge of hills separates the fertile Nile Valley from the desert beyond. For thousands of years, back into the days of the pharaohs, the Egyptians had tunneled tombs in the side of such hills. Each was in effect a room, some tiny and others up to sixty or more feet square, depending on the wealth of the occupant. Tombs of the affluent often featured depictions of the gods: strange creatures with the bodies of men and the heads of dogs, serpents, bulls and jackals.

Somewhere within each lay the remains of its long-dead owner, reduced to dust or mummified and wrapped.[1] In the midst of the hills and among these tombs, Christians said, dwelt the devil and his legions. Anthony selected one for his abode, noting the remains of its ancient owner at the far end. He arranged to have bread delivered

1. The desert hermits were not discernibly disturbed by the macabre features of their habitations. A biography of Anthony by Henri Queffélec recounts how a subsequent disciple, following Anthony's example and occupying another tomb, used the skull of its original occupant as a pillow.

The spirit of Anthony lives on in the stones of Egypt's Coptic monasteries and the faces of present-day monks. Christians seek out men like Father Estaphanos (1) at the Monastery of St. Macarius, for guidance and prayer. The monasteries themselves remain centers for pilgrimage. The architecture of the "Syrian" monastery (Deir as-Suriani) (2), sixth century, evidences a slightly shorter history than many. Behind the walls of St. Anthony's Monastery (3 and 4) are gardens, a mill, a bakery, five churches and a growing population of young monks. However, it is the vast monastery of St. Macarius (5) that carries the greatest prestige in the Coptic Church today. It has been the place of initial residence, consecration and burial of many Alexandrian popes, leaders of Coptic Christianity. Finally, the fourth-century "White Monastery" (6) and its sister "Red Monastery" have been recognized as world monuments now endangered by rising water levels behind the Aswan Dam.

periodically in exchange for his woven rugs and baskets. Then he settled in, praying, meditating and awaiting his adversary.

Eventually there came a night, he told Athanasius, when the devil arrived, accompanied by a troop of demons, who beat him savagely and left him for dead. The man bringing his bread, who happened to arrive next day, found him in a coma, loaded him on his donkey and brought him to the village. Believing him dead, the villagers kept vigil around him (his sister likely among them), but that night he awoke from the coma, and instantly besought his rescuer to return him to his tomb.

Despite the dark and his fears, the man reluctantly did so, while hyenas eerily cried and huge bats flew overhead. He deposited Anthony in his tomb, shut the door on him, and fled the forbidding place. Left alone, Anthony would recount to Athanasius, he cried, "Here I am! Here is Anthony! Come nearer, if thou art the devil!"

Then the ground outside began to tremble, he said. The door burst open, and ravening beasts swarmed into the room: leopards, scorpions, bears, lions and wolves. Bulls bellowed, snakes hissed, jaws snapped. The cacophony seemed to fill the world. Were they trying to scare him away, to make him flee his tomb? Anthony stood his ground and made an astonishing discovery. Not one of the creatures touched him. He suffered terrible pains internally, but his skin was not so much as scratched. It was as though they were leashed and could not reach him. He gained courage. He began taunting them, inviting them to tear him to pieces, which seemed to enrage them to a further pitch of fury.

At last, the noise abruptly stopped. All was silent. The creatures vanished. The tomb seemed to open up, and a light more brilliant than the sun shone into it. Anthony realized that he was now in the presence of Jesus Christ. Why, he wondered, had his Lord not come sooner? "I was there, Anthony," a voice seemed to say. "I was waiting to see your struggles. I saw them, and I will always be there to help you, and I will make your fame known to everyone." And so it was to be.

Precisely how long Anthony had lived in that tomb is not recorded, but it seems to have been at least ten years. Now he took the appearance of Jesus as a signal to move on. Crossing the Nile, he ascended the high hills on its right bank, traveled eastward, and entered the Arabian desert, where he found an abandoned Roman fort. He made his usual arrangements to have bread brought from time to time, says the account, and settled in one of the larger rooms, while a colony of snakes or some other desert reptiles moved out. Nearby, he found water. Compared to the tomb, it was a palace, and here he remained for the next twenty years.

However, he was never alone. Demons were still his constant assailants, Athanasius writes. They would shake the fort's disintegrating walls, wailing dolefully and yelling at him to get out. The desert, they said, belonged to them. He would laugh at them, singing hymns and psalms to taunt them, and there he stubbornly remained, weaving his mats and baskets, praying and communing with God, who protected him.

Increasingly, he had other visitors as well, human ones: the curious, the

devout, and those seeking to follow him. One such party, spending the night outside his cave and hearing hideous cries within, climbed a ladder to peer in through an opening. They saw only Anthony, sitting at rest. The noise, he assured them, was just the demons, which were indeed a great nuisance. But his guests need only bless themselves with the sign of the cross, and they would be safe. They did, and they were.

On another occasion, visitors heard Anthony chanting the words of Psalm 68 at the demons in the darkness of his cave: "Let God arise. Let his enemies be scattered. Let them that hate him flee before his face. As smoke vanishes, so let them vanish. As wax melts before the face of the fire, so let the sinners perish before the face of God." (This same chant, accompanied by the lighting of candles one to another throughout the congregation, ushers in Pascha [Easter] in the ancient Liturgy of the Orthodox Church.)

As the years passed, human visitors became ever more numerous. Many opted for the ascetic life and settled in the vicinity, consulting with Anthony whenever they could, and at length there came a day when he actually emerged from his refuge. For years, he had rarely been seen except through the openings in the walls, and people expected an emaciated form, shriveled, hollow-eyed and spectral. Instead, they beheld a vigorous man in his mid-fifties, lithe, muscular, fully alert, and persuaded that Christ now wanted him to counsel and befriend these crowds of newcomers to the ascetic life.

He took to walking from one little lodging to another, and periodically traveled to the nearby Nile Valley to heal the sick, and in particular to cleanse those believed to be devil-possessed. On one such visit, he met his sister, now a grown woman and a holy virgin, following in the footsteps of the elder brother she revered as a model servant of Christ. But periodically, he returned to his lodging in the fort, to regain in solitude the grace he could always find there.

He was never alone. Wailing demons constantly assailed him and his fort.

As his fame and that of his fellow ascetics spread, Anthony was perceived as the champion of both the rural Copts and the urban Alexandrians. He became Egypt's mystic hero, the rich young ruler who (unlike his biblical counterpart) actually had sold everything and had given it to the poor, who had lived alone with God for thirty years, who had wrestled with demons and won.

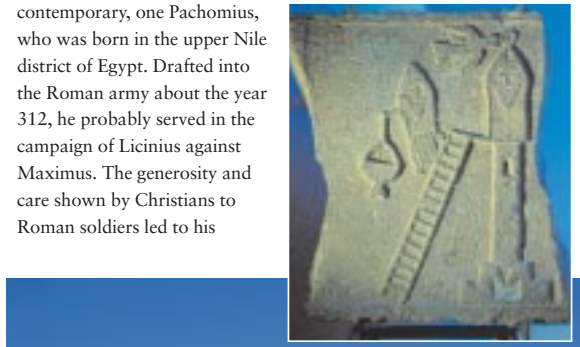
Meanwhile, catastrophic events were occurring in Alexandria. The Diocletian persecution had burst upon the city, followed by the even more brutal regimes of Galerius, Daia and Licinius, whose predations against Christians had spread far up the Nile. (See earlier volume, *By This Sign*, chapter 4.) At some time during this ordeal, the message came to Anthony of the Desert: Go to Alexandria and help your suffering brethren. It was this appeal that brought him and the other "athletes of Jesus" into the city, riding atop the grain bags. A little later, with the death of Daia, the persecution in Alexandria abated.

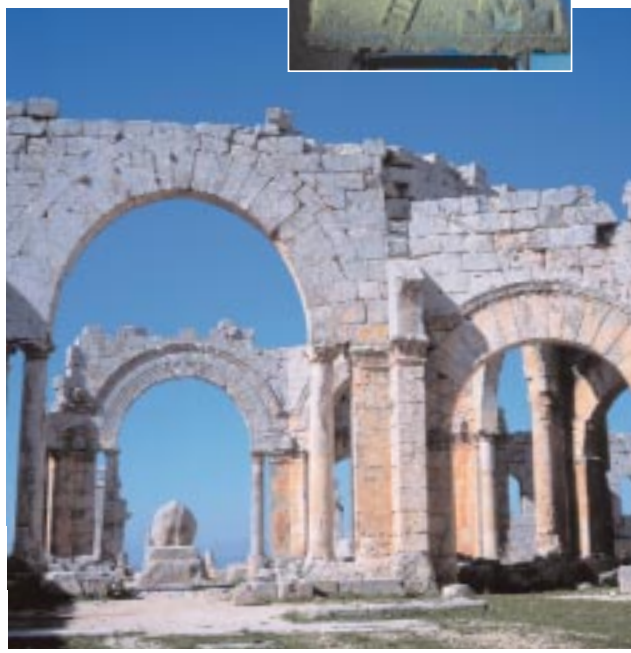
By then, Anthony had established himself at his final abode. He had hitched a ride with an Arab caravan heading east into the true desert, carrying enough bread to stay alive for several months. Three days' journey from the nearest human settlement, the caravan left him at the foot of Mount Qolzum, within sight of the Red Sea. Nearby, he found to his delight an oasis with a cool, clear spring, and built there a hut of stones with a palm-leaf roof, but even here he also sought a hideaway. He scaled the mountain and found, high up on its slope, a crevice through the rock, two feet wide and ten high, leading into a spacious cave.

Sure enough, within months, his neighbors from his previous abode near the fort arrived, insisting that without him they felt bereft of spiritual sustenance. They too built huts, and began growing grain for their bread. Then came visitors, and Queffélec speculates that one of these was a young man named Athanasius, a youth with many earnest questions about God and the ascetic life to which he aspired. Instead, Athanasius would become both patriarch of Alexandria and defender before all the world of the Nicene Creed. But he and Anthony would form a powerful partnership, as the hermits and monks of the desert became Athanasius's unswerving friends and supporters. Meanwhile, Queffélec writes, he left Anthony a gift, a sheepskin cloak, which the hermit accepted and wore.

After Anthony's notable visit to Alexandria, the numbers of his emulators grew still greater. By scores, hundreds and finally thousands, men and women flocked to the wilderness to find God. At first, they sought him alone, as Anthony had, and later in desert communities up the Nile Valley and into the bordering desert, whose members became known as monks. But Anthony, although he has been called the father of the monks, was not the father of the monasteries.

That distinction belongs to a contemporary, one Pachomius, who was born in the upper Nile district of Egypt. Drafted into the Roman army about the year 312, he probably served in the campaign of Licinius against Maximus. The generosity and care shown by Christians to Roman soldiers led to his





Living atop a column, Simeon Stylites attracted thousands to the base of his sixty-foot aerie. Some came to gawk, but many to gain from his wisdom or ask for his prayers—and others, as in the fifth-century relief (below) to honor him with incense. Eventually Simeon descended and founded a monastery (bottom), now in ruins in the Syrian wilderness. The base of his pillar can be seen between the arches.

conversion, and after his discharge, he resolved to pursue the life of a hermit, submitting himself to the guidance of an old man named Palaemon, with whom he worked and prayed night and day near the banks of the Nile.

Many others were doing the same in that vicinity, and Pachomius observed how they cherished solitude, but sometimes liked to come together for common meals or discussion of the pleasures and pains of their chosen life. He perceived that God was calling him to build a large dwelling where men could live in community, but where each would have a "cell" and could be alone with God. Thus was born the concept of monasticism.

Throughout the Middle East, some monks became known for vicious violence.

In numbers that were positively alarming, the hermits poured into Pachomius's monastery at the deserted village of Tabennisi in the Thebaid, the upper Nile region whose capital is Thebes. Another factor, too, may have raised alarming possibilities. These hermits, by definition, were dedicated extremists, and extreme behavior can become deplorable as well as exemplary. For example, at Alexandria in particular, but throughout the Middle East, monks would shortly become almost as noted for vicious violence as pious prayer. (See chapter 7.)

Ex-soldier that he was, Pachomius realized that he must fashion a disciplined "rule of life" for his community. This he did, specifying lines of authority, hours for prayer and work and sleep, times when members could converse and times when they must keep silent, how conflicts between brothers were to be resolved, and so on. He decreed for them simple garb: a tunic and leather belt, with a short cloak and cowl for cold weather. (Later, in the west, distinctive robes would identify, by color and sometimes by cut, the house to which a monk belonged.) Eventually some members were ordained priest, to provide the brethren with the sacraments.

Not every eastern ascetic hastened to a monastery, of course. Many still preferred a strict solitary life, which could take curious (and extreme) forms. Such were the stylites, of whom the first and best known is Simeon Stylites (390–459). Simeon left a Syrian monastery to live atop successively higher pillars, reportedly beginning quite low and reaching sixty feet by the time he died. There he spent his hours in adoration of God, prayerful intercession, theological correspondence, and discourse with the many pilgrims down below, who were attracted by this novel austerity. Simeon became, says *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, a notably effective evangelist and defender of Chalcedonian orthodoxy. He also inspired imitators.

But monasticism was the way of the future, and the "Rule of Pachomius" became the basis for regulations governing monasteries in both east and west. Meanwhile, so rapidly did the Tabennisi membership grow, that Pachomius had to start a second community and then a third. Before he died in 346, according to contemporary accounts, he had opened ten, and two more for women, with a total of some seven thousand members.[2] Scores of similar institutions appeared throughout the Nile Valley and adjoining drylands, and the movement spread to the Syrian Desert as well. They operated farms to feed their members, manufactured wares for public sale, and some monks continued in the monastery the trades they had learned before they had joined. "How good and joyful a thing it is," they sang, "for brothers to dwell together in unity."

If the monastic phenomenon is virtually incomprehensible to the twenty-first-century mind, this is partly because of the greatly differing conditions of that time. It grew and spread during the decline of the imperial economy, when high taxes and extreme poverty had reduced many people to misery. Significantly, the word "anchorite," a synonym for hermit, originally meant simply "a person living apart," a situation that increasingly included peasants fleeing their homes to escape taxes. More significant yet, when state persecution of Christians ended, the ascetic life was eagerly embraced by people who craved deep commitment to Jesus Christ as a substitute for martyrdom.

Meanwhile, Anthony's renown spread all the way to Constantinople. Even the emperor Constantine the Great had written him to seek spiritual advice, and thousands of ascetics regarded him as their spiritual father. When his death approached, monks from all over the desert came to wish him farewell. His last act, Queffélec writes, was to send Athanasius the sheepskin cloak, now in tatters—returning it, he explained, to its original owner. He asked the two monks who cared for him in his last years to hide his body, lest any seek to preserve it in the old Egyptian fashion. He died in 356 at Mount Qolzum, where the Coptic Monastery of St. Anthony stands to this day. Most historians agree he was 105 years old. ■

Anthony inspired a host of others to follow him into the desert or its equivalent, be it located in Russia, Greece, Ireland, France or as above, in the Judean wilderness. The monastery of St. George in Israel, built in crusader times, was located to benefit from the same qualities Anthony sought: harshness, quiet, solitude.

2. The word "monk" probably derives from the Greek *monachos* (a solitary) and the related word *monos* (alone, single). It generally signifies men living under vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in enclosed religious communities, who do not take up active outside ministries. Comparable women ascetics were referred to as "holy virgins" in Anthony's day; the later term "nun" derives from a Latin word meaning an elder.