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*The theological and doxological understanding of  
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Easter with particular reference to the festal letters of  
St. Athanasius of Alexandria*

Walker, Kenneth Donald Fraser

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**KENNETH DONALD FRASER WALKER**

**THE THEOLOGICAL AND DOXOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF  
RESURRECTION**

**AN EXAMINATION OF ITS CENTRALITY WITHIN THE 4TH CENTURY CHRISTIAN  
ORTHODOX UNDERSTANDING OF EASTER WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO  
THE FESTAL LETTERS OF ST. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA.**

**ABSTRACT OF THESIS**

The Festal Letters of Saint Athanasius were composed in response to a decision by the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. The Council of Bishops assembled primarily to confront the teachings of Arianism, which had questioned the Nature and Person of Jesus Christ. But another problem that the Council of Nicaea faced related to the celebration of Easter. For some time the Church had become divided about the proper observance not only of Easter itself, but also the Lenten Season and the post-Easter period leading to Pentecost. The Council deputed to the Bishopric of Alexandria the task of computing the correct dates for Easter to ensure unity of theological belief and doxological expression. While the practice of composing pastoral letters had already been established in Alexandria, Athanasius continued to notify the Church concerning Easter by sending Festal Letters throughout his entire period in office.

In the first instance, we shall examine the historical background to these Pastoral Epistles. The theme of resurrection is then investigated in relation to three of Athanasius' main works – *Contra Gentes*, *De Incarnatione* and *Contra Arianos* (I – III). The third chapter particularises the concept of resurrection and the manner in which Athanasius perceives it within the Festal Letters themselves. This is complemented by an analysis of the doxological significance of resurrection within worship and especially Eucharistic practice. Chapter Five expresses the main theological realities that formed the foundation of Athanasius' soteriological beliefs. Central to these are the nature of the *homoousion* and the saving vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ. The sixth chapter concludes appropriately with a study of immortality in relation to body and soul.



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**KENNETH DONALD FRASER WALKER**

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM  
DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY**

**AUGUST 2000**



19 SEP 2001



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**KENNETH D.F. WALKER**

**AUGUST 2000**

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**AUGUST 2000**



## CHAPTER I

### THE HISTORICITY OF THE FESTAL LETTERS

#### I.1. General Introduction

In his encyclical entitled *Mediator Dei*, issued towards the end of 1947, Pope Pius XII extolled the virtue, if not the necessity, of rediscovering the theological and doxological foundations which have continually underpinned the doctrine and worship of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. These ecclesiastical corner-stones to her life and faith, as Athanasius sought to remind the Church in the Fourth Century, were Christological in nature and expression and had been set in place by the apostles to express the mind and spirit of the Church as she sought to affirm the redemptive power of God in and through His incarnate Son Jesus Christ. More precisely, when confronted by the problematic teachings of Arianism which sought to emphasise the creaturely side of Christ's nature, the Catholic Church was compelled to affirm the full divinity of Christ and the consubstantial relationship between the Father and the Son. Accordingly, these theological and doxological pointers stand as soteriological foundations for the established truths and doctrinal traditions of orthodoxy. Grounded upon this apostolic tradition the Church was called to express in the fullest way possible her Christocentric belief and worship. These areas of the Church's witness, Athanasius insisted, must remain true to scriptural tradition and reflect the Gospel light of resurrection through the One revelation of God's Nature and Being in and through Jesus Christ the Son who was of one substance with the Father in the unity of the One Spirit.

"Assuredly," the 1947 encyclical stated, "it is a wise and most laudable thing to return in spirit and affection to the sources of the sacred liturgy. For research in this field of study, by tracing it back to its origins, contributes valuable assistance toward a more thorough and careful investigation of the significance of feast-days,

and of the meaning of the texts and sacred ceremonies employed on their occasion." <sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this thesis will be to explore the Festal Letters of St. Athanasius the Great and uncover the specific tenor of the Alexandrian bishop's understanding concerning the nature of Christ's resurrection. This exploration will seek to underline the distinctive non-dualistic theological stance and doxological import which lay at the heart of Athanasian Christology. Over against this, we shall draw attention to the propositions to which Arius adhered, not least the Arian hypotheses as they vehemently denied the divinity of Christ. In particular, throughout the teachings of what Athanasius referred to as the "heathen" or "pagan" protagonists, we shall observe the influence on their teachings of Hellenistic dualism which was perceived by Athanasius as the major stumbling-block to theological understanding.

From the earliest times within the historico-theological development of the Christian Faith, the Church has found herself engaged in fierce controversies as she endeavoured strenuously to clarify, re-affirm and re-establish the very grounds of Christian Belief. Such was the situation during the third and fourth centuries, when deep theological ferment threatened the unity of the Church as a result of the teachings of Arius and his followers. What did Arian teaching espouse as it challenged the accepted beliefs of orthodoxy? At the heart of the matter lay a deep-seated controversy in which Arius questioned the nature and unity of the Godhead by denying the divinity of Christ as the eternal Son or Logos of God. Through affirming the impossibility that the Son could ever have possessed a divine nature, Arius was effectively separating the nature and person of the Son from the nature and person of the Father. As a direct consequence, the Arian position logically asserted that no proper relationship of nature or being existed between the Father and the Son: the

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<sup>1</sup>. Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, Nov 20th, 1947. Vatican Library translation (N.C.W.C. pamphlet), par 62.  
Vide Josef A. Jungmann, S.J. *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great*: Translated by Francis A. Brunner, C.S.S.R. *Liturgical Studies*: University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1977.

two remained separate. Arius, while able to accept fully the fact that God as Father was divine in nature, was compelled to argue that in the Arian scheme of things, Jesus Christ as the eternal Son or Logos could only be creaturely in nature. How was it possible, Arius argued, for the Son to acquire a divine nature? Only God was divine and so the Son could belong only to the creaturely side of existence.

In this way it soon became clear that Arian teachings posed a threat to understanding the Christological nature of the incarnation. Furthermore, by affirming the creaturely nature of the Logos, we might easily adduce that Arian belief, while not denying the Resurrection, nevertheless posed sufficient argument as to undermine the divine nature of the Resurrection. Would it have been possible for the resurrection to have taken place had the nature of the Son been creaturely purely and simply and empty of divine nature? If, as we surmise, the Arians did not deny the Resurrection, in what sense could Jesus Christ, possessing only a creaturely nature according to Arius, be raised from the dead? In addition, this heretical threat to the unity of the Church's incarnational belief introduced misconceptions about the nature of redemption through Incarnation, Resurrection and Atonement. How was it possible, for example, that Jesus Christ could have brought about salvation for the world as a mere creature, without in any way being of the same nature as God from whom salvation flows? In the mind of Athanasius, we believe, Resurrection demonstrated the heart and purpose of God behind Incarnation and Atonement. By denying Christ's divinity, it seems clear to us that Arianism immediately forfeited a credible soteriological foundation for its teachings.

Accordingly, it became the determined task of Orthodoxy to re-affirm the Person and Nature of Jesus Christ in their saving relationship with the Person and Being of God. Furthermore, through the Credal statements of its ecumenical councils, the Church set about reaffirming the Trinitarian foundation on which apostolic faith and doctrine had been constructed.

Through the latter, as Athanasius so strongly affirmed, the very mind of the

Church must centre upon belief founded in and reflective of scriptural truth. Stemming from this scriptural and apostolic epistemology, the theological and doxological nature of belief, in order for it to be true to the nature of God, must be seen in accordance with the nature of God's self-giving and saving grace. It is this soteriological emphasis upon the divine economy of salvation, which Athanasius was so fervent in portraying throughout the Festal Letters. Indeed, as we shall endeavour to hypothesise, the Bishop of Alexandria regarded the Festal Letters as being much more than simply proclamatory vehicles for announcing to the Church the forthcoming Easter season. Quite clearly, we would propose, Athanasius employed the Festal Epistles as necessary expository tools for reaffirming the Church's theology of Resurrection in terms of the saving act of atonement between God and Man brought about through incarnational love and soteriological power. In examining this theme we shall see how Athanasius concentrated the mind of the Church upon the truth and necessity of resurrection for the life of Man as well as for the eschatological hope of eternal life.

But what was the historical background that prompted Athanasius to set out on this theological crusade? The primary reason can be seen against the rise of Arianism and the theological stance with which it confronted the orthodox doctrine of the Church.

## **I.2. The Council of Nicaea - Orthodoxy and Heresy.**

In the year 325, the Great Ecumenical Council of Nicaea was summoned by the Emperor Constantine to confront the Arian cause:

"That there is nothing more honourable in my sight than the fear of God, is, I believe, manifest to every man. Now because it was agreed formally that the Synod of Bishops should meet at Ancyra of Galatia, it hath seemed to us on many accounts that it would be well for a Synod to assemble at Nicaea, a city of Bithynia, both

because the Bishops from Italy and the rest of the countries of Europe are coming, and because of the excellent temperature of the air, and in order that I may be present as a spectator and participator in those things which will be done. Wherefore I signify to you, my beloved brethren, that all of you promptly assemble at the said city, that is at Nicaea. Let every one of you therefore, regarding that which is best, as I before said, be diligent, without delay in anything, speedily to come, that he may be in his own person present as a spectator of those things, which will be done by the same. God be with you by beloved brethren." <sup>2</sup>

The primary intention of this Council of Bishops was to discuss the content of Arius' statements and refute their heretical tendencies. With reference to Scripture and Tradition, the Council sought, successfully in the end, to denounce them as contrary to apostolic teaching and, therefore, as offensive towards the true catholicity of the Church.

The doctrinal task of the Nicene Council, in the first instance, but not without recourse to fierce theological dispute, re-established the orthodox Trinitarian faith of the Church and brought it to fulfilment in Credal form. But there was a second remit that the Fathers of Nicaea accepted - the final and proper establishing of the date of Easter together with the call to commemorate the festal season at the due times. Through the regular observation of events surrounding Easter, the hope was that the Church would be brought into a unity of theological and doxological expression that was based not upon creaturely or phenomenological understanding, but upon the restating of Christological truth that was bound up in the incarnation and became fulfilled in resurrection glory.

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<sup>2</sup> B.H. Cowper, *Syriac Miscellanies*, pp.5-6 quoted by J. Stevenson *A New Eusebius*. p.358. Para.299. Syriac Text with Greek version by E. Schwartz in *Opitz Urkunde* 20, p.41-42.

### **I. 3. Commemoration of the Easter Season.**

While faced with the primary theological controversy of Arianism which posed such a divisive threat to the unified relationship in Nature and Being between the Son and the Father, the Ecumenical Council directed its attention to this second, but related, remit. It is not difficult to make the observation that for Athanasius at any rate, both questions were related through important theological considerations. Central to the understanding of Easter lay the understanding of resurrection, the reality of which reflected the notion of divine power in raising Christ from the dead. Since Arius denied the divine nature of Christ, he thereby denied any proper relationship between the divine nature of God and the (purely human) nature of the Son. Any schismatic approach concerning the Nature and Being of God automatically reflected an epistemological division concerning the Nature and Being of Jesus Christ, contrary to the voice of orthodoxy which proclaimed belief in the unity of the Trinity and affirmed that the Son is of the same Being as the Father. Consequently, any such schismatic misinterpretative statements by Arians or any other heretical group denied a logical and scriptural, not to mention theological, understanding of the Resurrection. For if the incarnate Person of Christ is divided or his nature reduced to that of a creature only, then the atoning Nature and redemptive purpose of his Resurrection will be undermined if not negated.

On the matter of the Easter commemoration, the Fathers of Nicaea, who were fully cognisant of the astronomical learning within the School of Alexandria, in seeking to establish a unitary resolve throughout the Church and avoid confusion as to the precise date of celebration, agreed to depute to the Bishopric of Alexandria the task of computing and announcing in the early part of each year, the date for the celebration of Easter. Thus the Council declared to the Church in Alexandria and the See in which were included Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis:

"We bring you good news relative to unity of judgement on the subject of the

most holy feast of Easter; for this point also has been happily settled through your prayers: so that all the brethren in the East who have heretofore kept this festival when the Jews did, will henceforth conform to the Romans, to you and us all who from the earliest time have observed our period of celebrating Easter."<sup>3</sup>

J. Stevenson<sup>4</sup> points out that the question relating to the subject of Easter was contained in a letter dispatched by Constantine to all the Churches.<sup>5</sup> Apparently the problem was not quite the same as that pertaining to the dispute involving the Quartodecimans. The matter centred on the fact that at Antioch, the Church adopted the Jewish date of 14 Nisan and elected to use Jewish forms of calculation. Towards the end of this chapter we shall return to a more detailed account of the problem involving the observance of the Lenten and Easter seasons when we present an investigation relating to the Passover, the nature of the Fast and the Eucharist. It was at Alexandria, however, that the Egyptian Church established its own methods of calculating the times and seasons for the commemoration of Lent and Easter, leading to Pentecost. The Alexandrian methods were far from being perfect, however, and from time to time led to a discrepancy of as much as one month in the celebration of Easter in both Western and Eastern Churches.

The important decision by the Council of Nicaea that Alexandria should be endowed with the responsibility of determining the due dates of the Lenten season and Easter observance has to be acknowledged. We have already referred to the reputation for knowledge and learning which Alexandria had already gained. Investigation and discovery in the fields of mathematics, physics, astronomy and philosophy had established the Alexandrian reputation for knowledge and erudition. The Church in Alexandria, along with the teachings and traditions of the Catechetical

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<sup>3</sup> The Letter of the Council of Nicaea to the Egyptian Church: J. Stevenson *A New Eusebius*. p.370 Para.302.12 Cf. Socrates, H.E. I.9.1-14; Theodoret, H.E. I. 9. 2-13; Opitz, *Urkunde* 23, pp. 47-51.

<sup>4</sup> J. Stevenson, *supra*. 302.12. p.371.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Eusebius, *Vit..Const.* III.17-18, Socrates, H.E. I.9.32ff., Theodoret, H.E. 10.1ff., Opitz, *Urkunde* 26, pp.54-57.

School, had expanded its own distinction as a centre of theological understanding and academic excellence through the influence of Clement and Origen. That epistemological legacy continued under Alexander and, more especially, through Athanasius. It was not surprising, therefore, that the historicity of the Festal Letters should originate from the importance and high-standing which Alexandria had accrued. For the Fathers who had assembled at Nicaea, while quite clearly their deliberations centred upon matters of doctrinal substance, nevertheless, the question relating to the proper timing and seasonal observance of Easter was also high on the agenda. In his Preface to the Syriac version of the Festal Letters,<sup>6</sup> William Cureton acknowledged that “the question respecting the day on which Easter was to be celebrated” was among “the important matters discussed by the assembled bishops of christendom at the council of Nice.” So the purpose and content of the Festal Letters was far from being of secondary importance. While we may go so far as to suggest that the actual task of calculating the Lenten and Easter seasons was deemed necessary in shepherding the church into a common observance of the periods before and after the Easter day of resurrection, the opportunity was not lost to Athanasius, firstly, in underlining the dynamic reality of the resurrection within the scope of scripture and orthodox belief and, secondly, in affirming the truth of its incarnational redemptive power for which Athanasius argued fiercely over against the Arian cause. Cureton goes on to affirm that at Nicaea - this “first oecumenical council” - the decision was taken “that Easter should be uniformly celebrated upon the first Lord’s day after the Jewish Passover, agreeably to the custom of the Roman and other churches”,<sup>7</sup> and that “the duty of determining accurately the day on which Easter was to be observed for the whole of christendom was (to be) delegated to the patriarch of Alexandria.” Nevertheless, even though the responsibility of this

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<sup>6</sup> W. Cureton, *The Festal Letters of Athanasius*, Discovered In An Ancient Syriac Version, London, 1848. p. xxxv.

<sup>7</sup> Vide the Letter of the Council to the Church of Alexandria in Socrates *Eccles. Hist.* I. Chap.9 An English translation can be found in Cave, *The Life of St. Athanasius*, Section iii. xii.



calendric task belonged solely to the Bishop of Alexandria, the skill and precision in the manner of calculation, as has already been admitted, resulted on occasion in far from accurate results. Indeed, even the bishops of Rome who, it would appear, were far more skilled in working out the requisite dates and times and believed their methods to be far more accurate - even they were not permitted to extend a helping hand to Alexandria. "To him alone (i.e. the patriarch of Alexandria), it appears, this office belonged; nor were the bishops of Rome able to interfere at all in the matter, even although it should be certainly proved that the Alexandrian bishops had made erroneous calculations, and appointed the festival at an improper period."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, among the Roman bishops, frustration added to frustration as they compared the results of their own calculations with those of their Alexandrian counterparts. Their only hope was to appeal to the emperor and "intreat him to admonish the bishop of Alexandria to use more caution in determining the day of Easter, and thus preserve the whole of christendom from falling into error on this head."<sup>9</sup>

As a consequence of the Council's decision regarding the calculation of Easter and its due notification, the very first Festal or paschal Letter was written, not by Athanasius, but by his predecessor in office, Bishop Alexander, on returning to his See after the Council had concluded.<sup>10</sup> Cureton confirms the exact dating: "This was for the forty-fourth year of the era of Diocletian, under the consulship of Januarius and Justus, or A.D. 328, when Easter-day was fixed for the sixteenth of the month Pharmuthi of the Egyptian Calendar, or the fourteenth of April of the Roman."<sup>11</sup> This announcement was to be Alexander's first and only Festal Letter. He departed this life six days later, "on the twenty-second of the same month Pharmuthi," and was succeeded by Athanasius.

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<sup>8</sup> Cureton op. cit. Preface, p. xxxv.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. cf also Leo the Great in his Letter to Bishop Julianus (453 AD) – Leonis Opera, 2 volumes, Rome, 1755, Vol. 2. P. 370.

<sup>10</sup> Cureton, ibid. p. xxxvii.

<sup>11</sup> Cureton, op. cit. Preface, p. xxxvii.

While the Festal Letters remain incomplete in both form and content (a number remain simply as fragments) the majority stand as a fitting commemoration of the theological mind of Athanasius. That theological fact is important to note, for, as we have already suggested, the Festal Letters were not solely vehicles for the transmission of liturgical dates and seasons. The Festal Letters performed an ecumenical task, for they engage in the deepest theological truths which Athanasius imparted to the Churches as he reminded them of their scriptural and apostolic traditions, the Christological centralities of their faith and, principally, the truth of Christ's Resurrection with the eucharistic promise of eternal life. For, bound up with Resurrection, lay the ground of eschatological hope. But what can we say about the nature of the Easter commemoration, as Athanasius perceived it to be?

Surrounding the Easter Festival was a supreme note of joy, faith and encouragement that Athanasius sought to impart to the Church. Linked to the note of thanksgiving, the Letters - apart from those which were absent for certain years - also proposed the times and occasions when fasting was to be appropriate as a preparatory rite leading towards the actual feast day of Easter resurrection. This Alexandrian epistolary tradition will now become the subject of deeper investigation.

#### **I. 4. FESTAL ORIGINS AND TRADITIONS**

##### **I. 4. 1. Epistolary Titles Defined.**

At the outset, we must be aware that the Letters in question were not always described as *Festal*. In pre-Athanasian times we find reference to *Paschal Letters* which, by their very title and nature, made reference to the Jewish Paschal Festival and, subsequently, the Christian Festival of Easter.<sup>12</sup> Eusebius, for example, refers to

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<sup>12</sup> For a fuller discussion cf. *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities* p. 1562 (2 Vols. ed. by William Smith and Samuel Cheetham) London, 1876.

them as *Festal Epistles* (ἐορτάστικαι ἐπιστολαί)<sup>13</sup> or *Festal Writs* (ἐορτάστικαι γράφαι).<sup>14</sup>

At Alexandria these pastoral forms of communication were first delivered as homilies or discourses, but in time transposed into the form of epistles. In essence, the paschal epistles were Letters written by patriarchs and archbishops to the bishops within their jurisdiction. In the more specific aspect of the Bishops of Alexandria, with whom we are more particularly concerned, they were addressed and dispatched to the various geographical dioceses within the See of Alexandria and, indeed, even further afield, to the Bishop of Rome.

#### **I. 4. 2. The Historical Tradition**

We now turn our attention to the history and tradition of the Festal Letters. In what ways did their growing importance influence the theological understanding of the Catholic Church, particularly through the central emphasis, which Athanasius placed on the Resurrection?

The historical background relating to the introduction and tradition of Festal Letters can be traced to the third century AD. It was during the middle of this period that the annual practice was initiated of announcing the start of the Lenten season and the date on which the Easter festival should be celebrated.

While the perception of such a practice may appear simple and straightforward, a number of questions arise which shed further light on the precise nature and content of these “paschalia”. What, for example, was their primary purpose as a literary genre within the established pattern of patriarchal tradition? More specifically, in relation to the Festal Letters of St. Athanasius, how did they come to be discovered? And what was their implied intention in respect of the belief and worship of the Church?

The name of Athanasius has largely, but not entirely, been associated with the

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<sup>13</sup> H.E. VII.20, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. VII.22.

immediate post-Nicene tradition bound up with Festal Letters. Athanasius, however, was not the initiator of this annual observance. That particular distinction had already been assumed by the thirteenth Bishop of Alexandria, Dionysius (247-265 AD).<sup>15</sup> We can easily deduce, therefore, that the ecclesiastical tradition of the Festal Letters had been affirmed for almost a century before Athanasius' own episcopacy commenced. Furthermore, the practice of festal intimation by means of an annual paschal letter was to be continued by Athanasius' Episcopal successors.

But what elements had already been introduced within the pre-Athanasian festal tradition? What particular factors contributed towards the Alexandrian practice that Athanasius spearheaded? And what can we learn of the nature of Athanasius' theological approach, more especially in terms of his understanding of the Resurrection, from an examination of the form and content of his Festal Letters?

While the name of St. Athanasius stands out as the guardian of Fourth Century orthodoxy, the Bishopric of Alexandria, to which Athanasius was appointed in 328 AD had been participating already in the practice of dispatching, almost every year, a festal epistle.<sup>16</sup> This practice exercised a pastoral purpose between bishop and clergy and not least between bishop and the ordinary people. That pastoral intention remained an essential objective within the Athanasian tradition. But what became equally necessary for Athanasius was to re-establish not only the theological unity of the Church, but re-affirm the need for doxological unity also. Both of these objectives we find maintained in the polemical and dogmatic works which Athanasius directed largely against the Arians.

The Fathers of Nicaea were fully aware that the Church's belief in the truth of Easter Resurrection had become subject to division and debate as a result of a

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<sup>15</sup> J. Quasten *Patrology* Vol. 2. p. 108 and Vol. 3. p.52.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. The Letter of the Council of Nicaea to the Egyptian Church (Section 12). Socrates, *H.E.* 1.9. 1-14; Theodoret, *H.E.* 1.9.2-13; Opitz, *Urkunde* 23, pp. 47-51. Also *The Canons of Athanasius* (trans. from both the Arabic and Coptic texts) Canons 16, 30, 31, 57, 62, 66. Cf. also W.A. Hammond *The Definitions of Faith and Canons of Discipline of the Six Ecumenical Councils* pp. 5 & 10. The Synodal Epistle from the Council of Nicaea concerning "our most holy feast of Easter".

difference in emphasis and understanding as to the correct time when Easter should be observed. The Synodal Epistle from the Council of Nicaea referred to the festal commemoration as “our most holy feast of Easter”.<sup>17</sup> As the Fathers understood the problem, the Festival of Christ's Resurrection must not be allowed to become the object of ecclesiastical disunity, nor was it right and proper that the feast should be celebrated on two different occasions. As we have already noted, the Church had become the subject of division as a result of the Paschal Controversy during the 2nd century when official letters were dispatched to restore unity and liturgical practice.

#### **I. 4. 3. Dionysius of Alexandria**

In terms of setting in proper motion the practice and tradition of dispatching Festal Letters or ἐπιστολαί ἑορταστικάι as they were frequently referred to, we return to Dionysius of Alexandria who has acquired the primary virtue in this respect. Normally, the Festal Letters were circulated following Epiphany in order to announce the date of the forthcoming Easter. In addition, they included directives relating to the celebration of the Easter Festival and guidelines for the start of the preparatory fast. The fast, by nature, was held to be contemporaneous with the period of Christ's suffering. It lead through the Lenten Season and Holy Week, including Good Friday and the following Saturday. This period of fasting, in which participants became associated with and incorporated in the death of Christ, acted itself as a necessary rite of inward spiritual readiness for the celebratory Feast of Easter, with its resurrection joy and the subsequent festal period which brought the Church's liturgical practice within the six weeks leading to Pentecost.

The church historian Eusebius has preserved much of the historical accounts. He records that: “Dionysius, in addition to the letters of his that are mentioned, composed at that time also the festal letters which are still extant, in which he gives

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Note 16 supra on The Synodal Epistle from the Council of Nicaea.

utterance to words specially suited to a solemn occasion with reference to the festival of the Pascha. Of these he addressed one to Glavius, another to Domitius and Didymus, in which also he sets forth a canon based on a cycle of eight years, proving that it is not proper to celebrate the festival of the Pascha at any other time than after the vernal equinox.”<sup>18</sup>

Of the festal letters sent out by Dionysius, sadly only a collection of fragments remain; but they serve to indicate that, in addition to their central purpose of directing the mind of the Church towards the proper observing of Lent and Easter with their corresponding identity relating to the Jewish Paschal Festival, they contained matters of detail and theological import referring to the on-going life of the Church. A small fragment from the fourth of these letters of Dionysius, for example, exhorts the Church to “peace”<sup>19</sup> and “goodwill”.<sup>20</sup> From the fragments which have come down, we may note that while they are indeed regarded as being the earliest and truest form of Paschal Letter to survive from the See of Alexandria, prior to Athanasius, there is no indication that they were issued on a regular basis every year, unlike most of those that are Athanasian in origin; nor that succeeding bishops dispatched the same letter to all neighbouring bishoprics. Notwithstanding such caveats, the custom of composing Festal Letters, as thus initiated by Dionysius (in spite of certain reservations in this field to which attention has already been made), was continued up to the ninth century AD, as a firmly established tradition among succeeding Bishops of Alexandria.

In addition to the normal annual Festal Letter, we might also note that a series of Easter Epistles was sent by Dionysius to individuals as well as to Alexandrian presbyters.

(1) To Domitius and Didymus - written before Easter 251 AD from a place of refuge

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<sup>18</sup> H.E. VII, 20. Eusebius appears to have dedicated almost the entire seventh book of his Eccles. Hist. to preserving the writings of Dionysius.

<sup>19</sup> H.E. VII, 20

<sup>20</sup> H.E. VII, 11-23, 24f.

in Libya. The extant fragments refer to the capture, release, and flight of Dionysius.<sup>21</sup>

(2) To Flavius.<sup>22</sup>

(3) To the Presbyters in Alexandria.<sup>23</sup>

(4) To various unnamed persons. According to Eusebius, these letters were sent during the period 258-261 AD.

(5) To the Alexandrians, at the time of the civil war, and after his return from exile, that is, before Easter 262 AD.<sup>24</sup>

(6) To the Egyptian bishop Hierax during the civil war, but later than the preceding date.<sup>25</sup>

(7) To Gallienus, that is probably before Easter 262 AD.<sup>26</sup>

(8) To the Brethren (in Egypt?) at the time of the plague, before Easter 263 AD. Two fragments are given by Eusebius.<sup>27</sup>

(9) To the Brethren in Egypt, after the plague. This was probably the regular Festal Epistle of the year.<sup>28</sup>

(10) A letter to Basilides, bishop of the churches of the Pentapolis,<sup>29</sup> has been preserved in its entirety, through it having been incorporated among the canonical documents of the Greek Church. The contents of the letter deal with the precise time of Christ's resurrection; and, therefore, of the time when the fast of preparation should cease and the paschal festivities should commence.<sup>30</sup>

(11) To the Egyptian Bishop Germanus who had reproached Dionysius for fleeing from persecution.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> H.E. VII. 20.

<sup>22</sup> H.E. VII. 20.

<sup>23</sup> H.E. VII. 21.1.

<sup>24</sup> H.E. VII, 21.1

<sup>25</sup> H.E. 21, 21. 2-10

<sup>26</sup> H.E. VII, 23.4. Dionysius "related much concerning the iniquity of Decius and his successors and then made mention of the peace under Gallienus."

H.E. VII. 22, 12; frags.vii.1,10 and 23.

<sup>27</sup> H.E. VII, 22. 2-6, 7-1.

<sup>28</sup> H.E. VII, 22.11.

<sup>29</sup> H.E. VII.26, 3.

<sup>30</sup> H.E. VII.26, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Eusebius H.E. VI, 40; VII, 11.

(12) To Theotecnus, Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, composed a short time after the death of Origen and written "in memoriam".<sup>32</sup>

(13) To Basilides whose Bishopric included the churches of the Pentapolis. The letter is important in dealing essentially with the exact time of Christ's Resurrection and, therefore, has a direct bearing on the time when the preparatory fast should cease and the Easter paschal festivities commence.<sup>33</sup>

#### I. 4. 4. Peter of Alexandria

In addition to the letters of Dionysius, we find the Alexandrian Tradition of Festal Epistles being maintained in some brief extant fragmentary writings of Peter of Alexandria, Bishop c.300 AD and probably Head of the Catechetical School.<sup>34</sup> His theological treatise (No 5) entitled "On Penance" (περὶ μετάνοιας)<sup>35</sup> was a long and elaborate discourse commonly referred to as the "Canonical Epistle" out of which the Eastern Church has preserved a collection of fourteen canons. The opening passage of the first of them begins: "Since the fourth passover of the persecution is at hand....." This not only helps to date the work to the year 306 AD, but provides firm evidence that it was part of the Easter Letter for that year. Furthermore, the fourteenth canon is followed by one entitled: "From the treatise *ON EASTER* by the same" and deals with fasting on the fourth and the sixth day of the week. From the sixth treatise of Peter entitled "On Easter" (περὶ τοῦ πάσχα),<sup>36</sup> evidence suggests

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<sup>32</sup> Phot., Bibl. God. 232. The letter was recorded by Stephen Gobarus. cf. Bardenhewer Patrology p.156 also Migne PG., X. 1271-1290.

<sup>33</sup> H.E. VII, 26. 3. cf. Bardenhewer supra.

<sup>34</sup> H.E. VII,32.31; VIII,13.7; IX,6.2. Also Jerome Chronicon ad annum 2320 Abrahama, 19 Dioclet.

<sup>35</sup> Written at beginning of 306 A.D. Trans. J.B.H. Hawkins - ANF, VI, 269 - 279.

<sup>36</sup> Eusebius H.E. VII, 32. 6-12 mentions a work of the same name by Anatolius who appears to have been a native of Alexandria, but left the city after the siege of Bruchesium (262 A.D.) in which he distinguished himself.



from the fragment of an Alexandrian Chronicon that Peter dedicated a treatise with that title to a certain Tricenius, who was possibly an Egyptian bishop.<sup>37</sup>

#### I. 4. 5.           The Athanasian Festal Tradition

Athanasius faithfully accepted the task that the Fathers of Nicaea had entrusted to the Church in Alexandria regarding the festival of Easter. The date was calculated with reference not only to lunar calculations but also to solar formulae. Eusebius points out that reference was also made in accordance with the canons of Anatolius.<sup>38</sup> Thus the basis was established upon which due notification was given to the Church as to when Easter should be celebrated, as well as observance of the Lenten fast and the commemoration of the post-Easter period leading to Pentecost. This cosmological foundation was to become the revised tradition, which the bishopric of Alexandria was to promulgate. But it seems to us that Athanasius seized upon the primacy of the festal epistles for an additional but related purpose. It was sufficient and necessary to undertake the basic Nicaean instruction as it related to the date of Easter and its prior intimation or, in the case of some Letters, a simple notification. For Athanasius, however, there was more to it than that. His Festal Letters he intended for the spiritual health of the Church and this, naturally, stemmed from a proper and precisely ordered celebration of Easter Resurrection. In this regard, what was so important for Athanasius was to ensure that the mind of the Church at large was fully cognisant with the significance and truth of the resurrection. This was possible only if the theological standpoint of the Church was sufficiently sound to withstand the heretical teachings, which threatened the

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<sup>37</sup> For further reference and bibliography cf. Editions by P.A. De Lagarde: *Reliquiae iuris eccles. Antiquissimae*. Leipzig, 1856, pp. 63-73. Greek Text: pp. 99-117. Syriac Text: J.B. Pitra: *Iuris eccles. Graecorum historia et monumenta* 1. Rome, 1864, pp. 551-561. English trans. J.B. Hawkins, *ANL* 14; *ANF* 6, 269-279.

<sup>38</sup> Eusebius, *H.E.* 7. 32.14-19.

Church's unity, worship and witness to Christ - Christ who is our Passover, as Athanasius frequently wrote. So our understanding of the Festal Letters must centre in an understanding of Athanasius' own theological thought, and more particularly the ways in which his theology stemmed out of Easter resurrection and Easter resurrection reflected Athanasius' theology.

With this in mind, therefore, we observe that within the epistolary tradition that Athanasius sought to establish, three essential aspects stand out. Each one pertains to the soteriological understanding and doxological nature of the gospel-centred faith handed down by the Apostles and Fathers. Each one Athanasius regarded as crucial in reminding the Church, not only of the true nature of her Christly calling, but also of the content of her kerygmatic vocation of being obedient to Christ and his resurrection. For Athanasius, the Church was called to proclaim, celebrate and manifest the festal truth of Easter in order to be faithful to the redemptive purpose of her incarnational belief. So we find the Festal Letters calling the Church to a three-fold remembrance involving both fast and feast through -

(a) the pre-Easter season of Lent with its characteristic expression of fasting and its identification with the sufferings of Christ. This period of fast reflected two aspects.

- (1) It was seen as a preparation, either for the paschal commemoration or for baptism, notwithstanding the choice of emphasis which some placed upon the paschal observance in relation to Christ's death or in terms of His resurrection.
- (2) It was designed to signify the sadness of the Christian Church during the time when Christ's body lay in the tomb. In this we must note that the suggested emphasis upon a Good Friday fast, extended by 'superposition' to the Saturday.

The length of the pre-Easter or Lenten fast has been associated with forty days. But fasting for forty days was unknown until the 4<sup>th</sup> century. We come

across reference to τεσσαρακοστή in the 5th Canon of Nicaea, but as a season only (the Canon itself deals with the holding of synods). While it is seen as a time of reflection and solemnity, there is no mention of fasting. Elsewhere, in the *Testament of our Lord*, for example,<sup>39</sup> the “forty days of Pascha” are described as a time of vigil and prayer, specially devoted to the preparation of candidates for baptism. But it is not a fast. On the other hand, we find in the *Apostolic Canons*<sup>40</sup> reference to τὴν τεσσαρακοστὴν τοῦ Πάσχα as being a compulsory fast. With regard to the Festal Letters themselves, Duchesne has uncovered something of the development of the fast. On the one hand we read of the *time* of Lent and of the *week* of the fast<sup>41</sup> and of the Passover itself.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand later on we read of the *fast* of Lent<sup>43</sup> and the Holy Week of Pascha,<sup>44</sup> as well as “the fast of forty days”<sup>45</sup> We observe the change in length where the period of fasting was revised from one week to forty days.

- (b) the festal day of Easter and the central importance of the Resurrection to orthodox Christian belief.
- (c) the post-Easter season leading up to Pentecost with its intrinsic outpouring of festal joy and the promise of new life with its eschatological promises for the individual and for the Church.

To understand the nature and purpose of the Festal Letters we require to hold firmly to these three features. Taken separately, each one reflects the faith of the Christian through being identified with the unfolding of divine redemption. Taken together they represent the progressive fulfilment of the saving life of Christ from birth to death and resurrection.

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<sup>39</sup> Testament of our Lord, 2.3.  
<sup>40</sup> *Canons* 68 and 69) c. 400 AD.  
<sup>41</sup> FL1.10; FL2.8; FL3.6; et al.  
<sup>42</sup> FL 20. 2; FL 43.  
<sup>43</sup> FL4.5; FL5.6.  
<sup>44</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>45</sup> FL10.12; FL13.8.

#### I. 4. 6. The Post-Athanasian Festal Tradition

Within the post-Athanasian era, the custom of the Alexandrian bishops of issuing Festal Letters was continued, initially following to the successor of Athanasius, Peter.<sup>46</sup> Timotheus who followed Peter, is said to have continued the task<sup>47</sup> which was then assumed by Theophilus who wrote a minimum of twenty-six<sup>48</sup> Of these, three were preserved in Jerome and were issued in 401 AD, 402 AD and 404 AD and contain an ant-Origenist tendency. The Latin version can be found in Jerome's Epistles 96,<sup>49</sup> 98<sup>50</sup> and 100.<sup>51</sup> Of the first, a collection of fragments with the original Greek remain, together with a remnant of a Coptic version. Of his earliest Paschal Letter written in 386 AD nothing survives except for a quotation from Cosmas Indicopleustes.<sup>52</sup> The third epistle, for 388 AD, is mentioned by Timotheus Aelurus in his refutation of the Chalcedonian doctrine.<sup>53</sup> Some portions also remain of the fifth (for 390 AD), the sixth (for 391 AD) and the tenth (for 395 AD). Several fragments remain of the twenty-first (for 406 AD), the twenty-second (for 407 AD) and an undated excerpt from another. The twenty-sixth (for 411 AD) is referred to in passing by Synesius,<sup>54</sup> while Cassian<sup>55</sup> and Gennadius<sup>56</sup> describe a further Easter circular, which had the intention of arguing against the anthropomorphites who attributed to God a human body.

In Cyril of Alexandria we find the tradition of issuing Festal Letters being

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<sup>46</sup> Cureton op.cit. Preface p. xxxviii refers also to Renaudot, *Historia Patriarcharum Alexandrinorum*, p. 100. Paris, 1713.

<sup>47</sup> Cureton, ibid. Preface pp. xxxviii and xxxix.

<sup>48</sup> Quasten *Patrology* Vol. III. p. 103 ff.

<sup>49</sup> CSEL 55, 159.

<sup>50</sup> CSEL 55, 185.

<sup>51</sup> CSEL 55, 213.

<sup>52</sup> *Top. Christ.* 10.

<sup>53</sup> Quasten *Patrology* Vol. III. p. 103 ff.

<sup>54</sup> Ep. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Collat. X. 2. *longa disputatio, liber enormis.*

Cf. Quasten op. cit. Vol. III. p. 103 ff.

<sup>56</sup> De Vir. Ill. 33: *disputatio longissima.* Cf Quasten supra.

continued faithfully.<sup>57</sup> The annual festal announcement was given in the form of a pastoral letter and indicated the date of Easter and the preceding fast. The editions of Cyril's works contain a list of some twenty-nine Paschal Letters with the title of *Homiliae Paschales*. Composed within the period from 412 to 442 AD, they provide exhortations to fast and abstinence, to vigilance and prayer, to alms giving and works of goodness. Although they contain a number of moral and practical injunctions, the Letters comprise several dogmatic expositions which underline the recent Christological disputations. Homilies 5, 8, 17 and 27, for example, defend the doctrine of the Incarnation against the heretics who denied the eternity of the Son. Homily 12 embraces the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>58</sup>

Cyril uses the Paschal Letters as an opportunity for forthright criticism of both Jews and pagans. He warns Christians against the attitude of mind in which the soul is divided between Christianity and paganism (*dipsychia*) and, as a result, engages in rites relating to both.<sup>59</sup> He inveighs against false deities and their associates<sup>60</sup> and against Jews and their faithlessness.<sup>61</sup> Cyril prepared a Paschal Table covering the years from 403 to 512 AD for the Emperor Theodosius, but it is no longer extant. However, a covering letter survives in an ancient Armenian translation, which was published for the first time by Conybeare in 1907.<sup>62</sup>

The festal tradition and the purpose behind the dispatch of festal letters, as well as the disputed time when they were often sent out is well documented by Cassian whose account while of fifth century origin, is of interest in providing a detached background to fourth century festal activity.

"The Festal Letters were delivered by the Bishop of Alexandria as Homilies, and then put into the form of an Epistle and sent round to all the churches in Egypt;

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<sup>57</sup> Quasten op. cit. Vol. III. p 103 ff.

<sup>58</sup> Quasten op. cit. Vol. III. p. 103 ff.

<sup>59</sup> *Hom.* 12 and 14.

<sup>60</sup> *Hom.* 6 and 9.

<sup>61</sup> *Hom.* 1, 4, 10, 20, 21 and 29.

<sup>62</sup> English trans. by F.C. Conybeare *The Letter to the Emperor Theodosius II*, pp. 215-221.

and, according to some late writers, to the Bishops of all the principal sees, in accordance with a decision of the Council of Nicaea, in order to inform them of the right day on which Easter should be celebrated.”<sup>63</sup>

We now observe the regular practice being established for the composition and dispatch of Festal Letters. We note that the Tradition was inherited by succeeding bishops in office within the Alexandrian Church and that upon each in turn fell the duly-appointed task of making annual intimation, during or after Epiphany, firstly, confirming the start of the Lenten Season and, secondly, of announcing the proposed date on which Easter had been calculated to fall and, thus, when due commemoration of the festal event should begin. We note also that in addition to the stated dates of Lent and Easter, as well as Pentecost, the festal Letters also frequently contained supplementary material for discussion and comment ranging through current theological matters and ecclesiastical concerns to pastoral questions pertaining to doctrine, teaching and the faith as handed down by the apostles. With Athanasius we find that there were included also regular words of encouragement to observe the practice of fasting, to be faithful in alms giving and in receiving the blessed sacraments.

## **I. 5. THE ALEXANDRIAN BACKGROUND TO ATHANASIUS’ CHRISTOLOGY**

### **I. 5. 1. The Influence of Hellenistic Thought**

We turn now to investigate the theological background which influenced the mind of Athanasius. Our examination begins with the philosophical and epistemological traditions of Alexandria and their effect upon the Christian understanding of God. During the second and third centuries AD, Greek culture and

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<sup>63</sup> *Collat. X. Eusebius H.E. VII. 20 and 21.*

cosmological ideologies had already been firmly established within Egyptian culture and religion. Through a natural progression they soon established their influence within the eclectic attractions of Platonic, Gnostic and Philonic thought. With the arrival in Alexandria of the first seeds of Judaeo-Christianity, it was not long before the teachings and traditions of the Church at Alexandria were forced to confront the dualistic conceptualising which so often characterised Hellenistic philosophy. As a result, a syncretistic framework of religion and philosophy began to fuse and create a broad Judaeo-Hellenistic platform for future theological development. It was this epistemological merger which would influence the development of early Alexandrian theological thought. Gradually there arose, on the one hand, a drive towards philosophical exploration and, on the other hand, a growing desire to understand the faith of Judaistic monotheism. But in addition to these two strands of philosophical and religious teaching, the Christian presence in Alexandria sought to underline the truth of theological knowledge in the light of biblical truth in accordance with the scope or *skopos* of scripture and in accordance with the very nature of God Himself through His Self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Over against the syncretism of Greek ideology and the divisive nature of dualistic philosophy, the defenders of orthodoxy, led by St. Athanasius, addressed the mind of the Church to the fundamental question concerning the centrality of Christ in relation to the nature of faith and the need for applying properly defined theological principles, statements and expressions through which to proclaim the unifying truth and scope of scripture. An appeal to rationality and a proper methodological approach was necessary in seeking to comprehend the Being of God. Such a Theocentric level of understanding, it was felt, would bring about fresh clarification on the vexed question relating to the Person of Christ and, especially, his divinity within the hypostatic being of Jesus Christ, as well as with the mediatorial and soteriological aspects of Christ's life on earth. As the Son of God, Jesus was regarded as the One true, unique revelation of the Father; and, in terms of his Being

as the Son or Incarnate Word of God, Christ through his mediatorial activity has brought about a bridging of the gap between Man and God and God and Man through his One indivisible, eternal and unchangeable nature. Thus it was in terms of his divine saving grace as the eternal Son or Word of God that the Creed of Nicaea affirmed Jesus Christ as he who, "for us men and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate, was made man, suffered, and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, and is coming to judge living and dead." <sup>64</sup>

According to Theodoret of Cyrus, the Orthodox Faith has been communicated to us "not only by the Apostles and prophets, but also by those who interpreted their writings - Ignatius, Eustathius, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory, John and other luminaries of the world, and also by the Holy Fathers who before these assembled at Nicaea."<sup>65</sup> That timely reminder by Archbishop Methodios Fouyas (formerly of Thyateira and Great Britain) provides us with a necessary statement of theological importance.<sup>66</sup> It supports the truth that the Great Ecumenical Council of Nicaea provided the Church with a mighty reaffirmation of her faith, not least in the controversial debate surrounding the consubstantial relationship between the Father and the Son which the Church Fathers expressed through the term *homoousios*. Here they found a suitable expression – suitable, that is, as far as the non-Arians were concerned - and one admittedly not found in scripture, but which was generally accepted as the most appropriate theological means of defining as clearly as possible the essential relationship between the Father and the Son.

In this twin task of definition and clarification the *homoousion* sought to underline the essential Oneness of Being between the Father and the Son. As a

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, Documents illustrative of the history of the Church to A.D. 337, (S.P.C.K. London, 1968), p. 366. For a fuller discussion cf. T.F. Torrance *The Trinitarian Faith*, Edinburgh, 1988.

<sup>65</sup> *Epistola LXXXIX ad Florentium*

<sup>66</sup> "The Homoousion" in *The Incarnation*, Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed A.D. 381. Edited by Thomas F. Torrance, The Handsel Press, Edinburgh, 1981, p. 1f.



theological counter-measure to the Arian emphasis upon the creatureliness of the Son, the adjectival form of *homoousios* not only brought expression to the revelatory relationship in which the Father and the Son remain as One; but also, equally powerfully, it ratified the divine nature of Christ. We may quote from Archbishop Methodios: "By the term *homoousios* we affirm without any doubt the divinity of Christ, or, as St Ignatius of Antioch said, that Christ is our God - God incarnate, ὁ ἐν σαρκὶ γενόμενος Θεός.<sup>67</sup>

The central teaching of the Alexandrian Church came to be based wholly and unreservedly upon the acceptance of scriptural truths as they proclaimed, through the evangelical medium of the Gospel, the divine message of eternal salvation in Jesus Christ. This we find reflected as part of the wider Nicene Definition:

"We believe in One God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible: And in One Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Only-begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, Very God from Very God, begotten not made, *One in essence with the Father*, by Whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things in earth; Who for us men and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, was made man, suffered, and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, and cometh to judge quick and dead....."<sup>68</sup>

This biblical foundation gained undiluted expression through the Christological framework that had been handed down within the tradition of the Church since apostolic times. In other words, within the Church at Alexandria and beyond her immediate Episcopal bounds, the truth relating to the Being and Person of Jesus Christ Son of God, One with the Father, was constantly affirmed.

The Church proclaimed, following the Pauline theme, that all things began,

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<sup>67</sup> Torrance, *The Incarnation*, op. cit. p. 13, Note 2. Ephes. 7.  
Cf. Die Apostolischen Väter ed. by Karl Bihlmeyer, J.C.B.Mohr, Tübingen, 1956, p. 84, line 26.

<sup>68</sup> *Epistola Eusebii* - part of The Faith dictated in the Council of Nicaea - Robertson *TNPNF* Vol. IV, p. 75.

continued and ended in Christ: he is "the image of the invisible God; his is the primacy over all created things...and he exists before everything, and all things are held together in him. He is, moreover, the head of the body, the Church. He is its origin, the first to return from the dead, to be in all things alone supreme. For in him the complete Being of God, by God's own choice, came to dwell. Through him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to Himself.....to reconcile all things...through him alone." <sup>69</sup>

Here we are confronted by the Christological emphasis with which Orthodox Christendom reacted to the forces of Arianism. This classical theological development within the Alexandrian Church provides a necessary indicator not only of the theological struggles against Arianism in which Athanasius assumed the primary orthodox role, but also of the pre-Arian circumstances which led to the cult of gnosticism and which itself sought to establish a theoretical and speculative form of theology.

We now turn to an outline of the background that influenced the course of theological thought, particularly through the Greek concept of the two realms of God and man, together with the related question of divine transcendence and divine immanence. Thereafter, we shall profile the theological positions held by two of Athanasius' immediate predecessors at the School of Alexandria, namely Clement and Origen. We feel it is important to remember the theological legacy that each one left upon Alexandrian knowledge which, in turn, contributed to the development of Athanasian epistemology, especially in its struggles with Arianism. Against the latter heresy, as we shall discover, Athanasius directed much of the content of his Festal Letters in affirming true belief in the nature of the resurrection and its saving purpose within incarnational theology.

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Colossians I: 15-20.

### I. 5. 2. Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria has been described as "the first great representative of the church catholic"<sup>70</sup>. It is, accordingly, to the pioneering thought of Clement of Alexandria that we must now direct our attention and examine the epistemological legacy which he would imprint on the Alexandrian Church, as well as upon Christian thought, philosophy and theological understanding throughout the Church.

We have observed how during the latter part of the second Century AD the Church in Alexandria found its teachings meeting headlong with the concepts of Hellenistic philosophy. Alexandrian thought was coming under increasing pressure to be rationalised in terms of a deeper scientific methodology. Faith and doctrinal truths were being subjected to historical examination and philosophical investigation. In the words of Otto Bardenhewer: "History, exegesis, and philosophy put forward their claims as auxiliaries of Christian truth."<sup>71</sup> This growth towards a more precise scientific epistemology was to produce its most profound influence within the Catechetical School of Alexandria where, according to Eusebius,<sup>72</sup> Clement was to succeed his mentor Pantaenus as Head. "Wherever Alexandrian theology penetrated, the picture of Christ has been lastingly influenced by it."<sup>73</sup> Such a statement gives us an immediate insight into the future Christological influence of the Church at Alexandria. Its teaching would gradually develop along both incarnational and soteriological lines: incarnational from the point of view of the Self-revelation of God in and through His Incarnate Son Jesus Christ and soteriological through that divine Act of saving grace by means of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was this twofold inter-relation of divine Being in divine Act and divine Act in divine

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<sup>70</sup> H. Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church* Vols. I and II. (Vol II, p.276.).

<sup>71</sup> O. Bardenhewer, *Patrology* p.126f.

<sup>72</sup> cf. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, op.cit. p. 204. Eusebius records that Demetrius placed the young Origen in charge of instruction. "Origen was in his eighteenth year when he came to preside over the catechetical school....."

<sup>73</sup> A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* p.159.

Being which marked the prelude to the classical theological position of Athanasius in his endeavours against contemporary heresy. Within this theological field of exploration, the doctrines of the Logos and the Incarnation were to assume positions of central importance and influence. In this, Clement was to interpret theology from the point of view of established philosophy as well as from the standpoint of ethical understanding. To this ethico-philosophical approach within Clementine theology, we now turn.

While Clement rose to exert profound influence upon early Christian literature, he is easily distinguishable from his tutors in the fact that, while they concerned themselves with oral instruction, Clement promoted the use of the written response as an epistemological means of attuning the minds of his own students to conceptual understanding and theological formulation.<sup>74</sup> In so doing, Clement endeavoured to build a proper foundation of scientific knowledge (*episteme*) upon which the teachings of the Church could be constructed.<sup>75</sup> The description of Clement as "one of the first to attempt to put Christian theology upon a scientific basis"<sup>76</sup> underlines Clement's diligent desire after biblical and theological truth. Thus, "the rational element in faith requires to be cultivated and trained, if we are to attain clarity of apprehension or accuracy in believing."<sup>77</sup> He considered that philosophy had an important part to play within the divine plan of salvation. Just as the Jews were led to Christ through the Law, so, in like manner, the Gentiles should come to him through philosophy.<sup>78</sup>

For Clement the adoption of philosophy by the Christian was the only way to advance from faith to knowledge - from *pistis* to *gnosis*. Faith he regarded as "a

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<sup>74</sup> *Strom.* I,1,11-14.

<sup>75</sup> For further discussion on the scientific tradition and its background within the School of Alexandria, particularly relating to Clement's *Stromateis*, Cf. T.F.Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* p.216 f.

<sup>76</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Implications of Oikonomia for Knowledge and Speech of God in Early Christian Theology. (Auszug aus OIKONOMIA Heilsgeschichte als Thema der Theologie.* p.22.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. *Strom.* I.1, 8.2; 6,33.1.f.

<sup>78</sup> *Strom* I. 5, 28; cf. VI.17, 159, Cf. Gal.III: 24.

concise knowledge of what is necessary".<sup>79</sup> Science, on the other hand, was "a strong and assured demonstration of those truths that have been accepted by faith".<sup>80</sup> The obtaining of knowledge without philosophy, Clement claimed, was the equivalent of hoping to harvest grapes without looking after the vines.<sup>81</sup>

The influence of Valentinian Gnosticism had become increasingly strong towards the latter part of the second century AD and as the presence of Christianity spread steadily through the populace of Alexandria, the choice for the thinking convert lay in two directions: in simple terms between what was contrary to accepted doctrine and, on the other hand, the form and content of teaching which was generally accepted as true to apostolic tradition. Henry Chadwick described the choice as "between clever, eloquently defended heresy on the one side and a dim, obscurantist orthodoxy on the other."<sup>82</sup> At Alexandria Clement met with a church which was apprehensive, if not hostile, towards, Greek philosophy and pagan literature. "Gnosticism," Chadwick continues, "had made philosophy suspect; and pagan religion so permeated classical literature that it was not easy to disentangle a literary education from an acceptance of pagan values and polytheistic myth."<sup>83</sup>

It was from the point of view of the truth which Clement recognised was contained within Greek philosophy, that he set about extending philosophical support to those who were anxious about the effect of gnosticism upon Christian Faith. Clement saw that philosophy did not necessarily strengthen the side of gnosticism: rather could it offer a method through reasoned argument, for its destruction. "The Gnostics talked much of a higher reason, but did not in fact exercise it."<sup>84</sup>

As far as Clement was concerned, the concept of gnosis presented itself in two distinct types: one was founded on research and learning: the other emerged out

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<sup>79</sup> Bardenhewer, *Patrology* p.134.

<sup>80</sup> *Strom.* VII.10,57.

<sup>81</sup> *Strom.* I. 9, 43.

<sup>82</sup> H. Chadwick, *The Early Church* Vol. I. p. 95f. The Pelican History of the Church.

<sup>83</sup> H. Chadwick *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> H. Chadwick *supra.* p.96.

of speculation and conceptualism. The first was the true form of gnosis. The second was false. Gnosticism generally brought contact with pagan systems of thought: such a philosophical mingling threatened to water down, if not undermine, existing epistemological systems.

H.A. Blair has observed <sup>85</sup> how the influence of gnosticism brought about a hostile reaction as people regarded it with some suspicion. Taking the Four Causes of Aristotle, namely the formal and the efficient, the material and the final, to illustrate his argument as it can be applied within the fields of philosophy and theology today, Blair states that "The term <a physical explanation> has come to include so many indeterminacies that we have allowed ourselves to be persuaded that it is enough to know how things work and not bother ourselves about what they are. We have concentrated on two only of Aristotle's <four causes> - the formal and the efficient - and have shrugged our shoulders at the material and the final (what things are and what they are for). In fact the modern is afraid of the unpredictable, the freedom of the Spirit, the personal element in the universe."

The central aspect in Clement's thinking lay in the doctrine of Creation. Creation led to and was related to Redemption: Redemption emerges out of Creation and thus, through it, fulfils its soteriological role. Clement was attracted to the form of gnosticism that did, in fact, endeavour to see the whole of creation in personal terms. Unlike the speculative and dualistic forms of Gnosticism that Clement rejected, creation was not linked to impersonal forces in nature and inanimate beings, as in Greek conceptualisation. Rather did Clement think in terms of personal being, and more particularly as it came to be manifest in the divine Person of God : "of a God who worked through agents in the heavenly places, free agents who had used their freedom wrongly and caused confusion in the ordered pattern of God's purpose; of other redeeming agents seeking to restore the pattern under the will of God who

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<sup>85</sup> H.A. Blair, *The Kaleidoscope of Truth: Types and Archetypes in Clement of Alexandria*. p.31.

saved by creation and not by destruction, by addition and not by subtraction."<sup>86</sup>

Clement believed that all truth and goodness come from God the Creator of all things. "God had implanted the good seeds of truth in all his rational creatures".<sup>87</sup> In seeking to underline this concept, Clement sought to introduce to his argument the benefits he understood could be imparted from Platonic metaphysics, Stoic ethics and Aristotelian logic. But Clement was also forceful in resisting the Gnostics who scorned the concept of a created order and who regarded matter as being dissociated from God in His creativity.

For the more theological approach to the way in which Clement expressed his understanding of the Nature and Being of God, we must turn more precisely to his writings in the *Stromateis*. There, in Book V, Clement presents an investigation that centres on the concepts of faith and hope. Faith and hope are the means by which the human mind is able to apprehend whatever is by nature invisible to the senses. The use of symbolism occurs frequently in Clement's philosophy: "symbols and enigmas.....hide the truth from the uninitiated."<sup>88</sup> To describe the Being of God either in conceptual terms or in grammatical terminology is not possible. "For the God of the universe, who is above all speech, all thought, and all concepts, can never be committed to writing, being ineffable by his power."<sup>89</sup>

Through Platonic philosophy, Clement recognised both the distinction and epistemological effect which arose as a result of the separation between the two worlds of the κόσμος νοητός and the κόσμος αἰσθητός.<sup>90</sup> In this, he saw that human passions and earthly influence disunited the essential unity in knowledge of God. From these elements man had to free himself in order to achieve the possibility of bridging the gulf that separated the two realms. This meant "an unrepentant

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<sup>86</sup> H. A. Blair op. cit. p.31f.

<sup>87</sup> H. Chadwick, op. cit. p.97.

<sup>88</sup> E.F. Osborn, *The Philosophy of Clement of Alexandria* p.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. Cf. *Strom.* V. 65; II, 369, 24. cf. Plato, *Epist.* II, 312D.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. T.F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* p.61f. for further discussion relating to the effect of Platonic dualism on Clement's understanding of God that He is "far off in respect of His essence or being but very near in respect of His power."

abstraction" (ἀμετανόητος χωρισμός) <sup>91</sup> from the body and its passions. In this way he could attain to a form of divine knowledge, but only in a negative sense, that is, knowing God not in terms of who or what he is, but who or what he is not. Thus: "We lay hold of the way of cleansing by confession and then the way of vision by analysis, pressing on by analysis to the basis of thought, making a beginning from the things which underlie vision. We take away from physical body its natural qualities, stripping off the dimension of depth, then that of breadth, and after these, that of length. For the point that is left is unity, as it were, with position, and if we remove position from it, unity is preserved. If then, after removing all that belongs to physical bodies, and the things that are called bodiless, we cast ourselves into the vastness of Christ, and from there we go forward through holiness into the void; if we do these things we shall reach in some way the perception of the Almighty, knowing not what he is, but what he is not." <sup>92</sup> This has the unfortunate result in that we can "neither know nor say anything positive about God. God can neither be named nor conceived. He is other than our ideas would suggest."<sup>93</sup>

Clement also drew upon the Middle and Neo-Platonic concept in which God can only be known "only by stripping or abstracting all qualities from our idea of an existing thing." <sup>94</sup> According to E.F. Osborn, it is a concept that recurs in the writings of Maximus of Tyre<sup>95</sup>, Albinus<sup>96</sup> and in Plotinus<sup>97</sup> as well as in Plato<sup>98</sup>, but one that Clement himself expands within a Christian doxological context. "We begin by confession and cleansing from sin. We end in holy union with Christ."<sup>99</sup> Knowledge of God, therefore, becomes clearly underlined in Clement's mind with a mediatorial

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<sup>91</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Implications of Oikonomia for Knowledge and Speech of God in Early Christian Theology*. (Auszug aus OIKONOMIA Heilsgeschichte als Thema der Theologi, p.231.

<sup>92</sup> E.F. Osborn, op. cit. p.26. *Strom.*V, 71; II, 374, 4.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p.26.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p.27.

<sup>95</sup> Max.Tyr.143,11.

<sup>96</sup> Albinus X,5.

<sup>97</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.*V, 3, 17.

<sup>98</sup> Parmenides *Hypothesis* I.

<sup>99</sup> Osborn, *supra*.p.27



and Christological understanding: "The grace of knowledge is from God through the Son."<sup>100</sup>

In his discussion of Clement's philosophical approach to knowledge of God, E.F. Osborn expands a number of factors that Clement presents as he endeavours to argue towards a more positive comprehension of the divine nature.

Basing his understanding on the concept of Platonic first principles, Clement sought to expand his understanding of God as the first principle behind creative being and activity. "Indeed," Clement stated, "this is the most difficult question about God. For since the first principle of everything is hard to find, the absolutely first and oldest first principle is in all respects hard to show, which first principle is the cause of all things coming into being and being."<sup>101</sup> But God cannot be known or understood through comparison with anything else. "God cannot be discerned by other things, and it is right that he should not be apprehended by any one other than himself because his pureness, goodness and oldness make him remote from them."<sup>102</sup>

The development of Clement's theological position<sup>103</sup> stemmed considerably from his understanding and interpretation of some words from Isaiah: "If you do not believe, you will not understand."<sup>104</sup> For Clement, the ability to believe did not depend upon scholarly knowledge or scriptural authority in the first instance. Nevertheless, the faith that is bound up with belief contains the important aspect of reason which has to be nourished through spiritual truth in order to bring about the correct knowledge of truth to which faith points.<sup>105</sup> To attain this objective in relation to faith and reason calls the enquirer to exercise human knowledge through philosophy.

For Clement, philosophy is involved in the task of investigating the truth and

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<sup>100</sup> *Strom.* V, 71; II, 374, 23.

<sup>101</sup> *Strom.* V, 81-82, II, 380, 14 to II. 381, 13.

<sup>102</sup> *De Praem. et Poen.* 6.

<sup>103</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Implications of Oikonomia for Knowledge and Speech of God in Early Christian Theology.* op. cit. p.223.

<sup>104</sup> Isaiah 7:9

<sup>105</sup> *Strom.* I. 1, 8. 2; VI, 33.1; 35:1.

nature of things.<sup>106</sup> In the sense that it can prepare the ground for the assimilation and receipt of truth, philosophy leads us in such a way that we are brought to Christ who himself is the ground of all truth. "Thus true philosophy trains the mind, rouses the understanding, and begets in us a shrewdness in inquiry, that leads us to repose in Christ."<sup>107</sup> But while Clement can speak of Christ as "the foundation and the superstructure" in being the one in whom faith is centred we find that his attention does not tend to centre upon the Christological implications relating to faith but rather, in the words of T.F.Torrance, "with the moral disposition of the soul of the 'gnostic'."<sup>108</sup>

At this point it would be a useful exercise to pinpoint the main aspects in Clement's understanding of faith.<sup>109</sup> His perceptions are essentially scriptural.

(1) Clement understood that faith comes about through hearing and was to be interpreted as obedience to the Word of God (ἡ τοῦ λόγου ὑπακοή). Faith becomes enriched and strengthened with the passing of time (ἐν χρόνῳ γεννωμένη) through the Word that is proclaimed by the Apostles, "for that Word creates in us the new eye, the new ear, and the new heart which we need to apprehend what is given."<sup>110</sup>

(2) To Clement faith was perceived as a form of knowledge whereby we are brought into contact with the truth itself, that is to say, the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus Clement could affirm, "He who has believed the Word knows the matter to be true for the Word is truth."<sup>111</sup>

(3) For Clement faith required no external means of disclosing its own nature: it remained "perfect and complete in itself."<sup>112</sup> Faith is directed in the truth to

<sup>106</sup> *Strom.* I. v. 32. 4 (περὶ ἀλήθειας καὶ τῆς τῶν ὄντων φύσεως).

<sup>107</sup> T.F. Torrance, *op.cit.* p.229.

<sup>108</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning, The Hermeneutics of Clement of Alexandria*, p. 167.

<sup>109</sup> For a fuller analysis cf. T.F. Torrance, *ibid.* pp. 130-132.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* cf also. *Paed.* I. 6. 25. 1 ff., 28. 1.f; *Strom.* I. 1. 4-5; 2. 3. 10-11; 4. 13-15; 5; 1-2; 6. 25.3.

<sup>111</sup> *Strom.* 2. 4. 12. 1.

<sup>112</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, *supra.* p. 131.

“ultimate origins and ends” in such a way that it is out of faith that knowledge comes. “Knowledge starts from faith and is perfected in faith.”<sup>113</sup>

Within the philosophico-theological eclecticism of Alexandria in which he sought to propound his teachings, Clement was confronted, as we have already seen, by the divisive influences of Platonic dualism in which an intellectual as well as theological differentiation was made between the world of phenomena and the world of sense, between the world we live in and can observe and that other world that lies beyond space and time - and which, Platonic thought determined, remained utterly distant through its deistic disjunction from the life of Man. For followers of Platonic philosophy, such a division between phenomena and noumena meant that faith (πίστις) belonged to the world of phenomena, while knowledge (γνῶσις), was rooted in the world of noumena. To the latter world, therefore, Gnostics turned in their understanding and pursuit of knowledge and theological truth. Such an epistemological schism, however, led to the effect of a divided understanding of God and Jesus Christ. In the final analysis, God in the Person and Being of the Father, became separated God in the Person and Being of the Son. Not only so, but the Nature of God revealed in His Being as Father, became cut off from the divine revelatory relationship in, with and through Jesus Christ the Son. This meant, furthermore, that faith could only be related to the Son, while theological knowledge could only refer to the Father. In short the Nature of the Godhead became divided and, perhaps more so, the inherent nature and revelatory understanding of the Trinity was destroyed. Against this Platonic and Gnostic form of dualism Clement contended in much the same way in which Athanasius fought against the divisive and irrational forms of dualism which Arius and his followers sought to establish within the life and doctrine of the Alexandrian Church and which also threatened to destroy the very foundation of classical Trinitarian belief.

To overcome the dualistic thought of his own day, Clement underlined the

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<sup>113</sup> T.F. Torrance, op. cit. p. 131.

need for proper theological belief that stemmed from God's own self-revelation. Thus, "In order to believe truly in the Son we must believe that He is the Son, that He came, and how, and why, and believe concerning His passion, and we must know who is the Son of God."<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, Clement held that faith and knowledge were inter-connected in terms of theological and epistemological understanding. So he could affirm, "There is no faith without knowledge, and no knowledge without faith."<sup>115</sup> In addition, this unity of knowledge and faith lead to a unity of relationship in knowledge of God. "Nor is the Father without the Son, for the Son is with the Father. And the Son is the true Teacher concerning the Father. In order to believe in the Son we must know the Father with whom also is the Son. Again, in order that we may know the Father, we must believe in the Son, that it is the Son of God who teaches - from faith to knowledge; through the Son, the Father. The knowledge (γνῶσις) of the Son and the Father which is according to the rule of knowledge - that which is truly gnostic - is the apprehension and comprehension of the truth through the truth."<sup>116</sup>

For Clement, nevertheless, there remained the central problem as to the most acceptable way of bridging the gap between the two worlds. For if that gap is not satisfactorily closed in a theological sense, then our understanding of God's Nature and Revelation becomes also divided. While Clement struggled within the confines of contemporary thought to create a bridge through an admixture of theology and philosophy, he was unable in the fullest sense to attain to the theological achievements of Athanasius who rejected out of hand the theological and epistemological dualism of Platonic teaching. It is true that Clement laid the theological groundwork for his successors in the School of Alexandria, but it was Athanasius himself who unreservedly established the classical theological and

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<sup>114</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Implications of Oikonomia for Knowledge and Speech of God in Early Christian Theology*. op. cit. supra. p.225. cf. also T.F. Torrance *Divine Meaning*, op. cit. p.143 f. *Strom.* 5.I.1.4; cf. *Paed.* 1.6.25. 1 ff.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. Cf. *Strom.* V. I, 1. 4.

scientific position whereby knowledge of God can be obtained only out of God Himself as He reveals Himself to the world in and through the Person of His Son Jesus Christ the Incarnate Logos who is consubstantial, co-essential and co-eternal in Being with the Father. Athanasius "was able to show that at the heart of the Christian faith lay the fact that God Himself had so appropriated our condition and even our suffering that He took it into His own being and life in the Son for our sakes. What God has revealed of Himself in the incarnate Son He is in His own eternal Being, and what he has done for us in the incarnate Son is done through the involvement of His divine Being in our human and creaturely condition, and therefore also in its sanctifying renewal in Himself, for He does not cease to be what He eternally is as Creator and God."<sup>117</sup>

For Clement, nevertheless, knowledge stemmed from dependence and unity in Christ: it involved a journey of spiritual progression. "We climb the upward path by hanging on to Christ in faith, knowledge, and love. To grow in knowledge is to grow in Christ in whom we are planted and from whom we draw our life."<sup>118</sup> Clement was eager to bridge the gap between Greek philosophy and Christian thought. In so doing he sought to emphasise that central to Christianity was the epistemological nature of divine being. On the one hand, Clement could speak about God as "above all speech, all conception, and all thought, being inexpressible even by His own power" and "the One, indivisible, without dimensions and limit, without form and name."<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, he could affirm the truth of the divine Logos and that Jesus Christ, as divine Logos "has come down to us from heaven."<sup>120</sup> "This very Logos has now appeared among men, he alone being both God and man."<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> T. F. Torrance, *The Implications of Oikonomia for Knowledge and Speech of God in Early Christian Theology*, supra. p.238.

<sup>118</sup> E.F. Osborn, supra.p.158.

<sup>119</sup> *Strom.* V. 10, 12; VII. 1.

<sup>120</sup> *Protrept.* XI.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* I.

### I. 5. 3. Origen of Alexandria

A further divergence in the developing tradition of Alexandrian theology can be observed in Clement's successor, Origen. Of the two distinct groups, the Gnostics and the Orthodox, it was to the latter that Origen chose to give support. Although he entertained early leanings in the direction of the Gnostic Movement, Origen was attracted to theological truth which stemmed from the essentially scripturally-based tenets of the Faith: he condemned those who rejected scripture or interpreted it in terms of their own misconceptions. "Today," he wrote, "under pretext of Gnosis, heretics rise against the Church of Christ. They pile on their books of commentaries. They claim to interpret the Gospel and Apostolic texts. If we are silent and do not oppose them with true teaching, famished souls will be fed with their abominations."<sup>122</sup> In addition to his aversion towards Gnosticism, Origen equally detested the teachings of Monarchianism. His own theological understanding of the Logos, in relation to the Doctrine of the Trinity, developed in such a way that a distinction was placed between God the Father and God the Son. "In this way," he commented, "we avoid falling into the opinion of those who abolish the Son as distinct from the Father, and virtually abolish the Father also. Nor do we fall into the other blasphemous doctrine which denies the deity of Christ."<sup>123</sup>

From a systematic study of scripture, Origen proceeded to establish a doctrine of the Trinity as a proof, on the one hand, against both Gnostics and Monarchians, and on the other the supporters of Adoptionism. Origen accepted the tradition of the Church, but he claimed that the educated Christian should also endeavour to work out its theological implications in the light of philosophy. We note that Origen was trained in the philosophical teachings of Plato and Philo. These introduced Hellenistic ideas in Origen's understanding of divine being as transcendent. According to Eusebius Porphyry, a follower of Plotinus, said of Origen that his life

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<sup>122</sup> *Commentary on St. John* 5:8.

<sup>123</sup> *Dial. with Heracleides* 438/9.

was that of a Christian, but his concepts concerning God were those of the Greek.<sup>124</sup> We find, for example, Origen affirming God to be "incorporeal, a simple intellectual nature.....incomprehensible, impassible, uncircumscribed."<sup>125</sup> He speaks of God as "Mind, or something transcending Mind and Ousia."<sup>126</sup> But Origen's teachings were not wholly determined by Greek concepts. He professes, for instance, that the basis of his thought lay "in the revelation given in Scripture and the truth of the apostolic tradition."<sup>127</sup> Not only that but Origen seeks to relate the expression of this revelatory truth through the "use of sound philosophical teaching."<sup>128</sup>

The Origenist theological standpoint tended towards an understanding of God in the light of the Platonic concept of Absolute Being. Unlike Plato, however, Origen chose to replace the abstract qualities of goodness and beauty, which Plato conceived as inhering to Absolute Being and in their place, substituted the divine quality of love. But within Origenist thought, this divine quality of love was not to be associated with any abstract concept or philosophical principle. In contrast to the idea of some passive, inert aspect asomatically related to some distant formula to do with, say, the notion of divine transcendence, the quality of love to which Origen referred stemmed from God and was entirely of God, actively manifested through His Word or Son, only-begotten and eternally-inhering in the Father and through the power of the Holy Spirit. So Origen could affirm that, "Our Saviour is the effulgence of (the Father's) glory" and the "exact image of the Father." Here we touch on the later language of Athanasius as he wrestled with the Arian distinction in the Father-Son relationship, as well as those expressions in the Fourth Gospel which underline the consubstantial relationship of the Son to the Father.<sup>129</sup>

Notwithstanding this emphasis on the nature of consubstantiality, Origen

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<sup>124</sup> Eusebius *H. E.* VI. 19.

<sup>125</sup> *De Princ.* I. 1. 5, 6; C. Celsum, VI. 64.

<sup>126</sup> *C. Celsum*, VII, 38.

<sup>127</sup> cf. Sellars op. cit. p. 4.

<sup>128</sup> *De Princ.*, *Praef.* 4-10. cf. Sellars p. 5.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. St John 1.14; 5.26ff; 6.44ff; 8.16ff; 10.15ff; 14.6ff; 15.1ff; 16.3ff; 17.1ff; 20.17ff.

appeared to find difficulty in reconciling the concept of mutability in terms of both God and Christ. Although he could accept that the Son was the exact image of God and co-eternal with Him, he also held Christ to be somehow different from God. For while God alone remains unchangeable and immutable in Nature and Being, Origen could observe that the Son, while possessing eternal generation, thus linked God with the mutability of creation. So Origen admitted: "We confess two Gods through one in unity."<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, Origen's understanding of the Trinity tended to introduce three types of graded beings, each one distinct, yet united in a single substance, but at the same time possessed of individual qualities of which only two, God and His Word, were connected to the life of the world.

Origen's theological system appears to have been constructed upon the notion of a two-decker universe. Within this union of Greek dualism and Platonic philosophy, Origen perceived the world of the divine in which God was seen to be connected to man by means of His logos (or Word/Reason); but, at the same time, this was to be understood in terms of His inherent Nature by means of the concept of Absolute Being. There also existed the world of inferior spirits: "... before the ages, minds were all pure, both demons and souls and angels offering service to God, and keeping his commandments."<sup>131</sup>

These beings to which Origen referred were endowed with freedom of the will by which they chose to rebel. But God drove them out and imprisoned them in bodies that became more heavy and opaque in proportion to the degrees of sin. Nevertheless, as all possessed free will, all had the power to return to God. Man too, according to Origen, had a place within this order of creation; and man also possessed the means of attaining his own salvation. "Let us take up that which depends upon our decision," Origen stated, "God does not give it to us, he sets it before us."<sup>132</sup> In support of this argument, Origen refers briefly to the Old Testament

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<sup>130</sup> *Dial.with Heracleides* 438.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* 1.8.1.

<sup>132</sup> *Dial.with Heracleides* 454.



and to God's words addressed to the people of Israel through Moses - "Behold I have set life before thy face."<sup>133</sup> For Origen, the life referred to was Christ himself who by uniting human and divine nature enabled the former to rise towards its ultimate glory. Christ was a guide, an educator, a leader of mankind who revealed the whole essence of God so that man might rise towards God and be made One with Him.

It can be seen that the development of Alexandrian theology, certainly in its creative stages, came under an Origenist influence based on cosmological ideas, but which included the understanding of the universe being purified from the element of sin. Thereby the whole of creation would be restored to God. The final perfection of the divine creation would be accomplished.

In contradistinction to later Alexandrian theology - and certainly in comparison with that of Athanasius - Origen did not fully admit to any possibility for the resurrection of the body. To him the incarnation of the Logos was the fundamental act leading to the redemption of mankind. His understanding of incarnation was in terms of the Son of God who came into the life of the world and united himself with a human soul. The soul was the mediating connection between the divine nature of God and the corporeal nature of man.<sup>134</sup> At the same time, he ascribed to a belief in the soul's successive re-incarnation in the process of purification and renewal. As a result of such a Platonically influenced framework it became clear that for Origen, any theological premiss would be difficult to reconcile with a truly Christological foundation in which incarnational and soteriological concepts could properly fuse.

The theological standpoint of Origen is based upon his understanding of the Nature of God. Unlike Clement who propounded the concept of the Logos as the source of all knowledge, Origen begins with the truth of God: God is a spirit and God is light.

<sup>135</sup> Again, God is not created (ἀγέννητος) but unbegotten (ἀγέννητος) and not made

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<sup>133</sup> Deut.30:15.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. H. Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, London 1967, Vol. II, p. 309.

<sup>135</sup> *De princ.* I, I, 1.

up of physical matter. "God, therefore, is not to be thought of as being either a body or as existing in a body, but as an uncompounded intellectual nature (*simplex intellectualis natura*), admitting within Himself no addition of any kind; so that He cannot be believed to have within Him a greater and a less, but is such that He is in all parts "*monas*", and so to speak, "*henas*", and is the mind and source from which all intellectual nature or mind takes its beginning."<sup>136</sup> For Origen, this mind and source was in the world personally active as creator, sustainer and ruler. God is Father of mankind but as an absolute being He remains beyond comprehension. It is only through the Logos, who is Jesus Christ, that God becomes knowable and comprehensible. The Logos is the form which makes clear the essence and appearance of God "*figura expressa substantiae et subsistentiae Dei*."<sup>137</sup>

Origenist theology was eager to dismiss any thought of assigning anthropomorphic characteristics to the Nature of God's divine Being. God is not subject to change. Thus Origen affirms in response to the criticism of Celsus: ".....He (God) did not need to undergo a transformation, as Celsus thinks we assert, nor a change from good to evil, nor from virtue to vice, nor from happiness to misery, nor from best to worse. For, continuing unchangeable in His essence, He condescends to human affairs by the economy of His providence."<sup>138</sup> Such a belief in the unchangeable nature of God reinforced Origen's understanding of the Trinity. He disagreed with the Modalists who denied any distinction between the three persons of the Trinity, but in so doing was accused of teaching subordinationism - a charge that has been both affirmed, as in the case of Jerome and denied by others such as Gregory Thaumaturgos and by St. Athanasius himself.<sup>139</sup>

Within the Son/Father relationship, Origen asserted that the Son proceeds from the Father not so much by a process of division as by a spiritual act, "in the

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid. I, I, 6.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. I, 2, 8; *C. Celsum*.VII.17.

<sup>138</sup> *C. Celsum*. IV.14.

<sup>140</sup> Quasten mentions other modern authors (Regnon and Prat) who deny Origen's guilt.

same way as will proceeds from reason".<sup>140</sup> "For if the Son does all those things which the Father does, then in virtue of the Son doing all things like the Father, is the image of the Father formed in the Son, who is born of Him, like an act of His will proceeding from the mind."<sup>141</sup> As a result, knowledge of God is revealed through the Son who is the express revelation of the Father. "Our Saviour, therefore, is the image of the invisible God, inasmuch as compared with the Father Himself He is the truth: and as compared with us, to whom He reveals the Father, He is the image by which we come to the knowledge of the Father, whom no one knows save the Son, and he to whom the Son is pleased to reveal Him."<sup>142</sup>

Origen acknowledged that, as all things are eternal by nature in God, the act of generation is eternal (*aeterna ac sempiterna generatio*).<sup>143</sup> Thus, logically, the Son himself has no beginning: there was no time when he was not (οὐκ ἔστιν ὅτε οὐκ ἦν. Origen's interpretation here is an uncanny pointer towards the argument against the theology of Arius ("There was a time when he was not" – ἦν ὅτε οὐκ ἦν).

Similarly in relation to the Sonship of Christ: he is not "*per adoptionem spiritus filius, sed naturalis filius*".<sup>144</sup>

There emerged, however, certain features within the Son/Logos theological standpoint of Origen which have formed the subject of question and debate. On the one hand there stands out his understanding and affirmation of the divine nature of the Logos. On the other hand, Origen is quite prepared to assign to the second Person of the Trinity the term "second God" (δεύτερος θεός).<sup>145</sup> The Father alone is Himself God (αὐτοθεός) and is absolutely good and virtuous (ἀπλοῦς ἀγαθός). From this, the Son is the image of goodness (εἰκὼν ἀγαθότητος).<sup>146</sup>

Origen's Christological position was to affirm the relationship between his

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<sup>140</sup> Cf. Quasten *Patrology* Vol.II p.77.

<sup>141</sup> *De princ.* I. II. 6.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> *In Jer.* IX. 4; *De princ.* I. II. 4.

<sup>144</sup> *De princ.* I. II. 4.

<sup>145</sup> *C. Celsum.* V, 39; *In Joh.* VI, 39, 202.

<sup>146</sup> *C. Celsum.* V.39; *De Princ.* I, II, 13.

doctrine of the Logos and his understanding of the incarnate being of Jesus Christ. In this, the understanding of the pre-existent soul of Jesus was aligned to that of the infinite nature of the Logos and the finite body of Christ.<sup>147</sup> Origen's belief in the pre-existent nature of the soul led him to understand that there was a union of the Word with the human soul, before the union of the Word with the body. Such a teaching, although subject to the accusation of being in error, nevertheless is not heretical. Origen guards himself carefully against appearing to teach that there was a time when the Soul of Christ was not hypostatically united to the Divine Word.<sup>148</sup>

The soul, in terms of its substance, acted in intermediate form and purpose between God and Man: for Origen it seemed impossible for the nature of God to intermingle with a body without an intermediate instrument. The term Origen coined for this concept was "God-man" (*theanthropos*).<sup>149</sup> He was the first to use such a description and one that would find a place in future theological terminology.

Along with such a mediatorial definition, Origen also sought to clarify understanding on the subject of the hypostatic nature of Christ. The union of the two natures is made possible "for the soul and the body of Jesus formed, after the *oikonomia*, one being with the Logos of God."<sup>150</sup> Thus the introduction of the "*communicatio idiomatum*" permitted Origen to affirm that while Christ could be acknowledged in terms of his divine nature, nevertheless human attributes could be affirmed as true and necessary to his being: "The Son of God, through whom all things were created, is named Jesus Christ and the Son of man. For the Son of God also is said to have died - in reference, namely, to that nature which could admit of death; and He is called the Son of man, who is announced as about to come in the glory of God the Father, with the holy angels. And for this reason, throughout the whole of Scripture, not only is the divine nature spoken of in human words, but the

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<sup>147</sup> *De princ.* II, VI, 3.

<sup>148</sup> Cf. *περὶ ἀρχῶν*, II, 6, 6, (I. 91, A.).

<sup>149</sup> *In Ez. hom.* III, 3.

<sup>150</sup> *Contra Celsum.* II, 9.

human nature is adorned by appellations of divine dignity."<sup>151</sup>

Origen's understanding of the relationship between the Son and the Father remained in essence based upon a unity of substance, a consubstantiality of existence, a relationship of Being. This he described in yet another term <sup>152</sup> which he formulated - "*homoousios*" (ὁμοούσιος) - itself the very centre of Arian controversy and which Origen's later successor Athanasius successfully dealt with following the Council of Nicaea.

Origen accepted the fact of God as Creator and that God exercised his creative power over the world. Furthermore, God was the One who has chosen to reveal his nature to the world and that self-revelation has been manifest in the Person of Jesus Christ. As Sellars has cogently expressed the theological development of Origen, God is the One "who, just because He is what He is, must reveal Himself, this divine self-revelation being seen first and foremost in the Incarnation itself."<sup>153</sup>

Throughout the fourth century, a noticeable transformation took place in the theological climate. From the influence of the early Platonic philosophers, a new course was plotted in which the Church at Alexandria began to lay the foundation for future classical theological belief. In this task, St. Athanasius "the pillar of orthodoxy," was in von Campenhausen's phrase "theologically epoch-making."<sup>154</sup> "He (Athanasius) thoroughly stamped the Church with the character of a Confessional Church determined by dogma, as he proclaimed the Nicene Creed as the only and eternally inviolable norm of true faith in God."<sup>155</sup>

It can be seen that the development of Alexandrian theology, certainly in its creative stages, came under an Origenist influence based on cosmological ideas, but which included the understanding of the universe being purified from the element of

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<sup>151</sup> *De princ.* II, VI, 3.

<sup>153</sup> Along with *homoousios* and *theanthropos* other terms were *physis*, *hypostasis* and *ousia*.

<sup>153</sup> *De princ.* II, vi.

<sup>154</sup> H. von Campenhausen "The Christians In Old Alexandria" in ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣΤΙΚΟΣ ΦΑΡΟΣ (*Ekklesiastikos Pharos*) Vol. LV. IV. 1973. p. 492.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

sin. Thereby, the whole creation would be restored to God. The final perfection of the divine creation would be accomplished.

In contradistinction to later Alexandrian theology - and certainly in comparison to the affirmed belief of Athanasius in the resurrection - Origen implicitly denied any possibility of the resurrection of the body. At the same time, he ascribed to a belief in the soul's successive re-incarnation in the process of purification and renewal. As a result of such a Platonically-influenced framework, it became clear that for Origen, any such theological premiss would be difficult to reconcile with a truly Christological foundation in which incarnational and soteriological concepts could properly inter-relate.

## I. 6. THE PASCHA IN RELATION TO EASTER

Considerable controversy has been encountered over the origins of Easter within the Christian calendar and its relationship within the understanding and observance of Pascha. In the Greek and Latin worlds where Christianity established its influence, the regular term in use was *Pascha*. The Greek *Τὸ Πάσχα*, with its origins in the Aramaic *pisha*, had its equivalent in the Hebrew "Pesach", signifying *The Passover*. In contradistinction to this, the Syrian Church made use of a written form (*peshā*), meaning, "to rejoice" or, as some sources reveal "to celebrate Easter." Thus, certainly within Syriac literature, the precise meaning appears to be directed towards the joyful commemoration of Easter rather than towards the Passover. A further derivative sense was applied by the writers of Greek and Latin background to the Greek verb *πάσχειν* (to suffer). From this etymological source, various analogies were drawn between the paschal lamb and the suffering Christ. Justin Martyr, for example, sought to illustrate how the lamb sacrificed as the Passover, is

the "type" of the Passion.<sup>156</sup> On similar lines, Irenaeus expounds: "Moses foretold Him after a figurative manner by the name given to the Passover, and at that very festival did our Lord suffer, thus fulfilling the Passover."<sup>157</sup> Evidence indicating this relationship of suffering and passion linked to Passover and fulfilment through the Cross of pain may be observed in other writers. Tertullian, for example, makes a direct connection: "It is the Lord's Passover, that is, the Passion of Christ."<sup>158</sup> Lactantius is also clear in his interpretation that a direct etymological relationship exists: "Pascha nominatur ἀπο τοῦ πάσχειν quia passionis figura est."<sup>159</sup> Augustine, however, proposes a somewhat fascinating interpretation: "The word Pascha itself is not, as is commonly thought, a Greek word; those who are acquainted with both languages affirm it to be a Hebrew word. It is not derived, therefore, from the Passion because of the Greek word Πάσχειν, signifying *to suffer*, but it takes its name from the transition of which I have spoken, from death to life; the meaning of the Hebrew word *Pascha* being, as those who are acquainted with it assure us, a *passing over* or *transition*. To this the Lord Himself designed to allude when He said: "He that believeth in me is passed from death to life..."<sup>160</sup>

### I. 6. 1. The Scriptural Background

Although the meaning and sense of *pesach* remain clouded with some uncertainty, it remains clear that in the scriptural tradition of both Old and New Testaments, the origins of the term are associated with the "passing over" of the homes of the Israelites by the angel of death during the final moments of their enslavement in Egypt, where each door-lintel was smeared by the blood of the sacrificed lamb. As a celebration of that saving event, *Passover* became identified

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<sup>156</sup> Justin Martyr *Dial.* 40.

<sup>157</sup> Irenaeus *Haer.* IV. x.1.

<sup>158</sup> Tertullian *adv. Jud.* 19. (Migne, Vol. I, col. 670)

<sup>159</sup> Lactantius *Div. Inst.* IV. 26 (Migne, supra col. 531)

<sup>160</sup> Augustine *Ep. LV.* 1. ad Januar. 400 AD.

with the commemorative feast recollecting God's deliverance, as well as the sacrificial act itself.<sup>161</sup> Talley alludes to the possibility whereby the New Testament perception can be seen to link the Passover with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. At the same time he agrees that this may be understood simply as an elision of what were two separate festivities. Having accepted that, Talley proposes that the Passover enjoys a far earlier historical background than is generally accepted and may be "much older than the Exodus, which provides its biblical content." Talley concludes, "It has commonly been identified as the feast to God in the wilderness for the observance of which Moses asked the Pharaoh's permission."<sup>162</sup>

During the first century the Passover had become fully integrated within domestic family worship. At the same time it reflected the public commemoration through the priestly sacrificing of the lambs in preparation for the feast. This act (combined with the putting away of the leaven) took place on the eve of the feast, so as to coincide with 14 Nisan. The significance of this nocturnal commemoration lay in remembering the deliverance of Israel out of Egyptian slavery. Nevertheless, much of rabbinical tradition perceived the feast also as an occasion for expressing great hope in God's final act of redemption. The Book of Wisdom, for instance, reflects the first century sense of Messianic expectation. Through the Passover God's mighty redemption was inaugurated through the slaying of the Egyptian first born sons, "while all things were in quiet silence and that night was in the midst of her swift course." Redemptive fulfilment was expected to take place at midnight.<sup>163</sup> And so, while the Passover feast commemorated the deliverance of God's people out of Egypt, it assumed also a wider soteriological significance through association with God's final act of redemption. That is to say, 1st century Judaism had established a relationship between the saving of Israel as represented by the Passover and the final Messianic deliverance which, they fully believed, God would bring about.

<sup>161</sup> Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, (Pueblo Publishing Company, New York), 1986. p. 1.

<sup>162</sup> Talley, op. cit. p. 1. Cf., Exodus 5:1; 10:9.

<sup>163</sup> Talley, op. cit. p. 2. Cf. Wisdom 18:14.



In analysing the theme of Passover, Talley points out the import of other thematic influences. The Palestinian Targum on Exodus, he suggests, contains a "Poem of the Four Nights," which connects four items of significance to the Passover - the creation of the world, the binding (akedah) of Isaac, the deliverance from Egypt and the coming of the Messiah. These, Talley admits, "had significant impact on the Christian themeology of Pascha."<sup>164</sup> "The deliverance out of Egypt and the expected coming of Messiah reflect the meeting of memory and hope in this festival."<sup>165</sup> Such an impact brought 1st century Christian thought to see in the Passover a mode of identity both with the Last Supper, which Jesus shared with his disciples, as well as with his arrest, trial, passion and crucifixion. Talley points out that it was "within the eight days of this paschal festivity that he rose from the dead on the first day of the week."<sup>166</sup> The Church "as the central feast of the liturgical year", he affirms, has celebrated just such a Passover.<sup>167</sup>

Notwithstanding these propositions, however, what was the relationship between the Jewish Passover and the Christian Pascha? We are compelled, further, to pose the underlying question concerning the ultimate sense in which the word *Pascha* was used and the theological significance to which it pointed. For Athanasius, arguably the most frequently used scriptural quotation to which he refers in the *Festal Letters* is the great doxo-soteriological affirmation by St Paul in his 1st letter to the Christian community in Corinth, "Christ our Passover (Πάσχα) is sacrificed for us."<sup>168</sup> Drawing on the importance of this New Testament statement, the 1st century Church adopted the Pascha as the Christological reference for the Christian understanding of Passover or, as it became known, the Lord's Supper. In time, this celebratory event would become eucharistically perceived following the

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<sup>164</sup> Talley, op. cit. p. 3.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> I Cor. 5. 7.

presence of the risen Christ among the disciples.<sup>169</sup> In a parallel way to the Old Testament Passover which, as we have earlier indicated, reflected a present and a future salvific purpose and expression, so the Eucharistic understanding of the real presence of the risen Christ also encompassed a present and a future reference. As T.F. Torrance so describes, "As the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper was regularly and significantly celebrated on the Lord's day or the day of resurrection. Hence influenced by the fact that the Greek word Πάσχα was derived from πάσχειν, to suffer, it soon came in common use to refer to the *passion* of Christ, but significantly, as understood from the perspective of the resurrection. It was a celebration both of the sacrificial death of Christ as the Lamb of God and of his triumphant resurrection from the grave."<sup>170</sup>

### I. 6. 2. The Passover and Pascha

But when was Passover observed? And was the Christian *Pascha* the remembrance of the passion of Jesus Christ, or did it commemorate the resurrection? Or was it - and is it - meant to direct the understanding and worship of the Church towards both? Was the Last Supper a Passover meal?

For some answers at any rate, we must examine the textual evidence as it exists in the Gospel writings.

#### (1) The Passover Preparation.

Within the synoptic gospels it is clear that Jesus and the disciples had anticipated sharing the Passover in an Upper Room in Jerusalem. The appropriate references provide evidence for this.

<sup>169</sup> cf. T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh), 1996. p. 254 ff.

<sup>170</sup> Torrance, op. cit. p. 255. Cf. also Irenaeus, *Adversus haer.* 2. 21.2 and 4. Melito of Sardis, *περὶ πάσχα* as cited in Torrance, *Divine Meaning. Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics*, (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1995), Chapter 4.

(a) Matthew 26.14: "On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to ask Jesus, 'Where would you like us to prepare for your Passover supper?'"

(b) Mark 14. 14: "The Master says, 'Where is the room reserved for me to eat the Passover with my disciples?'"

(c) Luke 22.8: "Jesus sent Peter and John with these instructions: 'Go and prepare for our Passover supper.'"

(d) Luke 22.15: "How I have longed to eat this Passover with you before my death!"

(e) John 19.31: "Because it was the eve of Passover, the Jews were anxious..."

Slight confusion occurs, however, in the Marcan reference<sup>171</sup> to the first day of Unleavened Bread" which fell on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan but which appears to coincide with the day "when the Passover lambs were slaughtered" - namely the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan. Taking the synoptic accounts as a whole, the preparation for the festival must have been carried out on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan so that the supper consumed during the night refers to the Passover feast.

## (2) The Day of the Crucifixion

According to all four gospel writers the Crucifixion took place on a Friday.<sup>172</sup> Again, the first three gospel narratives indicate that the actual date fell on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, based upon the understanding that this date marked the first of the seven days of the festival and was the day immediately following the celebration of the Passover meal. Again, as we have already stated, according to John, it was the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan when the first day of the festival commenced, since on the afternoon of that day, the Paschal lambs were slain so that they might be consumed that same evening after sunset. In the synoptics, Jesus is crucified on 15 Nisan. With the Fourth Gospel, the crucifixion takes place "on the eve of Passover" (John 19.31), at the time when the

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<sup>171</sup> Mark 14: 12.

<sup>172</sup> G.H.C. Macgregor, *The Gospel of John*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary, (Hodder and Stoughton, London), Introduction, p. xiii.

lambs were sacrificed for the feast. John recounts (19.32-33) that the soldiers did not break the legs of Jesus and associates this with the Jewish Law that the Passover lamb was to remain whole. "You must not break a single bone of it."<sup>173</sup>

While we may admit, as Talley does, that the matter of chronological agreement in the fourth Gospel has not always been uniform and has frequently been rejected on the grounds that John presents a more theological than historical approach, nevertheless there is a greater inclination to approach the content of John's narrative with a more universal acceptance than hitherto. Indeed, by virtue of our earlier observations on the nature of the Passover, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Pauline reference in I Cor. 5:7 reflects the fact that the apostle was fully aware of a doxological and eucharistic tradition in the Early Church that predated the actual chronology of John's Gospel. Moreover, we can observe that a transition has taken place in the understanding of St Paul where his traditional Jewish perception of the Passover sacrifice has been enlarged to encompass the identification of Jesus Christ himself as the Passover or Paschal Lamb of the New Covenant - "Christ our Passover Lamb is sacrificed: let us keep the feast."<sup>174</sup> Writing to the Corinthians from Ephesus (c. 55 AD) Paul makes reference to both Passover and Pentecost. His intention is to stay at Ephesus until Pentecost.<sup>175</sup> At the same time, but in a different locality and reference, through his account in the Book of Acts, Luke underlines Paul's express desire to celebrate with the Church in Jerusalem, "if he possibly could, on the day of Pentecost"<sup>176</sup> - an indication, surely, that Paul still managed to retain his doxological roots within Judaism.

Although we have no clear insight into the manner in which Paul celebrated Passover at Ephesus, we can judge that already the festival had begun to acquire an altogether fresh significance in terms of the Cross. Quite clearly, a change has taken

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<sup>173</sup> Exodus 12: 46

<sup>174</sup> I Cor. 5: 7f.

<sup>175</sup> I Cor. 16: 8.

<sup>176</sup> Acts 20: 16

place in Paul's thought when we compare his reference to the Passover in I Cor. 5 and his later discussion of the Eucharist in I Cor. 11. For Paul, the nature of the Jewish Passover as seen from the point of view of God's redemptive power within Israel has now taken on a fresh and even more dynamic transformation. Now he perceives its Eucharistic quality in the light of its Christological and soteriological purpose. Furthermore, while Paul visualises the Passover as a proclamation of "the Lord's death until he comes", the festal observance is no longer limited to the annual Jewish commemoration. Now, the memorial in remembrance of the death of Christ is to be made "as often as" the feast is celebrated. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes."<sup>177</sup>

Firm evidence pointing to the Christian commemoration of Pascha comes to the fore in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, but suggests that the Christian observance was a gradual reinterpretation of Passover as it had been observed since earliest times, rather than the adoption of aspects reflecting Passover which were then utilised within the new celebration of the resurrection. Indeed, as Talley points out, there seems little evidence that the early Pascha was focussed primarily on the resurrection, even though the theme was included in the festival's celebration of our total redemption in Christ. One of the earliest textual forms of evidence comes from the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The *Epistula Apostolorum*, written possibly from Asia Minor, provides an address of the risen Christ to his disciples.

"As for you, make the commemoration of my death, that is to say, the Passover. It is then that one among you who stand by me will be thrown into prison because of my name; he will be very sad and cast down, for while you keep the Passover he is in prison and does not keep it with you. But I will send my Power in the form of my angel, and the doors of the prison will be opened, and he will come to you to watch and rest with you. Then at cockcrow, when you have completed my

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<sup>177</sup> I Cor. 11:26.

agape and my commemoration, he will be taken again and cast into prison for a testimony, until he comes to preach, as I have commanded you.”<sup>178</sup>

In this instance, Passover appears to have been kept during the night of 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> Nisan and commemorates the death of Jesus. The observance is described as a watch or vigil and is kept beyond the midnight hour, which marked the end of the Jewish Passover. The extension of the vigil to cockcrow – i.e. beyond midnight – is of interest in that the move appears to mark the distinction between the new Christian observance and the traditional Jewish practice. Such references to watching and vigil, as Tally observes, may have grown out of “some element of expectation of messiah in connection with the paschal night.”<sup>179</sup> But while Tally may accept the connection between Passover and the death of Jesus within the commemorative week of passion, we would propose that the significance of Christ’s death should be understood from the point of view not simply of one occasion in Holy Week, but more fully as a commemoration of the whole work of redemption from birth to death and resurrection. In this way, the Cross remains the focal point for soteriological understanding within the completed purposes of divine incarnational atonement.

### I. 6. 3. The Fast of Forty Days

For a long time it was generally regarded that the earliest reference to the Lenten Fast of Forty Day was to be found in the *tesserakoste* as it occurs in the fifth Canon of Nicaea. Nevertheless, this is increasingly thought to refer to the fortieth day of paschaltide.<sup>180</sup> As Talley remarks, “It remains true, however, that the Council of Nicaea is something of a watershed for the fast of forty days.”<sup>181</sup> For no recorded

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<sup>178</sup> Talley, op. cit. p. 5-6, trans. from French of L. Guerrier, POXI, fasc.3, p.58. The text was originally in Greek, although the preserved complete document appears only in Ethiopic. A mutilated or occasionally variant version in Coptic is also extant along with a single leaf in a Latin palimpsest.

<sup>179</sup> Talley op. cit. p. 6.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. p. 168. Eventually it would be known as the Feast of Ascension.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

evidence exists before Nicaea of any such forty-day fast in anticipation of Easter. Yet it seems that in no time at all after the Council the fast became a fairly well established aspect of the Easter season observance. To uncover the first direct evidence, we return to the Festal Letters and to FL2 for 330 AD where Athanasius gives due announcement of the date of Easter as well as the start of the Paschal Fast. "We begin the fast of forty days on the 13<sup>th</sup> of the month Phamenoth (March 9<sup>th</sup>). After we have given ourselves to fasting in continued succession, let us begin the holy Paschal week on the 18<sup>th</sup> of the month Pharmuthi (April 13<sup>th</sup>)."<sup>182</sup> Reference to "the holy fast" can be found also in FL1 for 329 AD and earlier records of the Paschal Fast occur in letters concurrent with the bishopric of Dionysius during the middle of the third century.<sup>183</sup> In FL2, Athanasius announces in addition to the forty-day fast, the beginning of the six-day Paschal Fast, and the date of Easter, together with a seven-week period of feasting during Pentecost. It is worth noting that in terms of the chronological setting of FL2, most scholars now appear to agree that the letter belongs to 330 AD. However, such scholarly consensus has not always been the case. In 1904, Eduard Schwartz suggested a rearrangement of order so that the Letter for 337 AD might be regarded as the first to announce the fast of forty days. His hypothesis centred on the fact of Athanasius' exile in Trier where the letter was composed. Schwartz argued that that practice of observing Lent had its beginnings in western tradition and had been introduced into Egypt as a result of Athanasius' experiences in the West. However, studies by L.-Th. Lefort, which included his edition of those letters that remain extant in Coptic, have revealed that the letter that provides our earliest description of the fast is, in fact, FL2 for 330 AD.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> FL2. 8.

<sup>183</sup> Eusebius, *HE*, 7. 20. Cf C.L.Feltoe, ed., *Dionysiou Leipsana: The Letters and Other Remains of Dionysius of Alexandria* (Cambridge 1904) pp.101f. (cited in Talley, op.cit. p. 168).

<sup>184</sup> L.-Th. Lefort, *Les Lettres festales de saint Athanase*, Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres de l'Academie Royale de Belgique 39 (1953) pp. 643-656, also *Athanase, Lettres festales et pastorales en copte*. CSCO 150 (Louvain, 1955).

An analysis of the concluding announcement in the Letters shows that not all of the Pastoral Epistles indicated the beginning of the Fast of Forty Days. When we come to consider the several periods Athanasius was compelled to spend in exile, we find that letters were often sent late (FL3, FL10) or despatched after Lent had commenced (FL4). Nevertheless, those letters that do make reference to the start of the feast provide a number of additional facts that are worthy of note. Talley denotes these as follows.

- (1) The older paschal fast of six days comprises the final week of the fast of forty days. The total fast before Easter comprises a period of six weeks. The actual date for the beginning of the sixth week, that is the ancient paschal fast that had been observed since the time of Dionysius, is indicated independently in the letters.
- (2) Little concern seems to have been shown for the number of actual fast days. FL6 for 334 AD makes it clear that Sundays neither are fast days nor are they Sabbaths, except that of the Pascha itself. There are then thirty-one days of actual fasting, i.e. five days in each of six weeks, together with the paschal Sabbath.
- (3) Although we find Athanasius referring often to scriptural models of a quadragesimal feast, he never refers this fast of forty days to the fast of Jesus in the Judaean wilderness. In various letters, Athanasius points to the figures of Moses, David and Daniel, for example, but the fast is presented purely as an ascetic preparation for Pascha.
- (4) No information exists that the fast of forty days has any relation to baptism. The rites of Christian initiation do not figure in these letters in any way.
- (5) It seems that the fast of forty days, as an innovative practice, could be seen as an unpopular liturgical introduction. We judge this through the fact that, as has already been stated, the letter announcing the fast was for 330 AD. Yet, some ten years later in 340 AD, Athanasius expresses concern that this fast is



still not being observed in Egypt. Unfortunately, the festal letter for that year (340 AD) is missing from the corpus. Nevertheless, there exists the letter, which Athanasius sent to his friend Serapion, generally referred to as FL12, although no actual festal letter remains extant. It was to Serapion that the letter was sent around April 340 AD bearing reference to the following year, since Athanasius himself was exiled at Rome. "I have written this to each one – that you should proclaim the fast of forty days to the brethren, and persuade them to fast, lest, while all the world is fasting, we who are in Egypt should be derided, as the only people who do not fast, but take our pleasure in these days. For if, on account of the Letter [not] being yet read, we do not fast, we should take away this pretext, and it should be read before the fast of forty days, so that they may not make this an excuse for neglect or fasting."<sup>185</sup>

#### **I. 6. 4. The Lenten Fast and the Fast of Jesus**

The relationship between the significance of the Christian Lenten Fast and the fast of Jesus in the wilderness is an interesting one. We have established that the earliest reference to the Church's Fast of Forty Days is to be found in FL2 for 330 AD. Yet nowhere in the letter – nor, it seems, in any of the extant festal letters – does Athanasius make any reference to or make connection with, the fast of Jesus. We would have thought such an inclusion both necessary and imperative in affirming such an important Christological episode upon which the Church's Lenten observance has been based.

Talley argues strongly against the suggestion of Dom Gregory Dix that this connection was a later introduction, which came into effect when candidates were being prepared for baptism. "The step of identifying the six weeks' fast with the forty days fast of our Lord in the wilderness was obviously in keeping with the new historical interest in the liturgy. Extending Lent behind the sixth Sunday before

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FL12. 1.

Easter in various ways made up the actual number of ‘forty days’ of fasting. But the association of our Lord’s fast in the wilderness was an idea attached to the season of Lent only *after* it had come into existence in connection with the preparation of candidates for baptism.”<sup>186</sup>

In counteracting Dix’s argument, Talley seizes upon a passage from a Canon (issued c. 305 AD) by one of Athanasius’ predecessors, Peter of Alexandria. The extract concerns the restoration of apostolic penitents. The Canon directs that such persons should perform a quadragesimal fast in imitation of Christ. Thus, “from the time of their submissive approach, *other forty days* should be enjoined upon them, to keep them in remembrance of these things; those forty days during which, though our Lord and Saviour had fasted, He was yet, after he had been baptised, tempted of the devil.”<sup>187</sup> Talley, however, rejects support for this reference in relation to the Festal Letters. Instead, he seeks support in another document – the 4<sup>th</sup> Century (pseudepigraphal) *Canons of Hippolytus*. Canon 20 states, “The days of fast which have been established are the Wednesday, the Friday and the Forty Days. One who adds to these will receive a recompense and whoever transgresses these, save from sickness, constraint or necessity, such departs from the rule and disobeys God who has fasted for us.”<sup>188</sup> Clearly, Talley sees in the final phrase a reference to the fast of Jesus, perceiving that the “forty days” refers to “an established annual period of fasting in imitation of Jesus’ fast.”<sup>189</sup> As a possible solution to the problem, Talley draws attention to a Coptic tradition, which refers to an early Alexandrian church practice in which the fast was “from the beginning just such an imitation of the fast of Jesus as later tradition has claimed it to be.”<sup>190</sup> And yet it remains curious that the Festal Letters themselves express no connective relationship – explicit or implicit – between the observance of the forty day fast and the period of fasting which Jesus

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<sup>186</sup> Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London, 1945, reprint, New York, 1982), p. 354.

<sup>187</sup> Talley, p. 191; ANF VI, p. 269.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid. p. 191.

<sup>189</sup> Talley, op. cit. p. 191.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid. p. 194.

endured in the desert. Taking Coquin as his source, Talley goes an important stage further in support of Athanasius. "The failure of Athanasius to associate the Fast of Forty Days with the fast of Jesus (Coquin suggests) can be an indication that that imitative period still followed on the Epiphany, an entrenched tradition that would explain the resistance of the Egyptians to the prepaschal Lent urged by Athanasius from 330."<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid. p. 194. Cf. Coquin, *Les origines de l'Epiphanie en Egypte*, pp. 151 ff.

## CHAPTER II

### THE THEME OF RESURRECTION IN RELATION TO OTHER WORKS OF ATHANASIUS

#### II. 1. TEXTUAL BACKGROUND

While the theme of Resurrection within the context of the *Festal Letters* remains central to this thesis, we would wish now to continue this investigation by widening the scope beyond the parameters of these particular writings. In so doing we shall reaffirm that Athanasius' theology of Resurrection is again bound up in the soteriology which is expounded in certain of his other writings. In particular, we shall centre upon what the majority of scholars regard as being the very first *opus* of Athanasius,<sup>1</sup> namely the two-part dogmatic treatise *Contra Gentes - De Incarnatione*. An examination of the textual content provides a number of similarities sufficient to adduce each of these writings to be elements within a single composition. For example Athanasius makes particular references from one to the other, as in the opening line of the *De Incarnatione*, "We have discussed in the preceding part (ἐν τοῖς πρὸ τούτων) the error of the Gentiles..."<sup>2</sup> And again, "...as was said in the first part..." (ὥσπερ ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις ἐλέχθη).<sup>3</sup> In both we find a clear reference to the *Contra Gentes* not only in the matter of related content, but also in the nature of the two-part work as a whole. We find also a coherence of thought in the mind of Athanasius throughout the overall work in terms of the soteriological necessity of raising man from his disobedient and corrupt condition through the restoration of the world by the incarnate Word of God by means of the resurrection. Thomson states that both works have an early provenance and are "mentioned together by other patristic authors as early as Jerome", although no specific mention is given of the authors in question.<sup>4</sup>

When we turn to the title of each work we find that a fair amount of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson, Introduction, p. xxi.

<sup>2</sup> De Incar. I. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 4.14.

<sup>4</sup> Thomson, op. cit. p. xx.

discussion has been contributed to the debate. With regard to the second part of the work, Thomson points out that the lengthier title *The Incarnation Of The Word And His Manifestation To Us Through The Body*, (Τοῦ αὐτοῦ λόγος περὶ τῆς ἐνανθρωπήσεως τοῦ Λόγου καὶ τῆς διὰ σώματος πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἐπιφανείας αὐτοῦ) is generally accepted in most revisions and is referred to in the majority of quotations.<sup>5</sup> However, increased debate has arisen over the title of the first part. Was it addressed “against idols” (κατὰ εἰδώλων) or “against the Pagans” or “Greeks” as the title would suggest (κατὰ Ἑλλήνων)? Thomson’s evidence lies within the evidence of the manuscripts themselves. “The manuscript evidence of the L.R. (Long Recension) is divided between the usually better SHG, with which the S.R. (Short Recension) is in agreement, in favour of ‘against idols’ and all the other manuscripts in favour of ‘against the Pagans’.”<sup>6</sup> From Thomson’s investigation we observe that the majority of later writers (“who also mostly use the S.R.”) were familiar with the former title. As the earliest witness, however, Jerome refers to “libri duo adversus Gentes”. The more traditional and accustomed title *Contra Gentes* or κατὰ Ἑλλήνων has been generally accepted and approved on the grounds that (a) the content of the work does not concentrate on idolatry in its full sense; and (b) it follows the pattern of similar works which are never entitled ‘against idols’. In support of this hypothesis we may refer to Tatian and Justin who wrote ‘πρὸς Ἑλληνας’ and to Clement who composed a ‘προτρεπτικὸς (λόγος) πρὸς Ἑλληνας.’

We stated earlier that the majority of scholars hold the opinion that the *Contra Gentes - De Incarnatione* is considered to have been the first work to emanate from the pen of Athanasius. There is less unity of opinion, however, in relation to the question of dating. For one thing, we might have imagined that the Arian heresy - to which Athanasius appears to be constantly critical - would gain some mention at some point or other. But no reference occurs, in contrast to the

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<sup>5</sup> Thomson, op. cit. p. xx.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. xxi.

wide-ranging position the heresy assumes in Athanasius' other dogmatic and polemical works. As a result, it has been generally suggested that the date of authorship must be before 323 AD. However, a number of objections have been made to this suggestion. Athanasius speaks of "those who wish to divide the Church"<sup>7</sup> - a phrase which could describe those involved in the earlier Meletian schism, yet which, in other writings, has a specific reference to the Arian heresy. As further substantiation, we come across the phrase in the *De Incarnatione* as a way of explaining the concept of the undivided body of Christ. We find a similar theme in a number of the *Festal Letters*, more especially those composed immediately before and after Athanasius' first exile from 335 - 337 AD.<sup>8</sup>

When we begin to analyse the question as to whom the overall work was addressed we find that it is directed in the singular tense to an anonymous reader. The reader is clearly either Christian or pagan, for two distinct modes of address are used. Thomson outlines the manner in which Athanasius describes the reader who clearly belongs to a Christian background: μακάριε;<sup>9</sup> ἄνθρωπε;<sup>10</sup> φιλόχριστε;<sup>11</sup> and ἡ σὴ φιλομαθεία.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand Athanasius addresses the non-Christian reader by ὧ Ἕλληνες<sup>13</sup> or οἱ ἀσεβεῖς or οἱ ἄπιστοι.<sup>14</sup> At the very beginning of *De Incarnatione* 25 where Athanasius states that "these remarks are for those outside the Church", the more powerful supportive evidence becomes clear that Athanasius was writing not to one specific reader, but to an audience inside and outside the Church. We turn now in greater detail to the content of this double dogmatic treatise in order to investigate the Athanasian understanding of resurrection and its contingent

<sup>7</sup> *De Incar.* 25. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. FL 5. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *C. Gentes* 1. 6; *De Incar.* 1. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *C. Gentes.* 1. 44.

<sup>11</sup> *C. Gentes* 1. 46; 47. 32; *De Incar.* 1. 9; 56. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *De Incar.* 56. 10; cf. 25. 3, where φιλομαθής "refers to any serious Christian reader." (Thomson op. cit. p. xxii, note 23.

<sup>13</sup> *C. Gentes* 21. 3; cf. 29. 47.

<sup>14</sup> *C. Gentes* 1. 43.

soteriological constructs.<sup>15</sup>

## II. 2. CONTRA GENTES

Central to the theology of Athanasius lay the necessity for man's restoration from his fallen state. As a result of human disobedience towards his Creator, Man effectively forfeited the gift of Divine Grace. Having abused the privileged position God bestowed upon him within Creation, Man forfeited the life that God intended him to have. Instead of the divine gift of life, Man brought sin, corruption and death upon himself. Athanasius contends that since Man could not by himself restore such a self-inflicted condition, only God as Creator and Redeemer could recreate the broken life of the world, heal corrupt human nature and restore fallen humanity directly and personally to Himself. For the human form to be restored, only one way was possible: that the creative Word or eternal Logos of God should himself in human form undergo death and thereby not only putting to death Man's sinful, corrupt and diseased state, but also destroying death itself. For Athanasius, therefore, as his understanding concentrated upon the economy of divine salvation, the Cross became the means by which Jesus Christ, the uncreated, Incarnate Word of God, underwent death for the whole of mankind. As a consequence, through his Resurrection the whole body - and thereby the whole life of Man - was able to be restored fully and completely and endowed with the promise of eternal life.

The background to man's state of disobedience and consequent corruption becomes plain when we turn, firstly, to the *Contra Gentes*. It is here that Athanasius delineates the reasons behind Man's fall from grace. But before proceeding upon this theme, he presents a vibrant *apologia* in support of Christian doctrine, particularly, as the Alexandrian Bishop steadily demonstrates, the Christian doctrine of salvation. This he undertakes as a counter-measure to the worldly teachings of those heathen forces of the world which denigrate the doctrine of the Cross and, by resultant

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<sup>15</sup> Textual quotations and references are taken from the edition and translation of Robert W. Thomson, (Oxford), 1971.

definition, refute the purpose and effects of the Resurrection. The truth of Christian doctrine, Athanasius proposes, is set forth in “the sacred and divinely inspired Scriptures (that) are sufficient for the exposition of the truth.”<sup>16</sup> Therein lies the timeless message of salvation. Yet there are those who ridicule the content of that divine truth and hold that it has no rational ground on which it can stand. Therefore a defence of biblical teaching is necessary “that no one may regard the teaching of our doctrine as worthless, or suppose faith in Christ to be irrational.”<sup>17</sup> For “such things the pagans misrepresent and scorn, greatly mocking us, though they have nothing other than the cross of Christ to cite in objection.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, “in slandering the cross they do not see that its power has filled the whole world, and that through it the effects of the knowledge of God have been revealed to all.”<sup>19</sup> Thus the gift of God’s work of salvation, stemming from the Cross into Resurrection, extends to the life of Man both the revelation of divine saving grace and the revelation of divine knowledge in accordance with the nature of God’s saving power.

In this theological affirmation we are able to recognise that the ontological connection grounded in the reality of divine revelation, relates centrally to the epistemological element whereby, through that revelation, Man is enabled to know something of God in nature, being and grace. Taken together, they have become bound up with the soteriological truth of the Cross and Resurrection. “For if they had really applied their minds to his divinity they would not have mocked at so great a thing, but would rather have recognized that he was the Saviour of the universe and that the cross was not the ruin but the salvation of creation.”<sup>20</sup> It is here that we perceive the importance in Athanasian theology of the Cross in making possible the Resurrection in terms of the whole of creative being and the restorative life that followed.

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<sup>16</sup> *C. Gentes* 1.9.  
<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 1.16.  
<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 1.20.  
<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 1.22.  
<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 1.24-27.



At the heart of this divine act of renewal lay the relationship between Creation and Redemption. In the mind of Athanasius, creation included both animate as well as inanimate aspects, but it is upon the life of Man wholly, particularly and necessarily, that God has bestowed His healing, re-creating and resurrecting power. In the beginning, the entire world of creation was brought into being from non-being through the Word of God. But since through disobedience, Man has divorced himself from his Creator, he has lapsed back into a state of non-being. It is from this darkened existence that God offered His Son as the life-giving Word. His life from birth and incarnation to death and Resurrection was one of complete obedience to the Father's will. When seen from the point of view of man's salvation it was one of total self-offering on the Cross fulfilled in Resurrection glory. Through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word of the Father, Man was restored to his full and unique ontic relationship with his Creator. Creation, therefore, is to be seen as a revelation of God, particularly as a result of the harmony and order ruling every aspect of created being. Nevertheless, while creation reveals something of the power of God in transforming being from non-being, order out of chaos and harmony from discord, Athanasius argues strongly that Creation does not by itself reveal the very Nature and Being of God: God Himself is beyond created being. "For God, the creator of the universe and king of all, who is beyond all being and human thought, since he is good and bountiful, has made mankind in his own image through his own Word, our Saviour Jesus Christ; and he also made man perceptive and understanding of reality through his similarity to him, giving him also a conception and knowledge of his own eternity, so that as long as he kept his likeness he might never abandon his concept of God or leave the company of the saints, but retaining the grace of him who bestowed it on him, and also the special power given him by the Father's Word, he might rejoice and converse with God, living an idyllic and truly blessed and immortal life."<sup>21</sup> God created Man in His own image and Man has been enabled to gain knowledge of God through the evidence of his creative power: "For God, who is

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<sup>21</sup> *C. Gentes* 2. 4-14.

good and loves men and who cares for the souls he has made, since he is by nature invisible and incomprehensible, being above all created being, and therefore the human race would fail to attain knowledge of him in that they were made from nothing while he was uncreated – for this reason God so ordered creation through his Word that although he is invisible by nature, yet he might be known to men from his works.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the unity of creation is such that it surely must reflect the oneness of the Creator. This is a point on which Athanasius lays considerable importance in establishing the Oneness of God’s Nature and Being. “A sure indication that the maker of the universe is one is the fact that the world is not many but one. For if there were many gods, there would have to be many different worlds.”<sup>23</sup> The Oneness of His Creation reflects the Oneness of God who created all things through His Word. The need for Man is to return to the Word, namely Jesus Christ. For only through the life-giving Word who underwent death and Resurrection for and on behalf of Man, could the corrupt and alienated life of Man be fully and properly restored. “But being good, he governs and establishes the whole world through his Word who is himself God, in order that creation, illuminated by the leadership, providence, and ordering of the Word, may be able to remain firm, since it shares in the Word who is truly from the Father and is aided by him to exist, and lest it suffer what would happen, I mean a relapse into non-existence.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, through the God-given will with which Man has been endowed, he is able to choose either to accept his new life made possible through Resurrection or to reject that life and remain in his state of sin and death. “...yet men in their folly, rejecting knowledge of him and belief in him, have honoured non-existent beings rather than reality; and in place of the truly existent God they have deified unrealities, “*worshipping creation instead of the creator*,”<sup>25</sup> thus involving themselves in foolishness and impiety.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> C. Gentes 35.1-7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 39.5-7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 41:21-27.

<sup>25</sup> Romans 1:25

<sup>26</sup> C. Gentes 47:15-19.

For Athanasius the necessity of Man's restoration through the Resurrection of the Divine Word has been set forth: it offers the one remedy for corrupt humanity. As he sees it, the preparatory groundwork in the divine plan of salvation now leads to that soteriological necessity being met in the Incarnation of God's eternal Logos.

### II. 3. DE INCARNATIONE

Having established the imperative requirement for Man's Redemption through the saving act of Resurrection, Athanasius now concentrates on the particularities in terms of the Word Himself both in Act and Being. In the *De Incarnatione*, he continues to affirm the necessity that Man's condition could be restored only through the healing power of God's Word. By assuming fallen human nature in its entirety, the Divine Word or Eternal Logos, revealed in and through the Person of Jesus Christ, provided in himself the sole remedy for the sinful and corrupt nature of mankind. Athanasius outlines the groundwork of this approach, beginning with the honoured position in which God had placed Man within Creation: this is his starting-point. "We must first speak about the creation of the universe and its creator, God, so that in this way one may consider as fitting that its renewal was effected by the Word who created it in the beginning. For it will appear in no way contradictory if the Father worked its salvation through the same one by whom he created it."<sup>27</sup> Since Creation (including Man) came into being through God's pre-existent Word, only through that same Word assuming incarnate form, could Man be restored and redeemed. For "no one else could bring what was corrupted to incorruptibility, except the Saviour himself, who also created the universe in the beginning from nothing; nor could any other recreate men in the image, save the image of the Father; nor could another raise up what was mortal as immortal, save our Lord Jesus Christ, who is life itself."<sup>28</sup> The means by which this process of restoration could be achieved was through the Word himself becoming incarnate in order to bring about

<sup>27</sup> *De. Incar.* 1. 30-35.

<sup>28</sup> *De Incar.* 20. 3-7. Robertson draws attention to the term ἀντοζωή in *C. Gentes* 40, 46; *Orat.* IV. 2. Note 4. 9-12.

the Resurrection of the whole of humanity from sin and death. "For we were the cause of his incarnation, and for our salvation he had compassion to the extent of being born and revealed in a body. God, then, had so created man and willed that he should remain in incorruptibility."<sup>29</sup> Again, the salvation of Man brought about through resurrection could only have been accomplished through the Word "who orders the universe, and who alone is the true only-begotten Son of the Father."<sup>30</sup>

Through the Incarnation of God's Word, Athanasius argued that the restoration of Man through Resurrection has been made not only a possibility, but also a reality. For since the Word took upon Himself human flesh which was subject to death and decay, only by undergoing death could the power of death be overcome, enabling corruption and decay to be restored through the Resurrection of the body. "So all the more, when the race of men which had been created by himself had descended to corruption, God the Word of the all-good Father did not neglect them, but effaced the death which had fallen upon them by the offering of his own body."<sup>31</sup> Both death and corruption have been overcome and destroyed. "Corruption has ceased and been destroyed by the grace of the resurrection."<sup>32</sup>

In the mind of Athanasius, we see how Incarnation and Resurrection are bound up together. While the Incarnation of Jesus Christ stands as the soteriological starting-point for the salvation of the world, the corollary is that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the soteriological fulfilment of his Incarnation as the inhominated Word of God. Furthermore, we may note that since the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was a victory over sin and death and thereby brought about the salvation of mankind, Resurrection is bound up with Redemption and Atonement.

The doctrinal controversy of Athanasius' day was not expounded directly in terms of Atonement as such. The central issue related to the Person and being of the Son in relation to the Person and Being of the Father. For Athanasius, however, the

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<sup>29</sup> *De Incar.* 4. 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 20. 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 10. 7-9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 21.3-4.

understanding of Resurrection and Atonement stemmed from the proper understanding of Christ's Person and Being. Put another way, the soteriological and the ontological were bound together. Athanasius did not work with a division between the work of Christ and the Person of Christ. We find on the one hand that Athanasius argued throughout his writings primarily for the Divinity of Christ, since the establishing of his divine nature and being were essential to the truth of his Salvation. If Christ had been mere man, instead, say, of being more than man, it would not have been possible for him to save. On the other hand, we find Athanasius arguing equally forcefully for the humanity of Christ. For if Christ had not been completely Man, Man in every respect of his humanity would not have been saved completely and wholly. It is in the Incarnation that we see the perfect two-fold ontological revelatory relationship in the divine and human natures of Christ through whom God chose to reveal His whole Nature and Being and, in His Son the Incarnate Logos, dwell as both God and Man within the life of Man. It is in the Incarnation leading to Resurrection that we see the total and perfect humanity of Christ that he assumed in order to redeem and restore it to fulness of life. Athanasius' understanding seems to be that the victory of Christ's death through Resurrection leads, not to a bodily destruction, but simply to a temporary dissolution. "So, since the common Saviour of all has died for us, no longer do we the faithful in Christ now die as before according to the threat of law, for such condemnation has ceased. But as corruption has ceased and been destroyed by the grace of the resurrection, now in the mortality of the body we are dissolved only for the time which God has set for each man, in order that we may be able to '*obtain a better resurrection*'.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Athanasius adds, while the body may be buried in the ground, it does not in the end perish through dissolution. Through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the human body is not subject to eternal destruction, but is assured of Resurrection life. "For like the seeds which are sown in the ground we do not perish when we are dissolved, but we rise again as plants, since death has been destroyed by the grace of

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<sup>33</sup> *De Incar.* 21. 1-7.

the Saviour.”<sup>34</sup> So, underlining Athanasius’ argument, Resurrection comes as God’s free grace to man. The statement posited by Gregory of Nazianzus underlines the truth of Christ’s redemptive wholeness, namely, that what was not assumed was not healed (Τὸ γὰρ ἀπρόσληπτον ἀθεράπευτον). “Christ, receiving our humanity in the condition in which we receive it, purified it by a life-long mortification, and in the end rendered it up to God without spot in the sacrifice of His Death.”<sup>35</sup> That is to say, in taking upon himself the completeness of human form, body, mind and spirit, the human form in every aspect of its totality is resurrected, healed and renewed.

We have noted the necessity that Athanasius placed upon the Divine Word in assuming human form as well as every aspect relating to the sinfulness of human nature and Being. Without the union between the Incarnate Word and the humanity of Man, the fulfilment of the divine saving grace in Resurrection would not have been accomplished. “The death of all was fulfilled in the Lord’s body, and also death and corruption were destroyed because of the Word who was in it.”<sup>36</sup> Again, “The Lord was more concerned with the resurrection of the body which he intended to effect. For the trophy of his victory over death was the showing of the resurrection to all, and their assurance that he had erased corruption and hence that their bodies would be incorruptible; and as a pledge and proof of the resurrection which all would enjoy he kept his own body incorruptible.”<sup>37</sup>

Athanasius rightly understood that only through Jesus Christ the eternal Word or Logos could the corruptible human body be transformed into a form that was incorruptible and not subject to death. Since he had created all things at the beginning, it was natural that (through the Resurrection) he should restore all things to life at the end. And since man had been created in the image of God and the Saviour of Man was himself the express image of God, only Christ could restore

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<sup>34</sup> *De Incar.* 21. 7-9. Athanasius underlines the Pauline emphasis, with reference to I Cor. 15. 53 ff. and to “Paul who has made a surety of the Resurrection.”

<sup>35</sup> Melville Scott, *Athanasius On The Atonement*, Pref. p.x.

<sup>36</sup> *De Incar.* 20. 32-33.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 22. 17-22.

Man to the divine image.<sup>38</sup> The Resurrection provided the visible proof not only of victory over sin and death for Man, but the restoration of Man in the image of God.

It was in the context of Christ's death that Athanasius posed several searching questions. To what extent was it necessary for the Word of God to endure the Cross? For what reason did it have to be such a public spectacle? If, as Athanasius has already argued and affirmed, the necessity of the Cross was central to the restoration of Man's life and being, could Christ not have undergone death more quietly and outside the public limelight? "If it was necessary for him to surrender his body to death on behalf of us all, why did he not put it aside privately as a man?" Why "come so far as to be crucified?"<sup>39</sup> Now, while we may observe the extent to which the means of Christ's death and the public nature of Christ's death filled Athanasius with revulsion, he seeks to overcome his feelings with a counter-reply. The answer to such questions depends on whether the act of Redemption is seen purely in its human context or understood from the point of view of the entire divine plan of salvation. "Consider whether such an objection be not human, whereas what was done by our Saviour is truly divine and worthy of his divinity for many reasons."<sup>40</sup> Even more emphatically, for Athanasius the public death of Christ was itself the ultimate requirement as proof for the Resurrection. In this, we come to what is arguably the key to Athanasius' argument. He restates the hypotheses whereby Christ might have undergone death in private or succumbed to illness and died. Had Christ then reappeared in full public view and confessed to have been raised from the dead, Athanasius argued, he would have risked being accused of trickery and untruths: the Resurrection would have been totally discredited. Whereas the death in public of Christ was a necessary precursor to the Resurrection and the proof in public of Christ in risen form. "But, death must precede resurrection, for resurrection could not take place unless death had occurred. So if the death of his body had occurred secretly somewhere and not in front of witnesses, its resurrection would also have been

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<sup>38</sup> *De Incar.* 20. 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 21. 16-17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 21. 21-22.

unseen and without witnesses.”<sup>41</sup>

Again, Athanasius compares the death befallen to Christ with the illnesses and diseases which befall man and which Christ healed during his earthly ministry. For Man, death may come as a natural result of illness or disease: the body succumbs naturally to death as a result of the weakness of its nature. Since Christ was the Word of Life, it was not fitting for Him to inflict death upon His own body; nor appropriate for Him to avoid or escape death at the hands of others. This did not show any sign of weakness but rather proved Him “to be the Word of God, who is life.”<sup>42</sup> “But,” Athanasius affirms, “Such action showed not the weakness of the Word, but rather demonstrated that he is Saviour and life.”<sup>43</sup> Had Christ simply succumbed to death through natural illness by expiring on a bed, in common with other people, such an act would have emphasised that the nature of Christ reflected the same physical weakness as mankind, whereas the nature of Christ was of God. “For as it did not befit the Word of God, who is life, to give death to his own body by himself, it was equally unfitting for him to flee from that which was given by others; but he should rather have pursued it to destruction.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, for Christ’s death to have retained its true purpose in Resurrection, it required not self-imposition, but compulsion on the part of Man and willingness on the part of the Word of Life to undergo death on the Cross for the salvation of man.

Again Athanasius asked whether Christ could not have prevented his own death in the same way as he restored illness and affliction in the human body. In reply, we are drawn to the emphasis that Athanasius placed upon the importance of the body within Resurrection. If Christ had not possessed a body that was human in every respect, then there would have been no possibility of that body being raised. “So why did he not restrain death as he did with disease? Because that was why he had the body, and it would have been unfitting to avoid death lest the resurrection be

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<sup>41</sup> *De Incar.* 23.8-11.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 22.4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 22. 8-9.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 22. 4-7.



prevented.”<sup>45</sup>

Here, once more, we come across the emphasis that Athanasius placed upon the necessity of Christ’s death: it had to happen in the precise way in which it did. Otherwise, it would not have been in accordance with the nature of God’s saving grace, forgiveness and love poured out for mankind. The purpose of Christ’s Coming was not for his own benefit, but to benefit the life of Man. “It was not his own death,” Athanasius quietly observed, “but that of men that the Saviour came to fulfil. Therefore he did not lay aside the body by his own death – for he had none since he was life – but he accepted the death imposed by men in order to destroy it completely when it came to his own body.”<sup>46</sup> And as if to sum up the climax of his argument, Athanasius glories in affirming the Resurrection of the body: The restoring of Man’s body from decay and corruption depended upon the Resurrection of Christ’s body from decay and corruption. “The Lord was more concerned with the Resurrection of the body which he intended to effect.”<sup>47</sup>

Just as death was necessary as a requirement and revelation of Resurrection, so the Resurrection itself was to become the one necessary revelation to the disciples both of its inherent truth and of their calling to proclaim that self-same truth to which they had witnessed - the very Gospel of Christ’s Resurrection which became the heart of the Church’s worship. To the eleven disciples, as Athanasius contests, the proof of the Resurrection was the visible revelation before them of the risen Christ. “How could his disciples have had frankness in speaking of the resurrection if they had not been able to say that he had first died? Or how would they have believed when saying that first occurred death and afterwards the resurrection, unless those to whom they were speaking so boldly had had them as witnesses of his death?”<sup>48</sup>

Further questions relating to the purpose and necessity of the Resurrection are posed. If, as he argues, it was necessary for Christ’s death to have taken place in face

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<sup>45</sup> De Incar. 21. 37-39.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 22.14-17.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 22.17. *supra*.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 23. 17-20.

of everyone and before witnesses for the very purpose that the Resurrection might prove to be true and credible, would it not have been better had Christ undertaken a more glorious death and so escape the ignominy of the Cross? Athanasius refutes such a suggestion. Had he done this, Christ would have roused suspicion against himself with the accusation that he did not have power over every single death, but only over his own - he death "which was devised by him" <sup>49</sup> and there would have resulted "the pretext for disbelief about the resurrection." <sup>50</sup> Therefore it was necessary for Christ to undergo death, not through any method of his own that would risk detracting from the universal purpose of the Cross, but through the universal hand of Man. In Athanasius' words: "So death came to the body, not through Himself, but by treachery, in order that he might destroy that death which they inflicted on the Saviour."<sup>51</sup> For the Resurrection to be understood as real and true, the death of Christ had also to be understood in the same manner. It had to be inflicted externally by others in order to establish its credibility: it had to gain overall agreement of having taken place: the evidence had to be before the eyes of the people. "So also the Life of all, our Lord and Saviour, even Christ, did nor devise a death for His own body, so as not to appear to be fearing some other death; but He accepted on the Cross, and endured, a death inflicted by others, and above all by His enemies, which they thought dreadful and ignominious and not to be faced; so that this also being destroyed, both He Himself might be believed to be the Life, and the power of death be brought utterly to nought."<sup>52</sup> "... for the death, which they thought to inflict as a disgrace, was actually a monument of victory against death itself." <sup>53</sup> With such emphasis upon the victorious nature of Christ's death and his obedience in enduring the Cross, Athanasius also recognised the importance in the wholeness of Christ's body so that as physical body it might be seen as a whole-offering for the salvation of Man and as a spiritual Body, whole and united, it might be recognised as

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<sup>49</sup> *De Incar.* 24.11.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 24. 8-9.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 24.10-11.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 24.3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 24.4.

pointing to the Church as being undivided and without division. Christ's death was quite unlike that of John the Baptist (whose head was severed) or that of Esaias (who was sawn in two). For it was necessary "that he might keep his body intact and whole in death, and that there be no pretext for those who wish to divide the Church."<sup>54</sup> Quite plainly we may observe how important the wholeness of Christ's body remained so that in undergoing death it might emerge whole and complete in Resurrection and thereby present his Body, the future Church, as undivided and unsullied.

A further matter which Athanasius thought necessary to underline and explain was the question of the period of time within which the Resurrection took place. Why was the body of Christ raised after such a precise period of three days? Could the Resurrection not have taken place more immediately after the Cross? Again, the unbelieving critic might have argued that time simply did not permit the resurrection. "For someone would have said that he had not died at all or that death had not fully touched him, if he had immediately shown resurrection."<sup>55</sup> For Athanasius, any thought of an immediate Resurrection was dismissed out of hand, in case the accusation be made that Christ had not died at all: that somehow his body had been spirited away. Quite clearly Athanasius accepted the fact that there was no other way by which Christ could have been put to death. The Cross manifested to the whole world the physical suffering and sacrifice which Christ had to endure, so that the human frame with its pain and mortality which he had assumed, might be put to death once and for all. "So his death for us on the cross was suitable (πρέπων) and fitting (ἀρμόζων), and its cause appeared to be eminently reasonable (εὐλογος). It was also justified because in no other way except through the cross did the salvation of all have to take place."<sup>56</sup> Proof of Christ's death was a necessary requirement for

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<sup>54</sup> *De Incar.* 24. 26-28. Thomson indicates that the reference to "those who divide the Church" has "often been interpreted in the light of the Arian controversy." p. 195, Note 1.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 26.12-14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 26. 1- 4.

proof of the Resurrection. The corruptible nature of the body had to be overcome and resurrected into an incorruptible nature. "So in order that the body might be shown to be dead, the Word waited one extra day in the middle and on the third day revealed it to all as incorruptible. It was thus in order that death might be shown in the body that he raised it up on the third day."<sup>57</sup> In this far-reaching search for a watertight proof as to the validity of the Resurrection - that it took place along with the precise purpose and efficacy in doing so - Athanasius endeavours to seek out and counter every possible criticism and doubt. As a supplementary argument in support of his earlier statement that the raising of Christ's body should not have taken place immediately after his death, Athanasius then advances the assertion that it was not appropriate that the Resurrection should have taken place more than three days afterwards. Any deep lapse of time could lead to distrust and the accusation that Christ's body had been replaced or exchanged for some other body. It was fitting, therefore, in accordance with the divine purpose of salvation that the Resurrection took place when it did, within three days of the Cross. Thus "...the Son of God after an interval of three days showed the body which had been dead as immortal and incorruptible; and it was demonstrated to all that the body had not died through the weakness of the nature of the Word who dwelt in it, but in order that death might be destroyed in it through the power of the Saviour."<sup>58</sup>

With the argument concerning the timing of the Resurrection now strongly affirmed, Athanasius proceeds to contrast the effect which the Resurrection left upon those who were witnesses to the death of Christ, but who subsequently found themselves also witnesses to his risen life. The Cross has become victorious over death: there is no doubt in Athanasius's mind on this matter. "That death has been dissolved and that the cross was a victory over it and that it is no longer powerful but truly dead, is demonstrated in no uncertain manner."<sup>59</sup> Not only that, but the effect left upon the disciples who were once so fearful of death is quite obvious for all to

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<sup>57</sup> *De Incar.* 26. 16-19.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 26. 28-32.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 27. 1 - 3.

see. Death now “is despised by all Christ’s disciples and everyone treads it underfoot and no longer fears it, but with the sign of the cross and in the Christian faith they trample on it as on a dead thing.”<sup>60</sup> In times past, “all used to weep for the dead as if they were lost.”<sup>61</sup> But now, as a result of the Resurrection, such sorrowing has been transformed into joyous hope: their faith in Christ has been confirmed and strengthened. “But now that the Saviour has raised up his body death is no longer to be feared, but all believers in Christ tread on it as something non-existent and would rather die than deny their faith in Christ.”<sup>62</sup> This re-affirmation of faith in the risen Christ itself brings about the profound assurance in the believer that, although they are still subject to the physical process of death, they will not be destroyed by its apparent power. The fact of the Resurrection provided them with the inestimable certainty that they will live thereafter a life that is no longer subject to decay and corruption. “For they really know that when they die they do not perish but live and become incorruptible through the resurrection.”<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, the prospect of Resurrection-life enriches the new believer with a joyful vitality of hope and promise, both for this life and the next. The contrast is again well marked. “The proof of this is that before men believe in Christ they view death as fearsome and are terrified at it, but after they have come to faith in him and to his teaching they so despise death that they willingly encounter it and become witnesses to the victory won over it by the Saviour.”<sup>64</sup>

For Athanasius, the centrality of Christ on the Cross was necessary to his understanding the transforming power of the Resurrection within the divine economy of salvation. To the casual observer the very fact of the crucifixion might appear obvious to the fulfilment of God’s redeeming work. Yet Athanasius returns to emphasise the indisputable purpose of the Cross. The Cross stood as the visible means to which the human form was nailed and death was allowed to do its worst.

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<sup>60</sup> *De Incar.* 27. 4 - 6.  
<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 27. 8 - 9.  
<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 27. 10-12.  
<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 27. 12-14.  
<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 27. 15-19.

But the Cross stood also as the visible means to which the humanity of the world was nailed through the assumption of that humanity in and through the person and being of Jesus Christ. That humanity was thereby nailed to the Cross, crucified, and itself put to death. That first stage, as it were, in the means of salvation, led through the Cross to the reality of Resurrection three days later. No one other than the Son of God could have accomplished such a prospect: the exchange which he underwent in bringing about the descent of God into humanity and in raising humanity to God, ensured that the Resurrection had really and truly been accomplished. "But if it is by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ that death is crushed, then it is clear, if truth is the judge, that it is none other than Christ himself who has shown triumphs and victories over death and who has rendered it powerless."<sup>65</sup>

The evidence of the Resurrection is unassailable as far as Athanasius is concerned: the proof is demonstrably beyond human dispute. The proof can be seen in the very facts, indeed "the proof of the now immortal resurrection of the body effected by the common Saviour of all, Christ the true life, is clearer through these visible events than any proof through words."<sup>66</sup> Human sight and sense evidenced the risen body of Christ. Could the reality of the Resurrection have been believed had the risen Lord not appeared before men and women? "But if this proof about resurrection is not sufficient for anyone, then let him believe the argument through obvious facts."<sup>67</sup> The visible, risen body marked the "proof that death has been destroyed."<sup>68</sup>

Athanasius recognised only too well the difficulties involved in persuading a godless world of the truth of Christ's Risen body in all its power and glory: for the godless to believe in the Resurrection was to consent to the irrational. Yet, Athanasius argues, those who refuse to believe that the Resurrection took place are themselves behaving in an irrational manner, for while these people believe in

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<sup>65</sup>     *De Incar.*   29.1- 4.  
<sup>66</sup>     *Ibid.*        30.3 -6.  
<sup>67</sup>     *Ibid.*        30.12 - 14.  
<sup>68</sup>     *Ibid.*        30. 1 - 2.

objects which are themselves lifeless in form and being, they deny belief in the risen Christ who is alive. What is more, those who insist on denying the bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ, *ipso facto*, deny the very nature of God whose very Word is revealed in the Risen Christ and by whose Power the Word was raised to life. Thus Athanasius states, "He who does not believe in the resurrection of the Lord's body is like one ignorant of the Word and Wisdom of God. For if he had fully taken to himself a body and made it his own in reasonable fashion, as our argument has shown, what should the Lord have done with it, or what should have been the end for the body, once the Word had come to it?"<sup>69</sup>

By virtue of its very nature as being mortal, the body of Christ had to endure death, otherwise death could never have been confronted in order to be destroyed. But that mortal body was infused with the Word - "the Word had made it his own."<sup>70</sup> That Word was the Word of Life. Thus "it was also unable to remain dead, because it had become the temple of life. Therefore it died as being mortal, but came to life because of the life which was in it; and its works are the indication of its resurrection."<sup>71</sup>

We can perceive, therefore, that the actuality of Christ's resurrection centred in and emerged out of his two-fold nature as both God and Man. From the side of Christ's divinity, Resurrection may be seen as a God-Manward movement in which the life of Man has been penetrated by the divine Word in human form where the world's sinfulness, death, decay and corruption have been assumed in order to be redeemed. But also, from the side of Christ's humanity, Resurrection may be understood as a Man-Godward movement in which the humanity of Man is raised from its state of corruption and restored to God, re-created in risen form, bestowed with new life.

It is at this point that we find Athanasius making a statement that appears to conflict with the understanding generally held, that it was God Himself who raised

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<sup>69</sup> *De Incar.* 31.25 - 30.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 1. 25.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 31. 31-34.

His Son Jesus Christ from the dead. After a lengthy exposition in which he affirms the evidence through the risen power of God's works – "For it is a property of God that he should be invisible but known by his works"<sup>72</sup> - Athanasius denotes two facts that, to him, are self-evident. The first is that, quite clearly, Christ himself somehow raised his own body. The second is that, directly related to this, Christ is affirmed to be the true Son of God. "It should be clear – and let no one obstinately resist the truth – that the Saviour raised up his body, and that he is the true Son of God, from whom he proceeds as very Word from the Father and Wisdom and Power; who in the last times for the salvation of all took a body, and taught the world about the Father, destroyed death and bestowed incorruptibility on all through the promise of resurrection."<sup>73</sup>

Clearly, to affirm that Christ "the Saviour raised up his body" and as the firstfruits of the resurrection "raised his own body" creates certain difficulties. How are we to understand the nature of God's saving power in that He raised Christ from the dead, if Christ himself raised his own body, as Athanasius avers? If Christ did, in fact, raise his own body, does that act deny the redemptive purposes of God as they have been manifested in Jesus Christ? For the resolution to such questions we turn our attention briefly to the Council of Nicaea. Following the Statement of Faith by the Nicene Fathers regarding the *homoousion*, Athanasius was constantly at pains to underline the inherent relationship between the Being of God and the Being of Christ - the undivided Nature between the Father and the Son and the relationship of consubstantiality by which the Father and the Son were One. In this, we may contend, Athanasius did not disregard that essential relationship, but understood it as re-enforcing the fact that what the Father was able to do in and through the Son, so the Son was able to do in and through the Father. This relationship, not only of Being, but also of Works, so Athanasius perceived, cemented the truth of the Resurrection and exerted further evidence of its divine substance and purpose.

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<sup>72</sup> *De Incar.* 32. 3.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* 32. 25-31.



The revelation of God's power both to create and to re-create was acknowledged by Athanasius as being central to the redemptive purposes of the Resurrection. To reiterate, only by God's power was the Resurrection made possible: the risen body of Christ with all its saving power could not have come through the power of Man, since Man was not endowed with the power to accomplish such a mystery. Athanasius re-affirmed the power of God in Creation, particularly within the context of Resurrection, the Creation of Man. God created Man by His Word: God spoke, God commanded, God ordered through His creative Word and all things came into being. But Athanasius was able to anticipate the counter-argument that on the basis of this ontological fact, could God not simply have spoken through His Word and ordered the re-creation of mankind? Could God, through His Word, not have ordered the salvation of the world, thus avoiding the Cross with its pain and suffering, its conflicts and disagreements? God's Word would not have found it necessary to assume bodily form, for it was not found necessary to assume bodily form when creation was made out of nothing. The Resurrection of the body and the re-creation of Man are addressed to aspects of creation that are already in existence - aspects of creation, more especially the life and being of Man. Thus, "In the beginning, when nothing existed at all, only a nod and an act of will were necessary for the creation of the universe. But when man had been made and the necessity arose to heal, not the non-existent, but what had come into being, it followed that the healer and Saviour had to come among those who had already been created to cure what existed."<sup>74</sup> What Athanasius wishes us to observe here is this. For God to have issued a decree or divine command in order to make possible man's salvation and redemption would have been quite simple. In this way such a redemptive act would have shown something of God's power. But more was required not only in terms of power, but much more, through divine love present and active within the heart and life of Man. That is what the incarnation demonstrates so uniquely. "For this cause,

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<sup>74</sup> *De Incar.* 44. 8-10.

then, “he became a man and used the body as a human instrument.”<sup>75</sup> To put on that body, as it were, in the flesh, ensured that every part of man’s being could be enveloped within the saving power of his Creator. “For this reason the Saviour rightly put on a body in order that the body, being joined (συμπλακέντος)<sup>76</sup> to life, might no longer remain as mortal in death, but having put on immortality, might then rise up and remain immortal.”<sup>77</sup>

As a climax to his stance in support of the Truth and Reality of Christ’s Resurrection, Athanasius begins to draw his arguments to a close with a discussion in which he declaims against current civilisations and their philosophies, in particular that of Hellenistic culture and understanding. The Cross of Christ, Athanasius states, rises far above all of them. While their supporters have succumbed in time to death, the Cross with its message of Resurrection has outlived them all. None of them can speak of life after death. None can proffer the truth or evidence of Resurrection. None can offer the promise of eternal life. None can boast of immortality. “And who else so assured men about immortality as the cross of Christ and the resurrection of the body?”<sup>78</sup> Athanasius enquires rhetorically. “For although the Greeks lied in everything they said, yet they were unable to forge the resurrection of their idols, not supposing at all that the body could possibly exist again after death.”<sup>79</sup>

In conclusion, we may state unequivocally that for Athanasius the purposes of the incarnation were demonstrated as the fullest expression of divine love for the life of Man. Only through God himself assuming human form in and through the

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<sup>75</sup> *De Incar.* 44.11-12.

<sup>76</sup> συμπλακέντος - While Robertson translates this as “wound”, Thomson prefers the notion of “being joined (to life).” The idea suggests the human body and the redemptive life of Christ being entwined, plaited or locked together.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 44.30-33.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 50. 26-28.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 50. 28-30.

Person of Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word of the Father could the whole life and being of Man be healed, restored and recreated in at-one-ment with God the Creator and redeemer of all things. For this purpose the very life of the Incarnate Word had to undergo death and then, through the unique act of resurrection, transform the humanity of the world through the promise of life in this world and in the ages to come. Only through the grace of God and only through the hypostatic unity in the Word who was both human and divine was such possible. We observe that it was against those who accepted the humanity of the Word yet insisted on denying his divinity that Athanasius launched an almost final attack. "For if they had recognized his divinity from his universal power, they would have known also that Christ's works done in the body were not human but of the Saviour of all, the Word of God; and 'if they had known' this, as Paul said, '*they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*'"<sup>80</sup>

At the heart of Athanasius' soteriology lay not only a powerful theological ontology, but also a sound doxological foundation. As a fitting end to this chapter we shall encompass Athanasius' redemptive theology with his concluding doxological expression to the *De Incarnatione* where worship and praise, sound learning and understanding are directed to "all the things which have been prepared for those who live in virtue and love God and the Father, in Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom and with whom, to the Father with the Son himself in the holy Spirit, <sup>81</sup>be honour and power, and glory, for ever and ever, Amen."

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I Cor. 2.8.

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Similar doxological forms may be found in the Festal Letters. While the common forms contain "to", "through" and "in", examples including "with" may also be found. Cf. FL7; FL14; FL19.

## II. 4. CONTRA ARIANOS

In turning to the first three *Discourses Against The Arians*, we find Athanasius pursuing a slightly different path in his arguments in support of the role and purpose of the Resurrection within the divine economy of salvation. We have observed that in the *De Incarnatione* Athanasius placed great emphasis upon the necessity of the Word made flesh in relation to the Cross and the saving nature of Christ's death. Such a death in the thinking of Athanasius was necessarily dependent upon the Coming of God's own Word revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. That human form was itself necessary in the process of redeeming the life of Man from its corrupt state. For only through subjecting to death that human form revealed in the person of Christ the Word made flesh was it possible for the forces of darkness and death, decay and corruption to be themselves destroyed. The Inhomination of the eternal Logos, to use a favourite phrase of Athanasius, became the spring-board for the resurrected Body of the Logos, recreated in risen form as the eternal Word of Life. With all this in mind, therefore, it is not difficult to conclude that for Athanasius the primary route towards Resurrection commenced with the Incarnation itself.

That fact having been established, Athanasius proceeds to re-establish a further soteriological relationship which he felt it necessary to affirm in opposition to the counter-arguments of the Arians. We come across this approach in his treatise containing the *Four Discourses Against The Arians*.

The long-standing controversy that arose between Athanasius and his arch-enemy Arius concerned the Divinity of Christ. In short, the Arians denied that Christ was divine in nature and argued solely in favour of the creaturely side of his nature. In assuming such a theological stance, as Athanasius perceived it, Arius and his followers were both denying the essential place of Christ within the Godhead and negating the inherent relationship between the Father and the Son, that is to say, between God the Father and Creator of all things and Jesus Christ the Saviour and

Son and Word of God in and through whom all things came to be. Since it was God who chose to come down into the world in human form in order to demonstrate his saving power and bring about the re-creation of fallen Man, the Redemption of man was possible and necessary only through the unique relationship existing between God revealed as Father and God revealed through the eternal Logos who is Jesus Christ. To deny the Divine Sonship of Christ, in the mind of Athanasius, was to deny the saving power of God revealed in the divine action of Resurrection that only God could have brought about. For those who believe the Resurrection to have been effective and true, there must exist that essential theological and ontological requirement of complete unity within the Godhead.

Central to the anti-Arian controversy which he attacks in the *Contra Arianos* stands the saving relationship which Athanasius understood with regard to the divine purposes of redemption and divine grace through forgiveness and renewal. Alongside this soteriological relationship revealed through the saving nature and work of Jesus Christ stood the ontological reality of Christ the eternal Logos of God through whom Resurrection has been manifested. Central to both lay the epistemological relationship with the Father; for through the Incarnation, not only was God's saving power towards Man made a reality, but also knowledge of God was made possible, in spite of the severed relationship which Man's sinful nature had brought about.

It is here that Athanasius underlines, as he was wont to do, the essential relationship between the Father and the Son in terms of the *homoousion*. But in this instance he goes much further than his regular defence of the consubstantiality between the Father and the Son. The nature of the Trinity is undermined if one aspect of the Godhead is denied or subsumed over against another. "For how can he speak truth concerning the Father, who denies the Son, that reveals concerning Him? Or how can he be orthodox concerning the Spirit, while he speaks profanely of the Word that supplies the Spirit? And who will trust him, concerning the Resurrection, denying, as he does, Christ for us the first-begotten from the dead? And how shall he not err in respect to His incarnate presence, who is simply ignorant of the Son's

genuine and true generation from the Father?"<sup>82</sup> Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, we see the vital relationship of Nature and Being between the Incarnation and the inner constructs of the Trinity. The nature of the Trinitarian Godhead took form through the Incarnate Being of God. The Arians, by contrast, vehemently denied the divinity of Christ and through their creaturely imagery with regard to the Son, thereby denied the Father-Son relationship within the Trinity. Thus, logically, they denied the Resurrection as a result of their denial of Christ's divinity and their denial of his generation from the Father. "Wherefore His works were framed, when He would, through His Word; but the Son is ever the proper offspring of the Father's essence."<sup>83</sup>

Athanasius fully recognised the error and illogicality of Arius and his followers. For in seeking to understand the nature of the Logos or Logos of God, they insisted that he be regarded as Unoriginate and that he be known from his works alone, rather than out of the coessential relationship revealed between the Father and the Son. "And they, when they call Him Unoriginate, name Him only from His works, and know not the Son any more than the Greeks; but he who calls God Father, names Him from the Word; and knowing the Word, he acknowledges Him to be Framer of all, and understands that through Him all things have been made."<sup>84</sup> "Therefore it is more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call Him Father, than to name Him from His works only and call Him Unoriginate... but the title Father has its significance and its bearing only from the Son."<sup>85</sup>

It is this significance and bearing between the Father and the Son that lies at the heart of God's saving grace towards mankind in incarnational love. God descended into the world and assumed human nature upon Himself through the Person and Being of His Son Jesus Christ the Word made flesh, not in order to amass glory upon Himself, but to bring Man into a saving relationship with Himself.

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<sup>82</sup> *C. Arianos* I. 8.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* I. 29.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* I. 33.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* I. 34.

Athanasius introduces the notion of deification (θεοποίησις) to describe the twofold action of bringing of Man within the nature of God and endowing him with divine saving grace. "Therefore, if, even before the world was made, the Son had that glory, and was Lord of glory and the Highest, and descended from heaven, and is ever to be worshipped, it follows that He had not promotion from His descent, but rather Himself promoted the things that needed promotion; and if he descended to effect their promotion, therefore He did not receive in reward the name of the Son and God, but rather He Himself has made us sons of the Father, and deified men by becoming Himself man."<sup>86</sup> "Therefore, He was not man, and then became God, but He was God, and then became man, and that to deify us."<sup>87</sup>

This action whereby, through the Incarnate Word, God Himself assumed the humanity of Man, is examined at length by Athanasius as he counteracts the misunderstandings of the Arians. One statement is followed by another supportive counter-statement, just as regular questioning encourages a direct reply. Response and counter-response echo from the heart of Athanasius' arguments. We may take one highly-developed passage from Discourse I that states the purpose of Christ in taking human flesh upon himself, so that it might undergo death in order to be raised to life. We note well the favourite use Athanasius makes of the prepositional phrase "for us" to signify the significance of Christ's self-offering for the life of Man.

"Since then the Word, being the image of the Father and immortal, took the form of the servant, and as man underwent for us death in His flesh, that thereby He might offer Himself for us through death to the Father; therefore also, as man, He is said because of us and for us to be highly exalted, that as by His death we all died in Christ, so again in the Christ Himself we might be highly exalted, being raised from the dead, and ascending into heaven."<sup>88</sup>

Again we are able to observe that Athanasius is not satisfied to stop, as it

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<sup>86</sup> *C. Arianos.* I. 38.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* I. 39. cf. also *De Incar.* 54, and note giving further examples of usage. Also *C. Arianos* I. 42. "He deified that which he put on...."

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* I. 41.

were, with the death of Christ. Always his concern is to point the church through and beyond the Cross to the redemptive love and power of God in raising His Son from the dead and, in so doing, extending to Man the promise of Resurrection and life eternal. To ordinary man, however, the Cross remains equated with foolishness. Yet it is in and through the Cross that Resurrection is made possible. "Behold then what men considered the foolishness of God because of the Cross, has become of all things most honoured. For our Resurrection is stored up in it."<sup>89</sup>

For Athanasius, it is through the Resurrection that the bountiful grace, love and mercy of Almighty God have been fulfilled in saving power both within the life of man, through the Incarnation; and in redemptive purpose, through the atoning Resurrection of Jesus Christ. More so, it is Jesus Christ Word of God and Son of the Father whom the Church worships together with the Father whom the Word reveals and makes known. Thus the epistemological relationship forged between the Father and the Son and the Son and the Father is integrally bound up with the soteriological expression and purpose seen in the free grace bestowed by God upon man. "For the fact that the Lord, even when come in human body and called Jesus, was worshipped and believed to be God's Son, and that through Him the Father was known, shows, as has been said, that not the Word, considered as the Word, received this so great grace, but we. For because we too have become God's temple, and in consequence are made God's sons, so that even in us the Lord is now worshipped, and beholders report, as the Apostle says, that God is in them of a truth."<sup>90</sup>

This at-one-ment of God in Man lies at the centre of Athanasius' understanding of the Resurrection; for, as Athanasius frequently reiterates, the Resurrection and consequently the salvation of the whole Man, would not have been possible if the Son of God had not humbled himself in human form and offered himself as the suffering servant who would redeem the life and Being of Man. "And what is this but that He who existed in the form of God, the Son of a noble Father,

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<sup>89</sup> *C. Arianos* I. 43.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* I. 43. cf. Robertson, *TNPNF* p.331 Note 9.



humbled Himself and became a servant instead of us and in our behalf? For if the Lord had not become man, we had not been redeemed from sins, not raised from the dead, but remaining dead under the earth; not exalted into heaven but lying in Hades.”<sup>91</sup>

This substantive argument vis-à-vis the Word becoming flesh and thereby leading to the Resurrection of the body, we find emphasised by Athanasius on numerous occasions. We may cite the following passages: “...though it does not speak of the exaltation of the Word Himself, so far as He is Word (for he is, as was just now said, most high and like His Father), yet by reason of His becoming man it indicates His Resurrection from the dead.”<sup>92</sup> “<Wherefore He hath highly exalted Him>; wishing to shew, that, although as man He is said to have died, yet, as being Life, He was exalted on the Resurrection; for <He who descended, is the same also who rose again. > He descended in body, and He rose again because He was God Himself in the body.”<sup>93</sup> “.... but to signify the cause why the Resurrection took place; and why, while all other men from Adam down to this time have died and remained dead, he only rose in integrity from the dead.”<sup>94</sup> “...yet He was highly exalted from earth, because He was God’s Son in a body.”<sup>95</sup>

Crucial to statements advanced by Athanasius lies the important emphasis that he places upon the internal relationship between the Son of God as the Incarnate Word of life and the assumption of the human body that the Word took upon himself. The Body of Christ, far from remaining divorced from or being in some way external to the Word, belonged to the Word Himself. Since, having assumed a human body, Christ the Word was also subject to death and underwent death on behalf of Man, “it was His (Christ’s) own Body, and none other’s, that was exalted from the dead and taken up into heaven. And again, the Body being His, and the Word not being external to it, it is natural that when the Body was exalted, He, as man, should,

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<sup>91</sup> C. Arianos. I. 43.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. I. 44.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. I. 44.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. I. 44.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. I. 44.

because of the body, be spoken of as exalted.”<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, Athanasius argues, “If then he did not become man, let this not be said of Him; but if the Word became flesh, of necessity the Resurrection and exaltation, as in the case of man, must be ascribed to Him, that the death which is ascribed to Him may be a redemption of the sin of men and an abolition of death, and that the Resurrection and exaltation may for His sake remain secure for us.”<sup>97</sup>

Clearly, in the mind of Athanasius, the Resurrection demonstrated beyond doubt the saving purposes of God. The redemption of Man, as we have observed, was possible only through the form and being of man in his total humanity being made subject to death and the grave, but also to the power of God to raise the body of man from the grave. Only through the saving act of God’s Incarnate Word Jesus Christ in taking upon himself the human body of man was that act of dying and rising able to be accomplished: by virtue of his human sin and weakness, Man could not achieve it by himself.

Athanasius stipulates the reasons for the Incarnate Coming of Christ.

- to provide visible evidence of divine saving power
- to experience death for the sake of Man
- to restore Man to his true life and
- to put to death the wickedness inherent in human nature

As Athanasius affirmed: “To give a witness then, and for our sakes to undergo death, to raise man up and destroy the works of the devil, the Saviour came, and this is the reason of His incarnate presence.”<sup>98</sup> Had these not been accomplished in full there would have been no Resurrection: Resurrection was possible only through the raising of the mortal form of Man: this in turn was dependent upon that mortal form undergoing death in the first instance. “For otherwise,” Athanasius

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<sup>96</sup> *C. Arianos.* I. 45.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* I. 45.

<sup>98</sup> *C. Arianos* II. 55. cf. Robertson note 1 TNP p.378. “Two ends of our Lord’s Incarnation are here mentioned; that he might die for us, and that he might renew us...” as in Romans 4:25 “who was delivered for our offences and raised again for our justification.”

continues,” a Resurrection had not been, unless there had been a death; and how had death been, unless He had mortal body?”<sup>99</sup>

The assumption of a mortal body in order for it to be raised and restored is so important in Athanasius’ thinking. One more he places powerful emphasis upon the fact that it was for the life of Man, rather than the life of the Incarnate Word, that salvation was intended: the whole of humanity in all its frailty and physical weakness. So, “Not for Himself then, but for our salvation, and to abolish death, and to condemn sin, and to give sight to the blind, and to raise up all from the dead, has he come; but if not for Himself, but for us, by consequence not for Himself is he created. But if not for Himself is He created, but for us, then He is not Himself a creature, but, as having put on our flesh.”<sup>100</sup> This somewhat intricate argument is crucial to the line that Athanasius is taking: but much more, the crux of the matter is that Christ, as the Incarnate Word of God has not been created, therefore He is no Creature in the sense that man is a creature. The Arians continually advocate the creatureliness of the Son and Word of God: of this Athanasius was only too aware. His argument seeks to disprove this creaturely misunderstanding of the eternal Logos, for if the Logos were wholly created, how could He, as creature, have brought about the Resurrection of man’s creaturely form? For “if the Son were a creature, man had remained mortal as before, not being joined to God...To provide against this also, He sends His own Son, and He becomes Son of Man, by taking created flesh; that, since all were under sentence of death, He, being other than them all, might Himself for all offer to death His own body...and all through Him might thereupon become free from sin and from the curse which came upon it, and might truly abide for ever, risen from the dead and clothed in immortality and incorruption.”<sup>101</sup>

It is in contradiction of the perennial Arian attribution of creatureliness with regard to the Logos that we find Athanasius re-emphasising that the nature of the

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<sup>99</sup> *C. Arianos.* II. 55.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* II. 55.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* II. 69.



Logos is neither of a created form nor created substance: for if the Word were created and therefore originate by nature, that is to say, of mortal form, it would not have been possible for the Word as such to have been central to the divine power as it was manifested through the single act of Resurrection. Again, Athanasius remains adamant that it was only as the creative (as opposed to the created) Word of God that He chose to assume human form so that He might infuse the mortal form of Man with his own life-giving spirit, which is the Spirit of the Father consubstantial in likeness, nature and in Being. It is here that we come across some favourite phraseology of Athanasius as he speaks of the deification of Man, that is to say, not the transforming of Man into God, so much as the imparting of the divine into the human and raising the human to the level of the divine. Thereby Athanasius affirmed: "Whence the truth shews us that the Word is not of things originate, but rather Himself their Framer. For therefore did He assume the body originate and human, that having renewed it as its Framer, he might deify it in Himself, and thus might introduce us all into the kingdom of heaven after His likeness."<sup>102</sup> "For man had not been deified if joined to a creature, or unless the Son were very God; nor had man been brought into the Father's presence, unless He had been His natural and true Word who had put on the body."

The proper relationship between God the Father and His Word incarnate Jesus Christ the eternal Logos, has to be re-affirmed and re-established by Athanasius since it is crucial to the whole argument. For if the eternal word is not of one substance with the Father, then He (the Word) has no part in, with or through the Father. Accordingly the nature of the Cross and the subsequent purpose of the Resurrection collapse. "And as we had not been delivered from sin and the curse, unless the Word put on (for we should have had nothing common with what was foreign), so also the man had not been deified, unless the Word who became flesh had been by nature from the Father and true and proper to Him. For therefore the union was of this kind, that he might unite what is man by nature to Him who is in

<sup>102</sup>

*C. Arianos* II. 70.

the nature of the Godhead, and his salvation and deification might be sure.”<sup>103</sup> The infusion of the life of God into the life of man through what Athanasius describes as deification, stands as the key to the whole process leading to Man’s salvation through Resurrection which Athanasius terms “the Economy of our salvation.”<sup>104</sup> The policy and purpose of this divine act of redemption is not something fresh or new, suddenly thought up and hastily devised: far from it. In fact it was purposed and given to Man even before the life of the world commenced. Furthermore, this act of redemption came not in response to the pragmatic nature of Man, but simply and precisely was bestowed upon Man as a free gift out of the store of God’s grace. “...God, who hath saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, but is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and brought to light life.”<sup>105</sup> The coming of God’s Word into the body of Man ensures that Man is no longer subject to what Athanasius refers to as “the affections” (πάθη) which relate to the body. By this he means the sinful nature of Man in body as well as in mind and spirit and the fact that the body of man has hitherto been subject to death. “But now the word having become man and having appropriated what pertains to the flesh, no longer do these things touch the body, because of the Word who has come in it, but they are destroyed by Him, and henceforth men no longer remain sinners and dead according to their proper affections, but having risen according to the Word’s power, they abide ever immortal and incorruptible...we, no longer as being men, but as proper to the Word, may have share in eternal life...but henceforward our origin and all infirmity of flesh being transferred to the word, we rise from the earth, the curse from sin being removed, because of Him who is in us, and who has become a curse for us..... for as we are all from earth and die in Adam, so being regenerated from above of water and Spirit, in

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<sup>103</sup> C. Arianos. II. 70.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* II. 75.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* II. 75.

the Christ we are all quickened....."<sup>106</sup>

It is the sheer reality of the Word made flesh leading to the saving and redemptive economy of the Resurrection which excited Athanasius in the host of verbal confrontations which he experienced with the Arians. Neither the Incarnation nor the Resurrection, through which together Man's salvation was attained, would have been possible had the creatureliness of the Word been proved and established by Arian argument. Salvation came of God through the power granted to and through His Son and Word Jesus Christ the eternal Logos who was not subject to creatureliness nor any earthly aberrations as put forward by the followers of Arius.

To conclude, in Robertson's words, "...in all the writings of Athanasius from the *De Incarnatione* to the end, his firm hold of the soteriological aspect of the question at issue, of its vital importance to the reality of Redemption and Grace, to the reality of the knowledge of God vouchsafed to sinful man in Christ. The Theology and Christology of Athanasius is rooted in the idea of Redemption: our fellowship with God, our adoption as sons of God, would be unaccomplished, had not Christ imparted to us what was HIS OWN to give." (Robertson's capitals).<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* III. 33.

<sup>107</sup> Robertson, *TNPNE* Vol. IV. p. 304.

## CHAPTER III

### THE THEME OF RESURRECTION IN THE FESTAL LETTERS

#### III. 1. Two Theological Perspectives

In endeavouring to underline the centrality of the resurrection within the corpus of scripture, the New Testament circumscribes two Christological approaches from which the truth relating to Jesus Christ may be disclosed and understood. The first of these biblical schemata lays emphasis upon the soteriological perception of St. John. The second concentrates upon the doctrine of salvation as extolled by St. Paul. While it is tempting to regard each approach as being independent of one another, such a perception would not in any way reflect the holistic nature of Athanasius' own scriptural soteriological understanding. For Athanasius, central to his thinking about resurrection lay the express desire to avoid treating it as an entity on its own. The type of approach that Athanasius engaged in emphasised that the saving nature of resurrection brought it into a direct relationship with every aspect of theological truth and belief. He realised the strict necessity of seeing the importance of resurrection, not in theological isolation, but in doctrinal relation to Christology (with specific emphasis upon the Incarnation), Pneumatology, the Church, Scripture, Liturgy, Eschatology and so on. Without the thread of resurrection running through the faith and worship of the church, Athanasius believed that theological dichotomies and doctrinal divisions would be the logical outcome - a fact borne out in his deliberations against Arian and Jewish teaching, as well as in his antipathy towards Hellenistic philosophy. In this way Athanasius was able to denote the central purpose of salvation in accordance with the nature of the *whole* economy of divine love as revealed in Jesus Christ the Word made flesh and the eternal Logos of the Father. The Resurrection bound together and brought about incarnational and soteriological truth.

Bearing in mind such a connective approach within Athanasian theology, we can view this scriptural construct from two different but converging points of view. On examining the Johannine approach first, we discover that the truth relating to the person and work of Jesus Christ centres in its divinely appointed purpose as the self-revelation of God. When, on the other hand, we examine the Pauline approach, we discover that this truth involving God's self-revelation marks the way for the redemption of mankind.

For St. John, the starting-point for Christian theology is the incarnation: through the Word made flesh in the person and form of Jesus Christ, the reality of God's Word became visible in human form. The atonement, made possible through the truth of the resurrection, evolves from this ontological act. Central to the Alexandrian theological tradition in which Athanasius had been brought up lay the doctrine of the Logos. In the previous chapter of this thesis we analysed the Athanasian understanding of the Logos or Word in relationship to the resurrection in his combined early treatise, the *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione*. In both these works we discovered that Athanasius did not allow the doctrine of the Logos or Word to overshadow the doctrine of the Son, but placed an equal unity of emphasis on both terms. In either case Athanasius made no distinction between Logos and Word or Logos/Word and Son. Each term referred to the Person of Jesus Christ with equal Christological and soteriological force.

In the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel full prominence is given in the Johannine text to the *Word* made flesh. From the outset we immediately observe that in seeking to be true to the Person of Jesus Christ, John prefers to address his gospel revelation in terms of the reality of the *Word* of God in all his Incarnate form, rather than speaking of the *Logos* being made flesh, although the meaning of the Greek term *Λόγος* refers to both senses, namely Word and/or *Λόγος*. For Athanasius it was important to make clear that it was none other than the eternal Word of God who had assumed human form through fleshly actuality and that this Word was none other than the incarnate Son of God, who in his complete divinity from the side of



God and in his complete humanity from the side of Man came into the world as the unique revelation of God Himself. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Such an ontological statement reminds us that at the very core of Athanasian soteriology lay the firm belief that through the Incarnation of the Word or *Λόγος* God himself entered into the life of the world through the human person and form of His Son Jesus Christ so that he might redeem the life of man from corruption and restore man as creature into communion with God his Creator.

An examination of the *Festal Letters* reveals that, so far as we can determine, Athanasius himself made no actual use of the term *Λόγος* whenever he came to describing the Son or referred to the Son in relation to the Father. Nevertheless, in the Athanasian scheme of things, the Son remained the eternal Logos of God – on the one hand "the man-loving Word"<sup>1</sup> with reference to his humanity and on the other hand, he is the Word "which is eternally with the Father"<sup>2</sup> in respect of his divinity and consubstantiality. Of interest, however, is the manner in which Athanasius may use a different, yet related sense. In FL 1, for example, he exhorts the Church to observe the Easter festival, which he describes as "this great and saving feast." The "Word" is equated with spiritual food and inward enrichment that comes through "having our souls nourished with divine food, with the Word."<sup>3</sup> In a more physical sense, Athanasius did not hesitate to speak of "eating of the Word of the Father."<sup>4</sup> God's living Word is offered as food for the life to the world. "And He by His living Word quickeneth all men, and gives Him to be food and life to the saints."<sup>5</sup> Throughout the *Festal Letters* we come across frequent examples of the fondness Athanasius showed in stressing the life-giving nature of the Word. By casting aside the food of the world and by feeding upon the one true Word of God, man receives that true inward nourishment with its saving outcome. "But as soon as a man begins

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<sup>1</sup> FL 2. 3.

<sup>2</sup> FL 11. 12.

<sup>3</sup> FL 1. 7.

<sup>4</sup> FL 4. 3.

<sup>5</sup> FL 7. 4.

to walk in the perfect way, he is no longer fed with the things before mentioned, but he has the Word for bread, and flesh for food..."<sup>6</sup> The ontological importance of the Incarnate Word in the relationship between God and Man is also expressed in the sense that the Word is "the man-loving Word"<sup>7</sup> who reveals the love of God towards humankind. The nature of consubstantiality between the Son or Word and the Father also, in the eyes of Athanasius, should not be overlooked. "The Word which is eternally with the Father, is also from Him."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the doxological consequence through the reality of the incarnation becomes an imperative for the Church to worship God within the light of the Holy Spirit. "And, what is most wonderful," Athanasius asks, "the Word became flesh, that we should no longer live in the flesh, but in spirit should worship God, who is Spirit." For Athanasius it was vital to recognise the fact that the coming of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God brought about a transformation in the mind and habits of man towards a deeper doxological relationship with God Himself. The call to "glorify the Lord" in response to the divine soteriological grace revealed in and through the Word made flesh underlined the vicarious humanity of Christ in coming into the world and taking upon himself the body of human sinfulness in order to deliver it from corruption into incorruption. "For even for our sakes the Word came down, and being incorruptible, put on a corruptible body for the salvation of all of us." Pervading the *Festal Letters* we find regular expressions of joy and thanksgiving in response to the gift of God's grace in the Word made flesh. The joyous nature of the festal celebration stemmed from the fact that Christ himself was present at the feast. "The gladness of our feast, my brethren, is always near at hand, and never fails those who wish to celebrate it. For the Word is near, Who is all things on our behalf, even our Lord Jesus Christ..."<sup>9</sup> In the twin phrases "for our sakes" and "on our behalf", we note the degree to which Athanasius drew from the emphasis which the Nicene Fathers placed upon the

<sup>6</sup> FL 10. 4.

<sup>7</sup> FL 2. 3. (cf. FL 3. 4. - "And our Lord Jesus Christ, being good and a lover of men...").

<sup>8</sup> FL 11. 12.

<sup>9</sup> FL 14 1.

vicarious nature of Christ's death and resurrection. The death of Christ and the divisive assertions regarding the Person of Christ were indicative in Athanasius with the dangers that emanated from a dualistic notion of the nature and being of the Word. "The altogether wicked heretics and ignorant schismatics are in the same case; the one that they slay the Word, the other that they rend the coat."<sup>10</sup> Again, it is necessary to note that it was the Word in the living Person of Christ (and not the *Λόγος*) whose ontological "coat" was divided essentially by the Arian denial of Christ's divinity and their consequent insistence that he must belong altogether to the creaturely side of creation. And it was the Jewish rejection of the Incarnate Word as the Messianic revelation which prompted the support of the Jews in bringing about the death of Jesus Christ the Word revealed in human form. In observing the inter-relatedness in both word and action, we endorse the further ontological emphasis Athanasius placed upon the fact that in this act of re-creation towards man, God as Father and Creator spoke and acted in and through His Son or Word and also that His Son or Word spoke and acted in accordance with the Will and purposes of God in His fatherly love and recreative power. In this we observe further the consubstantial relationship between the Father and the Son which Athanasius stressed over against the Arian eagerness to divide the Father from the Son by placing the Son on the creaturely side of creation. Athanasius, it appears, could not emphasise sufficiently the essential unity of God's nature and being in relation to the Son. "For they have learned to rend the seamless coat of God: they think it not strange to divide the indivisible Son from the Father."<sup>11</sup> The Father and the Son, far from being divided or different from one another are forever of one and the same nature and being and substance. As Son of God, the Word "is the express image of his Father."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, not only is the Word the true and living revelation of the Father, the

<sup>10</sup> FL 6. 6.

<sup>11</sup> FL 10. 9.

<sup>12</sup> *C. Gentes* 41. 2. cf. 46.60. (εἰκὼν ἀπαράλλακτος τοῦ Πατρὸς). Cf. also *C. Arianos* where Athanasius uses the same description. Thomson points out that the phrase was used by the teacher and predecessor of Athanasius, Alexander. Cf. *Ep. ad Alexandrum Constantinopolitanum* 9, 12. Also Pauline references in 2 Cor. 4.4; Col. 1. 15; and in Heb. 1: 3.

Word is from the Father and therefore of the same nature and being as the Father. "Therefore his Word exists, and is not composite, but is the one, only-begotten, good God, proceeding from the Father as from a good source, who orders and contains the universe." Again, but this time in the context of affirming the faith of the Fathers at Nicaea, Athanasius describes the Son or Word of the Father as "absolutely perfect Son, living and powerful, the true Image of the Father, equal in honour and glory."<sup>13</sup> It was from within this relationship of consubstantiality in which the Father and the Son remained one that the divine economy of salvation was fulfilled. In the words of Athanasius from FL10, "This is the Lord, Who is manifested in the Father, and in Whom also the Father is manifested; Who, being truly the Son of the Father, at last became incarnate for our sakes, that he might offer Himself to the Father in our stead, and redeem us through His oblation and sacrifice."<sup>14</sup>

From this investigation into the incarnational references within the *Festal Letters*, it becomes clear that Athanasius spoke of the Logos or eternal Son of God as the living, saving Word of the Father who addresses Man through His Word and has brought about the salvation of man through the soteriological nature of the Word. As we consider the legacy of the Logos doctrine which Athanasius inherited within the Fourth Century Church, we observe that he rejected completely the Hellenistic concept of the Logos either as some form of divine intermediary between God and man or as an expression of a Platonic divine principle. What A. von Harnack has stated tends to reflect the heart of the matter, namely, that "the Logos of the philosophers was no longer the Logos whom Athanasius knew and adored."<sup>15</sup> The Athanasian understanding of the *Λόγος* was to be seen only in terms of the Word as the Incarnate Son of God who, being of one substance with the Father, accomplished in resurrection power the divine plan of salvation.

John's interpretation of the Logos in the opening verses of his Prologue,

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<sup>13</sup> *Expositio Fidei*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> FL 10, 10.

<sup>15</sup> A. von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 4, London, Edinburgh, Oxford, 1898, p. 29.

while bound up in terms of Greek philosophical mysticism, the Hebrew notion of a transcendent God and the Christian understanding of revelation, may be seen in parallel with the opening verses of Genesis. The new creation at the beginning of time has been brought into being through the word of God through the Old Testament reference to the divine Word. John, it would appear, is moulding his notion of the creative Logos upon this Old Testament conception of the Word or Logos as an agent of divine activity. We can trace such a system of thought based upon the Logos in Greek philosophy where we discover that 'logos' means 'word' in its direct sense, but also 'reason' as in the word or command or reason with which God created all things and the reasonable order which directs the course of creation and holds everything together. Such a notion we find in the mind of St Paul where Christ "exists before everything, and all things are held together in him."<sup>16</sup> It was in the sense of general coherence within creation that Heraclitus (c. 500 - 450 BC) introduced the term 'logos' into Greek philosophy. In time the Stoics (from c. 300 BC) took over the idea that the 'logos' is the reasonable order that rules the world. Moreover there arose the idea of a multiplicity of 'logoi' which corresponded with the Platonic notion of ideas of which the highest represents the supreme deity, together with the concept of the 'spermatikos logos' as the agent or vehicle of the deity in creation.

Within the wider purpose of divine salvation for the world in which the Incarnate Word remains central, it is of key interest to note that while the Logos-doctrine is presupposed throughout the Fourth Gospel, the Johannine account of the divine economy of salvation always centres upon the one who is the Word of God. Jesus Christ the Incarnate Son of God remains the central reference point within John's soteriological understanding. The heart of the Logos or Word is soteriologically placed under key references such as 'Truth', 'Light' and 'Life'. 'Truth', in particular, becomes the term that describes the Logos or Word in his reality. For John, 'truth' is the supreme reality and becomes equivalent to the divine

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<sup>16</sup> Col. 1. 17

nature, while things that are 'true' or 'real' can only be so in that they reveal the nature and purposes of God. Thus in Jesus Christ, not only is he the Logos of the Johannine Prologue, but the one who has been chosen as the instrument of divine revelation, the one in whose human form God has chosen to dwell and through whose humanity God has disclosed Himself to man so that man might know something of God's nature and be reunited with his Creator. Thus the ontological strands which unite Creator and creature through Jesus Christ the Word made flesh, are also the soteriological means by which the redemption and re-creation of man is made possible through the Word assuming the nature and being of man.

The Johannine Prologue also affirms that the Word or Logos existed in the very beginning. That is to say, the appearance on earth of the Incarnate Word or Logos of God is the very first act towards the redemption of the world and of a New Creation (καινή κτίσις) as a complete restoration of the first creation. We come across a similar Pauline understanding in which, as in St John, the Word is both the Life and the Light of men. "For the same God who said, 'Out of darkness let light shine', has caused his light to shine within us, to give the light of revelation - the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."<sup>17</sup>

Within the Pauline model we find that it is the resurrection leading to the atonement which becomes the starting-point for the salvation of Man. The resurrection is understood as the essential act within time and space for atonement to be fulfilled through the divine economy of salvation. The resurrection stems from and, of necessity, is bound up with the incarnation: thus it stands as the actualised consummation of God's saving work in and through His Son Jesus Christ both in this world and for the life of eternity. The Pauline soteriological interpretation is such that the Incarnation is to be seen in terms the covenant which God made with his people as the voices of the prophets proclaimed the coming of the Messiah." "This gospel," Paul assured the Christian community at Rome, "God announced beforehand in sacred scriptures through his prophets." So the kerygmatic message

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<sup>17</sup> 2 Cor. 4. 6.

had already been delivered - a message which was both incarnational and soteriological in form and content. "It (the Gospel) is about his Son (Paul continues): on the human level he was born of David's stock, but on the level of the spirit - the Holy Spirit - he was declared Son of God by a mighty act in that he rose from the dead: it is about Jesus Christ our Lord."<sup>18</sup> For Paul the actuality of the resurrection stood as proof that Jesus was Son of God, the incarnate Word to whom the messianic prophecies had referred and through whom the salvation of the world would be fulfilled.

For Athanasius, it seems clear, both the Johannine and the Pauline systems of thought are brought together in such a way that incarnation and atonement cannot be regarded as separate entities within the soteriological spectrum, but must be understood as essential aspects allied to the whole. Neither is emphasised over against the other. Both are essential within the economy of divine salvation. It is this inter-connected theological construct which we see portrayed within the Festal Letters through the Athanasian understanding of resurrection arising out of incarnation, as the divine tool by which the life of Man has been restored and recreated. Such a process of restoration, Athanasius argued, was only made possible through the ontological reality of God Himself coming to earth and in human form revealing His Nature and Being through the eternal Logos within the life of man, so that from within, the whole nature and being of man might be healed and brought from death to life. As a result, we can note the considerable emphasis that Athanasius placed upon the eschatological import of the divine economy of salvation.

For Athanasius, implicit within resurrection lay the idea of deliverance. Now, whenever we seek to understand or define the nature of God's saving grace, almost inevitably we come up against the notion of divine deliverance from someone or something. In terms of the divinely created life of man we may then ask from whom or from what is man delivered? In the *Contra Gentes*, which is essentially a

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<sup>18</sup> Romans 1: 2 f.

justification of the Christian Faith, particularly in relation to the salvation of Man through the Cross, Athanasius starts from the point of view of the created order of things brought into being under God's power and contingent upon His will and purposes. The world was once a place of goodness and beauty, but it had become influenced by evil and wickedness through the disobedience of Man. God, the fountain of goodness, through regarding Man as a very special creature, formed Man in His own image through the creative power of His Word. "For God is good, or rather is essentially the source of goodness: nor could one that is good be niggardly of anything: whence, grudging existence to none, he has made all things out of nothing by His own Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. And among these, having taken especial pity, above all things on earth, upon the race of men, and having perceived its inability, by virtue of the condition of its origin, to continue in one stay, he gave them a further gift, and he did not barely create men, as he did all the irrational creatures on the earth, but made them after His own image, giving them a portion even of the power of His own Word; so that having as it were a kind of reflection of the Word, and being made rational, they might be able to abide ever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise."<sup>19</sup> This theme of the necessity for God's redeeming power through the coming of God into the life of the world in human form Athanasius takes up in the *de Incarnatione*, the second part of this overall work.<sup>20</sup> However, in spite of his divine origins, Man refused to worship his Creator and to obey His Will. Man fell from grace and as a result, human nature become tainted and depraved: it became subject in the end to death, corruptibility and bodily decay. In this state of affairs, how does the resurrection of Jesus Christ raise the life of man in such away as to re-create, restore and renew that life? In this context, Athanasius expounded the fact that only God could restore man to his true self: that only God could deliver Man from evil and from sin: that only God could

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<sup>19</sup> *De Incar.* 3.3.

<sup>20</sup> cf. Jerome, *De Script. Eccl.*, in support of *C. Gentes* and *de Incar.* being two parts of a single opus. He refers to them as "Adversus Gentes Libri Duo." Robertson TNPNF Vol. IV, p. 1. (Introduction to *Contra Gentes*).



rescue Man from the power of death and from bodily corruption. This he has accomplished through the coming of His Incarnate Word "He, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption, by the promise of resurrection." Here, so far as we are aware, along with an earlier reference to corruption being "stayed from all by the Grace of the Resurrection,"<sup>21</sup> are the first references to resurrection in the *de Incarnatione*. We shall return to the *De Incarnatione* at a later stage as we investigate the emphasis that Athanasius places upon the Resurrection in several of his other works.

For Athanasius, the Eternal Word has brought deliverance to Man through being Incarnate and the Eternal Word has brought deliverance to Man through being raised from death. Thus, "...the corruption of death which before was prevailing against them is done away. For the race of men had gone to ruin, had not the Lord and Saviour of all, the Son of God, come among us to meet the end of death."<sup>22</sup> Such themes we find occurring regularly throughout the Festal Letters and we shall examine more of them in due course. At this juncture, the words of Professor Berdyaev describing the corrupt condition of man, are, it seems, particularly fitting: "Our natural world is apparently in the victorious grip of the inane; for it is dominated by corruptibility and death, animosity and hatred, egoism and discord. Man is overwhelmed by the meaningless evil of the whole of life. In religion and in faith he turns towards the world of meaning, and receives strength from that world where love triumphs over hatred, union over division, and eternal life over death."<sup>23</sup>

With the central theme of resurrection in mind, therefore, Athanasius understood the Easter festal celebration as a commemoration in joy and thanksgiving for the saving and atoning grace of God accomplished through the Cross, bringing life to the world through Christ's victory over sin and death.

We intend now to examine the various contextual ways in which Athanasius emphasised the nature of resurrection and the consequent modes in which the Church

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<sup>21</sup> *De Incar.* 9.1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 9.4.

<sup>23</sup> N. Berdyaev *Freedom and the Spirit* pp. 158 ff.

should observe the Easter season.

### III. 2. Resurrection and Doxological Commemoration

In the opening Festal Letter for 329 AD, the whole nature of man's salvation is seen by Athanasius as being bound up in time and space. Easter comes as the seasonal reminder that the resurrection is a life-giving reality. As such, Athanasius emphasises the necessity of treating this festive season with joyful celebration, for what more appropriate way to celebrate the feast of resurrection than through gladness and with thanksgiving?

We see how in the very first section Athanasius explores the import of Christ's resurrection in relation to the particular period and moment surrounding Easter that the Church is called to commemorate. Because of the life-giving vitality of Easter, Athanasius perceives that the festal season itself "calls us to keep the feast."<sup>24</sup> Indeed the call to anticipate the festal season, since the latter stems from and centres in Christ, is regarded as itself Christly in nature. Through the festal season Christ himself is in effect summoning the Church to engage in celebration. Writing in anticipation of Easter 330 AD, Athanasius exhorts the Church: "Again, my brethren, is Easter come and gladness; again the Lord hath brought us to this season."<sup>25</sup>

For Athanasius, the timely call to commemorate the feast "in season"<sup>26</sup> was of paramount importance. Furthermore, the time of the feast was regarded as having been divinely pre-ordained and called the Church to be obedient in its celebration. Athanasius understood all too readily that to overlook the opportunity for festal celebration would lead to loss of gladness and rejoicing and thereby diminish altogether the very joy in the resurrection itself to which the feast points. "The Sun of Righteousness, causing his divine beams to rise upon us, proclaims beforehand the

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<sup>24</sup> FL 1.1. cf. Lefort FLI. 1. line 1. "le moment nous invite à fêter."

<sup>25</sup> FL 2.1.

<sup>26</sup> FL 1.1. cf. Lefort FLI. 1. line 14. "à temps, à contretemps."

time of the feast, in which obeying him, we ought to celebrate it, lest when the time has passed by, gladness likewise may pass us by.”<sup>27</sup> Or, as we find in FL6 “Now again, my beloved, has God brought us to the season of the feast, and through His loving-kindness we have reached the period of assembly for it.”<sup>28</sup> The same God who brought salvation to the Israelites in delivering them from suffering and death in Egypt, is He who “at this time calls us to the feast.”<sup>29</sup> We see how the seasonable and timely celebration of the feast was all-important to Athanasius, and how centrally he regarded such a celebration within the life of the Church. As Archibald Robertson reminds us, such a joyous recognition of man’s salvation would bring about a lasting, beneficial effect upon the Christian. “For thus the God of all, after the manner of wise Solomon, distributes everything in time and season, to the end that, in due time, the salvation of men should be everywhere spread abroad.”<sup>30</sup>

Here we see the extent to which the soteriological aspect of Christ’s resurrection is again underlined. The saving purposes of God, manifest in and through His creative and redemptive activity within time, have brought about the restoration of the world. God, the Creator of times and seasons, sent His Son “in season” (not “unseasonably” but “seasonably”).<sup>31</sup>

The metaphor of rising is brought out immediately in the second verse of FL1. “The Sun of Righteousness, causing His divine beams to rise upon us, proclaims beforehand the time of the feast, in which, obeying Him, we ought to celebrate it.”<sup>32</sup> Again, “the God of all, the Maker of times and seasons...exhorts to obedience in season...”<sup>33</sup> This prior proclamation “beforehand”, as Athanasius describes it, of the time of the feast has to be placed within the context of the overall

<sup>27</sup> FL 1.1. cf. Lefort FLI. 1. line 2. “.. le soleil de justice, nous indiquant, par ses rayons purs, le moment de cette fête.”

<sup>28</sup> FL 6.1.

<sup>29</sup> FL 6.1.

<sup>30</sup> FL 1.1. cf. Cyril *Hom. Pasch.* V. (Robertson *TNPNF* p. 506.n.3.) cf. Lefort FLI. 1 line 18.

<sup>31</sup> FL 1.1. cf. Lefort FLI. 1. line 20.

<sup>32</sup> FL 1.1. cf. Lefort op. cit. FLI. 1. line 2.

<sup>33</sup> FL 1.1. cf. Lefort FLI. 2. line 10.

period of inward spiritual preparation for the Easter festival. It has to be acknowledged that Athanasius had a tendency to refer to the terms “the fast” and “the feast” in such ways that they might easily be confused. But this is far from being the case. Athanasius simply uses them in an interchangeable manner. Athanasius could refer to “the Feast” in terms of the Easter season as a time of joy and celebration where the call was to observe it “not with the old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”<sup>34</sup> Rightly keeping the feast led to heavenly rewards.<sup>35</sup> To engage in the feast is to experience an inner spiritual joy in obedience to Christ: it is none other than “the service of the soul.”<sup>36</sup> Again, the feast consists “in the acknowledgement of God and the offering of thanksgiving and of praise to Him.”<sup>37</sup> On the other hand Athanasius can call for diligence in celebrating the feast and in having a right manner and approach in observing the fast which would appear to be synonymous with feast. Thus in FL 14, the call goes out that “the feast shall be celebrated...(but also)... let us vie with each other in observing the purity of the fast.”<sup>38</sup> But throughout the Letters, we are able to perceive quite clearly the way in which Athanasius links fast to feast in terms of the period of preparation leading up to the Easter Festival. He could affirm strongly that “.... he who neglects to observe the fast of forty days, as one who rashly and impurely treads on holy things, cannot celebrate the Easter festival.”<sup>39</sup>

Through his references to the Jewish rite in connection with the Passover and the Christian celebration of Easter resurrection, it is clear that Athanasius regarded both as celebratory occasions. In this context, what Athanasius emphasised was that the feast of the Passover which the Jews observed (“the feast of the Jews”)<sup>40</sup>, has been replaced by the feast of Resurrection which is shared by those who belong to Christ. “Henceforth the feast of the Passover is ours, not that of a stranger, nor is it

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<sup>34</sup> FL.1.9.

<sup>35</sup> FL.2.7.

<sup>36</sup> FL 3.2.

<sup>37</sup> FL 7.3.

<sup>38</sup> FL 14. 5.

<sup>39</sup> FL 19.9.

<sup>40</sup> FL 6.2. Note 10.

any longer of the Jews.”<sup>41</sup> On the one hand the day of the feast is understood as a time of celebration to be diligently observed.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand Athanasius had no hesitation in linking the observance of the feast with a commemoration of the death of Jesus. Particularly in FL1, we find a strong emphasis upon the need to fast and the significance of fasting prior to and as a preparation for the Easter feast of resurrection. While the purpose of the trumpet was to make a joyful announcement of the festal period and thus summon the Church to commemorate “the feast,” there was another trumpet summons - “a warning trumpet - (which) commands with great earnestness, that when we fast, we should hallow the fast.”<sup>43</sup> This inward fasting of the soul and outward fasting of the body was both -

(a) A form of spiritual self-discipline concentrating the heart and mind upon the sinfulness of human nature in marked contrast to goodness, mercy and forgiveness of God, and

(b) An act of penitence and contrition whereby the act of fasting and self-denial led the Christian to full confession of sin and unworthiness: that “a man should humble his soul”<sup>44</sup> and seek divine pardon and renewal. The act of fasting and the life of holiness were complementary.

In the mind of Athanasius, to commemorate the feast is to commemorate the resurrection and to commemorate the resurrection is to celebrate the risen person of Christ with a spirit of jubilation and Eucharistic gladness. The season of Easter resurrection, which has brought new life to the world, Athanasius describes as “the only one in which we may be healed.”<sup>45</sup> Quoting from St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, Athanasius reminds the Church of the approaching immediacy of the festal season: “Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”<sup>46</sup>

Because of the divine nature of God’s saving grace in the resurrection,

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<sup>41</sup> FL 19. 1.

<sup>42</sup> FL 6 et al.

<sup>43</sup> FL 1.4. cf. Lefort FLI. 4. line15.

<sup>44</sup> FL 1.4. cf. Lefort FLI. 4. line 2 (p.4).

<sup>45</sup> FL 1.1.

<sup>46</sup> FL 1.2.

Athanasius insisted that the mode of celebration that the Church should adopt must be appropriate to the nature of God. The feast must not be celebrated “after an earthly manner”, but “as keeping festival in heaven with the angels.”<sup>47</sup> Such a celebration must not be so much an outward earthly expression of man’s exuberance, but a fitting, virtuous response to what God would call from His Church. “Let us glorify the Lord, by chastity, by righteousness, and other virtues. And let us rejoice, not in ourselves, but in the Lord, that we may be inheritors with the saints”<sup>48</sup> In respect of the nature of fasting and the virtuous expression in the human which it calls for, Athanasius would argue, we surmise, that virtuous conduct should be a feature of the whole of life and not simply a temporal aspect applicable to the season of the Paschal feast. Thus in FL7: “We too shall be counted worthy of these things, if at all times we cleave to our Saviour, and if we are pure, not only in these six days of Easter, but consider the whole course of our life as a feast, and continue near and do not go far off...”<sup>49</sup>

The central nature of the feast Athanasius understood always in terms of the divine work of salvation. In FL10 and FL13, for example, his summons to the Church is to “our saving Easter-feast”<sup>50</sup> and towards “The saving feast.”<sup>51</sup> Clearly, the soteriological purpose, entwined within the incarnational-redemptive love of God and fulfilled in Easter glory, remained paramount in Athanasius’ theology of resurrection.

But Athanasius goes further in terms of a more specific and definitive understanding. Within the soteriological nature of the feast from the side of God, the call and response of man is no less important: here we enter the inner recesses of the soul and the Eucharistic response of prayer: “For what else is the feast,” Athanasius enquires, “but the service of the soul? And what is that service, but prolonged

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<sup>47</sup> FL 6.12. cf. Lefort FL6. 11. line 21. “Qui n’aspirerait à la fête céleste et angélique.”

<sup>48</sup> FL 6.12.

<sup>49</sup> FL 7. 10.

<sup>50</sup> FL 10.1.

<sup>51</sup> FL 13.1.

prayer to God, and unceasing thanksgiving?"<sup>52</sup>

Inherently related to this Eucharistic expression of prayerful anamnesis in and through Communion, the festal commemoration is further defined in terms of its purest doxological centralities. "For what else is the feast," Athanasius again asks, posing both question and answer, "but the constant worship of God, and the recognition of godliness, and unceasing prayers from the whole heart with agreement?"<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the true importance of the feast is not concerned with outward show: the purpose of celebrating the resurrection does not lie in polite conversation, nor does it present an occasion for extravagant dress and finery, nor a time for physical relaxation. These are simply the expressions of human misunderstandings whereby worldly exhibitionism is allowed to replace the inner grace and glory of the festal sacrament. Appropriate to the nature of divine love and saving power are constant praise and thanksgiving. "For the feast does not consist in pleasant intercourse at meals, nor splendour of clothing, nor days of leisure, but in the acknowledgement of God, and the offering of thanksgiving and of praise to Him."<sup>54</sup>

For Athanasius, the opportunity of participating in the festal celebration while in this world meant always anticipating eschatologically the heavenly feast. "...to us in this present life they (i.e. the feasts) are above all an uninterrupted passage (to heaven) - it is indeed our season."<sup>55</sup> And again, "For if we diligently celebrate the feast here, we shall doubtless receive the perfect joy which is in heaven."<sup>56</sup>

As with the writers of the New Testament Epistles, Athanasius chose the Festal Letters as a vital means of communicating the Gospel and of reminding the life of the Church on a regular basis that the foundation of her faith lay in the unchangeable truths of Scripture; and that through apostolic example and tradition, the Easter Festival of Resurrection remained the culmination of God's act of

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<sup>52</sup> FL 3.2.

<sup>53</sup> FL 11.11.

<sup>54</sup> FL 7.3.

<sup>55</sup> FL 13.1.

<sup>56</sup> FL 6.1.

redemption and life-giving love for the world. "So," he reminds the Church, "we are not remiss in giving notice of its seasons, as we have received from the Fathers. Again we write, again keeping to the apostolic traditions, we remind each other when we come together for prayer; and keeping the feast in common, with one mouth, we truly gives thanks to the Lord...So, when we rightly keep the feast, we shall be counted worthy of that joy which is in heaven."<sup>57</sup> Once again we observe that the eschatological hope always assumed a central position within Athanasian soteriology.

We have noted already that for Athanasius, as for the Church at large, the Feast of Easter did not stem from human origin or design: it was of God and, as such, it was God Himself who summoned the Church to commemorate it with due solemnity, as well as with appropriate joyfulness. Such a note of joy, Athanasius insisted, must be the axiomatic response of the believing Christian. "...the Lord's death is an event, not of sorrow but of joy, and that he who dies for us is alive."<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, the true theological nature of the feast must be fully understood if its proper celebratory nature is to be satisfactorily achieved. In contrast to the misleading interpretations on the part of the Jews, combined with the divisive teachings of the Arians in respect of the Father-Son relationship and the creaturely connotations placed upon it, Athanasius underlines the fact that the festal commemoration must be doctrinally true in accordance with the nature of Christ himself. "For we do not institute days of mourning and sorrow, as some may consider these of Easter to be, but we keep the feast, being filled with joy and gladness. We keep it then, not regarding it after the deceitful error of the Jews, nor according to the teaching of the Arians, which takes away the Son from the Godhead, and numbers Him among the creatures; but we look to the correct doctrine we derive from the Lord."<sup>59</sup> And "...obeying the voice of truth, we together with you cry aloud

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<sup>57</sup> FL 2.7. cf. Lefort FL2. line 20, p. 7. "le type de genre de vie céleste."

<sup>58</sup> FL 11.14.

<sup>59</sup> FL 11.13



in the day of the feast.”<sup>60</sup>

Resurrection, of course, emerged out of the death of Christ, but to commemorate that death did not entail anything that was either morbid or funereal: quite the opposite. For Athanasius, as was his call to the Church, to commemorate the death of Christ was not to mourn, but to celebrate in a Eucharistic manner the new life of Christ to which Christ has been raised and the new life to which he has raised the humble believer. “.... but we celebrate His death as a feast, rejoicing because we then obtained rest from our afflictions.”<sup>61</sup>

Nor should the true and devout Christian be influenced by heretical teachings, allowing distress and tribulation to destroy the nature of gladness and joy which belong to the feast. “Let us therefore keep the feast, my brethren, celebrating it not at all as an occasion of distress and mourning, neither let us mingle with heretics through temporal trials brought upon us by godliness. But if anything that would promote joy and gladness should offer, let us attend to it.”<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, since the nature of the festal summons is divine, the commemoration of God’s act of redemption should be fitting and appropriate: there should be no postponement or deferral, any negligence or wrong attitude of mind.

“If then God Himself loves the feast, and calls us to it, it is not right, my brethren, that it should be delayed, or observed carelessly; but with alacrity and zeal we should come to it, so that having begun joyfully here, we may also receive an earnest of that heavenly feast.”<sup>63</sup>

We have already drawn the observation that in his First Festal Letter Athanasius reveals what we might describe as “the urgency of habitual commemoration.” We need only address the introductions to many of the Festal Letters to be impressed by the sense of urgency which propelled their proclamation and underlined their primary purpose, both of which centre in the kerygma of

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<sup>60</sup> FL 3.1.

<sup>61</sup> FL 20.1.

<sup>62</sup> FL 11. 13.

<sup>63</sup> FL 6.1.

resurrection-life. "Again," he writes, "<the Sun of Righteousness>, causing his divine beams to rise upon us, proclaims beforehand the time of the feast."<sup>64</sup> This opening summons strikes such a note of exigency, particularly through Athanasius' use of the adverb "again" which is emphasised on a number of occasions. "*Again...is Easter come and gladness.*"<sup>65</sup> "*Again the Lord hath brought us to this season.*"<sup>66</sup> "*Again...the day of the feast draws near to us, which, above all others, should be devoted to prayer, which the law commands to be observed, and which it would be an unholy thing for us to pass over in silence.*"<sup>67</sup> "Now *again*, my beloved, has God brought us to the season of the feast, and through his loving-kindness we have reached the period of assembly for it."<sup>68</sup> "It is well my beloved, to proceed from feast to feast; *again* holy vigils arouse our minds, and compel our intellect to keep vigil unto contemplation of good things."<sup>69</sup>

For Athanasius, as was his wish for the whole church, the origin of the festal summons in the divine call remained of paramount importance: the invitation came always from God, never from man. "For that God who brought Israel out of Egypt, even he at this time calls us to the feast."<sup>70</sup> Referring to the persecutions which the Fourth Century Church had to endure, Athanasius reminded his readers that still they were called to worship the same Lord, even when divided from one another. "I do not send word to you as though you were ignorant; but I publish it to those who know it, that ye may perceive that although men have separated us, yet God having made us companions, we approach the same feast, and worship the same lord continually."<sup>71</sup>

It followed, as a result, that the centre of coherence on which pivoted the Church's responsive understanding of and obedience to the resurrection feast, was

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<sup>64</sup> FL 1.1.  
<sup>65</sup> FL 2.1.  
<sup>66</sup> FL 2.1.  
<sup>67</sup> FL 3.1.  
<sup>68</sup> FL 6.1.  
<sup>69</sup> FL 4.2.  
<sup>70</sup> FL 6.1.  
<sup>71</sup> FL 3.1.

manifest not in anthropocentric subjectiveness which might determine the form and nature of the feast. Rather was the festival of Christ's resurrection to be understood and celebrated in accordance with its purely divine objectivity: that is to say, in terms of the Theocentric-Christological axis of God's own Word and Incarnate Logos. For Athanasius, the revelation of the divine Word, born in human form to endure and to triumph over suffering and death, then to be utterly fulfilled in resurrection glory, was the universal message which pertained both to the scriptures of the New as well as the Old Testaments. "For who is our joy and boast, but our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Who suffered for us, and by Himself made known to us the Father? For He is no other than He Who of old time spake by the prophets..."<sup>72</sup>

In terms of the general nature of the festal summons, we soon become aware that the urgency in proclamation really demonstrates a twofold purpose. Firstly, the urgency of the summons serves as an immediate reminder to the Church that the centrality of the Easter feast itself lay in the resurrection event; for without the latter the former would neither be possible nor necessary. Secondly, the festal announcement, whether it be an advance notification or a stated summons to both fast and feast, reflects the theological and doxological nature of the Festal Letters as a whole, with the exception perhaps of the fragments where content is naturally limited. But while importance lay in the prior announcement of the feast, Athanasius chose to place a fresh emphasis on the actual mode of proclamation. While the call to the Easter season of resurrection continued to be associated with the sound of trumpets in accordance with Jewish practice as found in the Old Testament, the true festal summons now centred in Christ himself risen in glory. "For this is the season of the feast, my brethren, and it is near; being not now proclaimed by trumpets, as the history records, but being made known and brought near to us by the Saviour, Who suffered on our behalf and rose again."<sup>73</sup> The summons to the Easter feast of Resurrection was pronounced in Christ's Name: He was guide to all who went up to

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<sup>72</sup> Frag. FL 27.

<sup>73</sup> FL 19.1; cf. FL 1.2.

the festival. "Who will be our guide, as we haste to this festival?" Athanasius ponders: "None can do this, my beloved, but Him Whom you will name with me, even our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>74</sup> As guide to the festival, the risen Christ is he who links the Resurrection feast with the eternal feast in heaven. "Following Him, we may, even here, as on the threshold of the Jerusalem which is above, meditate beforehand on the feast which is eternal..."<sup>75</sup>

Again, the significance of the festal celebration was such that its saving Eucharistic purposes could never be restricted to one particular moment or season in the year. The goodness and divine nature of the feast continued at all times to provide spiritual benefit to the true follower of Christ who offers his saving word to all who seek it. "... there is free access for him to the Saviour." Athanasius writes, "For the grace of the feast is not limited to one time, nor does its splendid brilliancy decline; but it is always near, enlightening the minds of those who earnestly desire it."<sup>76</sup>

It is in the Fifth letter that we come across an interesting emphasis that Athanasius lays upon the continuity of the annual practices associated with Easter. Instead of each aspect of the Easter season being commemorated independently from one another, it is Athanasius' reminder to celebrate them as a whole, yet with each one separately and together accomplishing the economy of man's salvation. "We duly proceed, my brethren, from feasts to feasts, duly from prayers to prayers, we advance from fasts to fasts, and join holy-days to holy-days. Again the time has arrived which brings to us a new beginning, even the announcement of the blessed Passover, in which the Lord was sacrificed."<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, the celebration of the Easter festival was not some blind

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<sup>74</sup> FL 14.2.

<sup>75</sup> FL 14.2.

<sup>76</sup> FL 5.1. cf. also FL 1.1. where Robertson comments that "The due celebration of the feast is spoken of as producing a permanent beneficial effect on the Christian." (*LNP NF* IV. p. 506). Note also Robertson's comment on FL 6.5: "The due observance of such festival will have its effect in quickening our *habitual* meditation on the resurrection." (*LNP NF* IV. p. 519).

<sup>77</sup> FL 5.1.

emotional activity devoid of thought or understanding. It is quite clear that Athanasius regarded the festal commemoration as a thought-provoking activity: theology was bound up in doxology: the worship and praise offered through liturgical expression were to be seen as the *modus operandi* of doctrine and epistemology. The regular celebration of the pre-Easter fast leading into the festal commemoration of resurrection should engender intellectual capacity and spiritual contemplation. For Athanasius, mind and understanding, theology and worship went inseparably together. "It is well... to proceed from feast to feast; again festal meetings, again holy vigils arouse our minds, and compel our intellect to keep vigil unto contemplation of good things."<sup>78</sup>

Through the commemorative feast of Easter Resurrection, therefore, Athanasius endeavoured to mould the theological and doxological mind of the Church as fully as possible in a unity of understanding and expression.

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<sup>78</sup>

FL 4.2.

### III. 3. THE NATURE OF RESURRECTION AND ITS EXPRESSED THEMES

#### III. 3. 1. Resurrection as Personal Belief and Theological Truth

For Athanasius, the festal commemoration of Easter which we find throughout the Festal Letters placed emphasis not only upon the highest doxological and theological belief of the Church: it reflected the nature of Athanasius' own theological understanding. Through what he described as "The saving feast"<sup>79</sup> or "our saving Easter-feast",<sup>80</sup> the Church was called to celebrate in joyful worship and witness to the Risen Christ. But along with this sense of corporate ecclesiastical expression we find a more personal element present. Throughout the Festal Letters, there unfolds, almost line by line, in the visible language of praise, worship and thanksgiving to Almighty God, a written acknowledgement by Athanasius of his own belief as a private person, as well as a man of high standing within the Church - a bishop, indeed, of saintly vocation and theological tenacity. The reality of Easter expressed Athanasius' intimately personal and vibrant faith in the saving grace of God in and through Jesus Christ His only-begotten Son, the eternal and incarnate Word of the Father. In the Tenth Letter, in spite of persecution and tribulations of various kinds while in exile, Athanasius affirms his faith and joy that the feast - or more precisely Christ who is the feast - brings together those of like mind and spirit through the unifying power of God. "For although place separates us, yet the Lord the Giver of the feast, and Who is Himself our feast, Who is also the bestower of the Spirit, brings us together in mind, in harmony, and in the bond of peace. For when we mind and think the same things, and offer up the same prayers on behalf of each other, no place can separate us, but the Lord gathers and unites us together."<sup>81</sup>

As the Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father and of one Being with the Father, Jesus Christ, as Athanasius constantly affirmed, came into the world as the

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<sup>79</sup> FL 13.1.

<sup>80</sup> FL 10.1.

<sup>81</sup> FL 10.2.

Incarnate Word or Logos of God to reveal the very Nature and being of God with whom He was One also in saving and redeeming power. Athanasius could thus affirm:

“This is the Lord, Who is manifested in the Father, and in Whom also the Father is manifested; Who, being truly the Son of the Father, at last became incarnate for our sakes, that he might offer Himself to the Father in our stead, and redeem us through His oblation and sacrifice.”<sup>82</sup>

With the clarification of this scriptural truth, the Church Fathers at the Council of Nicaea led by Athanasius’ predecessor Alexander, wrestled against the schismatic misunderstanding of scripture on the part of Arius and his followers. It was with the re-affirmation of scriptural theological truth, over against the anthropocentric mythology of Arianism, that Athanasius himself singularly triumphed through his orthodox or right teaching regarding the *homoousion* formula. As a result, throughout the Festal Letters we find encapsulated not only the substantive belief of Athanasius which was of a deeply personal nature, but that also of the Church, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, grounded in the incarnational truth manifest in the Advent of Jesus the divine Logos and fulfilled in the soteriological reality of festal resurrection in and through the Risen Christ.

For Athanasius, the relationship within the Godhead between God the Father and God the Son, depended upon that essential unity of Being in which the Father was not separate from the Son, nor the Son divided from the Father; but where both remain consubstantial and co-eternal, all of which the Arians sought to deny.

As the Word made flesh was the very Son of God who had taken upon himself the form of man, so this same Word or Wisdom of God, as Athanasius often described Him, who had come from God, came, in consequence, to manifest himself to the world as the rational, communicable, intelligible revelation of God in all His divine Being. In Jesus Christ could be seen reflected the very glory and love of the Father in his supreme redeeming power. “For,” Athanasius states, “it is not the sun,

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<sup>82</sup>

FL 10.10.

or the moon, or the host of those other stars which illumines him, but he glitters with the high effulgence of God over all.”<sup>83</sup>

That incarnational form of revelation that we find throughout the writings of Athanasius occurs no less in the Festal Letters. Again, we must remember the vital link that Athanasius emphasised between incarnation and atonement. T.F. Torrance describes it thus: “It is important to remember, as Athanasius used to insist, that the Son of God is the only *Logos* and *Eidos* of Godhead.”<sup>84</sup> It is in and through the incarnate Word of God in Jesus Christ that God reveals Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and is believed and acknowledged in accordance with His divine nature and rationality; it is in and through the incarnate Form of God in Jesus Christ that His Face and Image are revealed and that our human knowledge of Him is shaped and formed through the conformity of our minds to Jesus Christ.”<sup>85</sup> Such was the dynamic truth of the Incarnation.

But, furthermore, this Jesus Christ, revealed as the Word made flesh, was also Jesus Christ the Son of God who was crucified for the world and three days later was raised from death, who ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. Here, once more, we see propounded the central theme of the Festal Letters. Easter resurrection, as Athanasius affirmed throughout these Epistles, was the confirmation of God’s power over sin and death. Thus in the Fifth Letter Athanasius could state that this provided, in truth, due reason for festal celebration: “For it is God, my beloved, even the God who at first established the feast for us, Who vouchsafes the celebration of it year by year. He both brought about the slaying of His Son for salvation, and gave us this reason for the holy feast.”<sup>86</sup> With proper emphasis on the central nature of salvation, Athanasius brought into doxological focus the unifying power that comes from within the nature of festal celebration: “This also leads us on from the cross through this world to that which is before us,

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<sup>83</sup> FL 5.1.

<sup>84</sup> *C. Arianos* 3.15; *Ad Serap.* 1.19.

<sup>85</sup> T.F. Torrance *God and Rationality*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 166.

<sup>86</sup> FL 5.2.



and God produces even now from it the joy of glorious salvation, bringing us to the same assembly, and in every place uniting all of us in spirit; appointing us common prayers, and a common grace proceeding from the feast.”<sup>87</sup>

These were the theological truths, culminating in the unshakeable conviction based upon and centred in the reality of the resurrection, and given fullest doxological expression, which Athanasius imparted to the Church in Alexandria and further afield.

### **III. 3. 2. Virtue and the Soul of Man**

From the relational approach that Athanasius emphasised with regard to the life-giving nature of resurrection and the saving commemorative nature of the feast, we now proceed to an examination of the related aspects which were deemed appropriate to a proper understanding of resurrection and its fitting festal commemoration.

Athanasius perceived that the appropriate time for keeping the feast was a task of momentous importance for it was linked to virtuous conduct. The concept of virtue he expresses as a spiritual benefit that he described in terms of being clothed, of feeding or of being fed. The mind, for example, must be seen to be clothed with fitting garments, that is, being adorned with pure, clean Christ-like attire. Such a theme we find echoed in the Fourth Letter: “What follows, my beloved, is obvious: that we should approach such a feast, not with filthy raiment, but having clothed our minds with pure garments. For we need in this to put on our Lord Jesus, that we may be able to celebrate the feast with Him. Now we are clothed with Him when we love virtue...”<sup>88</sup>

It is upon the nature and purpose of the soul that Athanasius draws as he proceeds to demonstrate the twofold choice with which the soul is faced: virtue and

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<sup>87</sup> FL 5.2.

<sup>88</sup> FL 4.3.

vice. The supreme quality of the soul lies in the degree of strength that enables wickedness to be overcome. In this challenge between what is good and virtuous and what is evil and ridden by vice, Athanasius draws attention to the practice of fasting in which there should be an integral involvement not only of the soul, but also of the body, for, as he emphasises in FL1, "not only with the body should we fast, but with the soul."<sup>89</sup> Since fasting is bound up with the elements of abstinence, self-denial and the notion of humility, the soul, through choosing to be abased, is able to decide in favour of goodness. In this way, by electing to stand against the power of evil, the soul experiences the gratification and inward satisfaction that comes through virtuous action. Accordingly, virtue is to be perceived as reflecting the spiritual food on which the soul of man must feed. Only by choosing virtue can the soul resist the ever-threatening power of sin. In this contrast between the need for the soul to choose between virtue and vice, Athanasius draws upon his essentially Christological approach to lay stress upon the metaphor of inward feeding. The food of the Christian soul is none other than Jesus Christ who as the true bread of life gives spiritual nourishment to the pure and the virtuous. The sharp contrast that Athanasius introduces speaks for itself. Jesus Christ as the bread of heaven is "the food of the saints". By distinction the devil is "the food of the impure."<sup>90</sup> To those who are impure, the call of Christ will always be at hand summoning them to a life of goodness - one that expresses at least three essential qualities, "humbleness of mind, lowliness to endure humiliations, (and) the acknowledgement of God."<sup>91</sup> Such an objective response towards God leads to the gift of divine forgiveness through His atoning love and power in Jesus Christ.

It is here that Athanasius introduces the centrality of resurrection as leading through the fast to the climax of the Easter feast itself. All who are pardoned through the atoning love of God in Jesus Christ are brought towards that holiness which surrounds the saints in resurrection. "For not only does such a fast as this obtain

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<sup>89</sup> FL 1. 5.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

pardon for souls, but being kept holy, it prepares the saints, and raises them above the earth.”<sup>92</sup>

From time to time - perhaps more frequently than we might wish - we come across examples of synonymity between fasting and feasting. Athanasius often had a habit of interchanging the sense between feast and fast. While we have touched on this aspect earlier it is worthy of further mention. The opening call in FL1 is directed towards due festal observance in relation to the celebration of the Easter feast (“the season calls us to keep the feast”). FL2 provides a similar introduction: “Again, my brethren, is Easter come and gladness; again the Lord hath brought us to this season; so that when, according to custom, we have been nourished with His words, we may duly keep the feast.”<sup>93</sup> But feasts appear to be interchangeable with fasts, for example in FL5: “We duly proceed, my brethren, from feasts to feasts, duly from prayers to prayers, we advance from fasts to fasts, and join holy-days to holy-days.”<sup>94</sup> The notion of fasting, by its very nature, suggests a period of abstinence and self-denial, of penitence and purification, especially prior to the Eucharistic celebration. For Athanasius, this widespread perception was held to be valid and necessary in anticipation of the Easter feast of Christ’s resurrection. But Athanasius also associated Christ’s death, not only with fasting and penitence as we might assume, but also with festal rejoicing, since he regarded it necessary to emphasise the death of Christ as necessary in a soteriological sense for the fulfilment of man’s salvation: “But we celebrate His death as a feast, rejoicing because we then obtained rest from our afflictions.”<sup>95</sup> The festal commemoration of Christ’s death through a pre-eucharistic fasting becomes the preparatory rite for the actual Eucharistic feast of Easter resurrection. Not surprisingly, we find the metaphor of rising is brought out immediately in the second verse of FL1 where “the Sun of Righteousness, causing His divine beams to rise upon us, proclaims beforehand the time of the feast, in

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<sup>92</sup> FL 1.5.

<sup>93</sup> FL 2.1.

<sup>94</sup> FL 5.1.

<sup>95</sup> FL 20.1.

which, obeying Him, we ought to celebrate it.”<sup>96</sup>

For Athanasius, virtue, in both concept and practice, stood out as arguably the highest order to which the Christian could and should aspire. Whenever the virtuous life was abandoned, evil always filled the resulting vacuum. Giving up the practice of virtue was, in fact, abandoning the gift of divine grace. “For the departure from virtue gives place for the entrance of the unclean spirit. There is, moreover, the apostolic injunction, that the grace given us should not be unprofitable.”<sup>97</sup> The love of virtue signified a putting on of Christ himself. “Now we are clothed with Him (Christ) when we love virtue.”<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, in terms of Christ’s own sacrifice, feeding upon the Passover brought inner virtue to the Christian and the assurance of resurrection-life. “For the Passover is indeed abstinence from evil for exercise of virtue, and a departure from death unto life.”<sup>99</sup>

Throughout the Festal Letters, we find many other calls by Athanasius to the qualities of virtue. We may simply note them at this juncture. “For through virtue a man enters in unto God...”<sup>100</sup> “For virtue is philanthropic.” (This description occurs on two occasions.)<sup>101</sup> “...but we should the more please God through these things, and should consider such matters as the probation and exercise of a virtuous life.”<sup>102</sup> “...let us never loiter in the path of virtue...”<sup>103</sup> “And whereas, not only in action, but also in the thoughts of the mind, men are moved to deeds of virtue.....”<sup>104</sup> “But our feasts consist in the exercise of virtue and the practice of temperance.”<sup>105</sup> “Hence meditation on the law is necessary, my beloved, and uninterrupted converse with virtue.... For by these things is the promise of eternal life.”<sup>106</sup> “...let us hasten as to

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<sup>96</sup> FL 1.1.

<sup>97</sup> FL 3.3.

<sup>98</sup> FL 4.3.

<sup>99</sup> FL 5.4.

<sup>100</sup> FL 10.4.

<sup>101</sup> FL 10.4 and FL 11.1.

<sup>102</sup> FL 10.7.

<sup>103</sup> FL 11.2.

<sup>104</sup> FL 11.7.

<sup>105</sup> FL 14.5.

<sup>106</sup> FL 11.7.

the Lord, Who is Himself the feast, not looking upon it as an indulgence and delight of the belly, but as a manifestation of virtue."<sup>107</sup> "(He)...was willingly led to death, that we might behold in Him, the image of all that is virtuous and immortal."<sup>108</sup>

The importance that Athanasius placed upon the fitting commemoration of the resurrection can easily be seen therefore. Virtuous conduct and an inner attitude that mirrored the quality of godliness reflected the nature of the worshipper in response to divine salvation.

### **III. 3. 3. Resurrection Belief as the Antithesis of Godlessness**

One way in which Athanasius understood the saving purposes of the resurrection can be perceived through the comparison he made in terms of the mind and response of the godless and un-Christlike. In FL2, for example, the festal call is a summons to the godly and devout to follow the example of the saints by responding to the laws of God in both word and deed. Only in this way will the Christ-like obtain their heavenly reward. Thus, "having imitated the behaviour of the saints, we may enter together into the joy of our Lord which is in heaven, which is not transitory, but truly abides."<sup>109</sup> In sharp contrast, the godless and un-Christlike bring upon themselves their own form of recompense which is far removed from the kingdom of heaven, for they reap "the fruit of their ways, sorrow and affliction, and groaning with torments."<sup>110</sup> Indeed, not only have they rejected the ways of godliness, they have deprived themselves of that essential intelligibility which God had bestowed upon man in the beginning. So, through his own disobedience and

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<sup>107</sup> FL 14.5.

<sup>108</sup> FL 10.7.

<sup>109</sup> FL 2. 2.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

godlessness, man has denied himself proper knowledge both of himself and of God. Man is "without understanding".<sup>111</sup>

We can now observe something of the disobedient and corrupt condition which man has brought upon himself. We note the fallen human state that centres its attention upon the things of this visible world and cares nothing for the world of God's kingdom and the resurrection-life that awaits the faithful. We note too the rejection of God's Word and the treatment of scripture, regarded as man-centred by those who "do not hold such opinions as the saints have handed down, and receiving them as the traditions of men, err, because they do not rightly know them nor their power".<sup>112</sup> But, Athanasius affirms, sin and death have been overcome, for the festal celebration is a pointer towards God's saving grace in and through Jesus Christ. "For it is God, my beloved, even the God who established the feast for us, who vouchsafes the celebration of it year by year. He hath brought about the slaying of his Son for salvation, and gave us this reason for the holy feast."<sup>113</sup> In the understanding of Athanasius, the festal season marked the glorious celebration of God's dealings with man. There was no separation between God and man. Rather, the feast "leads us on from the cross through this world to that which is before us, and God produces even now from it the joy of glorious salvation."<sup>114</sup>

Here indeed we perceive the antagonism which Athanasius felt towards the Platonic-Aristotelian dualist philosophy which destroyed genuine belief in God through the concept of the disjunction between God and the world. Such a philosophy had taken root in Arianism and had led to a denial of the Incarnational

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<sup>111</sup> FL 2. 2.

<sup>112</sup> FL 2. 6.

<sup>113</sup> FL 5. 2.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

Truth and, as a direct result, a negation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ through the saving Word and Act of God towards mankind.

Nevertheless, as Athanasius proceeds to demonstrate, God was not prepared to allow man to continue in such a fallen state. Here, once more, the emphasis is on the soteriological aspect of the Inhomination of the Logos of God, in seeking out man in order to rescue and restore the world by extending the divine love in the Person of the Incarnate Word Jesus Christ. "The man-loving Word, who came for this very reason, that He might seek and find that which was lost, sought to restrain them from such folly..."<sup>115</sup>

Athanasius objects to those who do not observe the feast, that is, (what he refers to as) the true feast that is Easter: they devise names of feasts for themselves<sup>116</sup> - an allusion to an Old Testament reference to the conduct of Jeroboam.<sup>117</sup> Instead of feasts marked by days of gladness, they replace these by days of mourning. Thus "gladness and joy are taken from their mouths."<sup>118</sup> These are the feasts of the wicked. In marked contrast, those who are "wise servants of the Lord" and who have "truly put on the man which is created in God,"<sup>119</sup> have responded in heart and mind. They "have received gospel words" and, accordingly, are perceived to be true celebrators of the feast. Unbelievers see them and acknowledge in their faith and life the Presence and Power of God. Thus "seeing their order"<sup>120</sup> they will be able to acknowledge that "God is with them of a truth."<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> FL 2.3. cf. also FL 3.4. "...our Lord Jesus Christ, being good and a lover of men..."

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Robertson *TNPNF* p. 511 note 17.

<sup>117</sup> Scriptural Ref. I Kings 12:32-33.

<sup>118</sup> FL 3.2. Robertson (Note 8) regards the phrase as a scriptural quotation.

<sup>119</sup> FL 2.4. [cf. Ephes. 4.24.]

<sup>120</sup> FL 2.4. [cf. Col. 2.5.] Robertson *TNPNF* p. 511 note 5.

<sup>121</sup> FL 2.4. [cf. I Cor. 14.25]

### **III. 4. RESURRECTION AND HUMAN RESPONSE**

#### **III. 4. 1. The Attitude of Mind and Body**

In the very first of his Festal Letters, Athanasius calls the attention of the church to the importance in worship of a right attitude of mind and body towards the fast as a preparatory rite prior to the Easter feast itself. For the ancient people of Israel, the custom of expressing a devout spirit towards the act of fasting had been handed down from the time of Moses. Athanasius turns in particular to God's words to Moses in the Levitical commandments. For the Jews, two aspects were to be of importance in their worship of Yahweh: firstly, the religious nature and spiritual expression of the worshipper and, secondly, the right understanding towards the essential meaning of the fast. "That we may be able to shew what kind of persons we should be when we fast, and of what character the fast should be, listen again to God commanding Moses, and saying... 'And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, In the tenth day of this seventh month, there shall be a day of atonement; a convocation, and a holy day shall it be to you; and ye shall humble your souls, and offer whole burnt-offerings to the Lord.'"<sup>122</sup> In this we see straightaway the relationship between the worshipper and Yahweh; between the attitude of humility in worship and holiness towards fasting; between the fast-day as a day of self-offering and sacrifice and the fast as a preparatory rite of thanksgiving to God for his atoning deliverance towards Israel.

In his task of elucidation concerning the meaning, significance and purpose behind the Easter Feast, Athanasius was always careful to underline the absolute necessity of approaching both the Lenten Fast and the Easter Feast with a proper attitude of mind and spiritual understanding. To observe the feast was not a question of outwardly observing a set day or days. The day itself was unimportant: what was significant was the nature and meaning of the feast itself which, in turn, gave

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<sup>122</sup> Ref. to Leviticus 23.26.



soteriological meaning to the day. The festal celebration was prior to the day, not the day to the feast. Thus he remarks, "And we do not keep the festival as observers of days.... But rather do we consider the day solemn because of the feast; so that all of us, who serve God in every place, may together in our prayers be well-pleasing to God."<sup>123</sup>

Taking his cue from Pauline understanding, Athanasius returns once more to the centrality of the Easter commemoration, namely, that in and through the feast, the Church expresses obedience to her Risen Lord Jesus Christ and confesses his eternally divine Nature and Being as the Incarnate Word of God. "For the blessed Paul, announcing the nearness of gladness like this, did not announce days, but the Lord, for whose sake we keep the feast...so that we all, contemplating the eternity of the Word, may draw near to do Him service."<sup>124</sup>

Regular contrasts are made in the Festal Letters between the sentiments of joy and gladness which Athanasius is so eager to emphasise; and those of sorrow and sadness that he associates with the heathen and the heretics. The ensuing contrast appears, in the latter instance, to polarise emphasis upon the death of Christ, over against, in the former, his resurrection. To Athanasius the death of Christ marked the culmination of the Lenten period of fasting, appropriating to itself natural sorrow and mourning on the part of the Church in remembering the death of the Saviour of the world. The fast was not to be neglected: it was integrally related to the feast. To observe one without the other was unacceptable. "For he who neglects to observe the fast of forty days.... cannot celebrate the Easter festival."<sup>125</sup>

The death of Christ, Athanasius saw as the gate to life through resurrection joy. Put another way, the festal commemoration centred upon the Easter glory in which were manifest God's purposes of salvation through the victory of His Son Jesus Christ over sin and death. "For he raised up the falling, healed the sick, satisfied those who were hungry, and filled the poor, and, what is more wonderful,

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<sup>123</sup> FL 3.1.

<sup>124</sup> FL 3.1.

<sup>125</sup> FL 19.9

raised us from the dead; having abolished death, He has brought us from affliction and sighing to the rest and gladness of this feast, a joy which reacheth even to heaven."<sup>126</sup> In His saving love and power God "made the world free by the blood of the Saviour; then, again, He has caused the grave to be trodden down by the Saviour's death, and furnished a way to the heavenly gates free from obstacles to those who are going up."<sup>127</sup>

Proper inner spiritual preparation for the feast was of utmost importance for Athanasius: for the Christian it was not an option, but a necessary calling. Indeed, the correct approach to the festival, he believed, was shared actually with the saints at the earthly celebration. This, in turn, led to the eschatological hope of that even greater prospect of sharing with the saints in the heavenly feast. At the beginning of the Twentieth Letter Athanasius expresses this theme and purpose: "It becomes us then in these days of the Passover, to rise early with the saints, and approach the Lord with all our soul, with purity of body, with confession and godly faith in Him...so that when we have here first drunk, and are filled with those divine waters which flow from Him, we may be able to sit at table with the saints in heaven, and may share in the one voice of gladness which is there."<sup>128</sup>

The reward of the saints who are with Christ remains the same for the one who properly observes the feast. "Wherefore let us not celebrate the feast after an earthly manner, but as keeping festival in heaven with the angels. Let us glorify the Lord, by chastity, by righteousness, and other virtues. And let us rejoice, not in ourselves, but in the Lord, that we may be inheritors with the saints. Let us keep the feast then, as Moses. Let us watch like David...Let us fast like Daniel; let us pray without ceasing, as Paul commanded; all of us recognising the season of prayer...and thus having kept the feast, we may be able to enter into the joy of Christ in the kingdom of heaven."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> FL 6.9.

<sup>127</sup> FL 5.3. (The quotation has been preserved in the original Greek in Cosmas, *Topogr. Christ.* p.316.)

<sup>128</sup> FL 20.2.

<sup>129</sup> FL 6.12.

### III. 4. 2. The Attitude of Humility and Purity

As an expression of that right attitude of mind and body that Athanasius held in such high esteem, the spirit of humility was one of several necessary characteristics that Athanasius depicted as belonging to the nature of the Christian worshipper. We shall come to others shortly. Athanasius perceived that this humility of mind and body in the true worshipper must be a copy of the same form of humility which Christ taught his disciples and which he exercised during his earthly ministry. Jesus' own words, as recorded by Matthew, provided the pattern. "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest to your souls."<sup>130</sup> This call to humility and lowliness of heart Athanasius saw as illustrating the gulf which existed between the nature of worldly pride, over against the divine nature of meekness and redemptive forgiveness which belonged to Christ and which he shared with the Father. In short, as Athanasius put it, Christ's spirit of humility came "from the height of His divinity."<sup>131</sup>

With the spirit of Christ's divine humility, the genuine observer of the fast must also be pure in body and mind. "Let us cleanse our hands, let us purify the body. Let us keep our whole mind from guile."<sup>132</sup> With such purity and wholeness, the worshipper needs to be "conformed to the Spirit" and "always mindful of God."<sup>133</sup> These Christ-like characteristics of mind and heart bring to a person that appropriate spiritual attitude and doxological expression worthy of praise to God. "Now this is becoming in us, especially in the days of the feast, when a commemoration of the death of our Saviour is held. For he who is made like Him in His death, is also diligent in virtuous practices, having mortified his members which are upon the earth, and crucifying the flesh with the affections and lusts, he lives in

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<sup>130</sup> FL 2.4 [cf. Matthew 11.29]

<sup>131</sup> FL 2.4.

<sup>132</sup> FL 5.5.

<sup>133</sup> FL 7.1.

the Spirit, and is conformed to the Spirit. He is always mindful of God, and forgets Him not, and never does the deeds of death.”<sup>134</sup>

The assumption of bodily and spiritual purity, however, was not a temporary phenomenon restricted only to the period of the fast: it was for the whole of life. To Athanasius, the entire span of life was regarded as a ceaseless feast in which the Christian is constantly being nourished by the food which comes of God through His Word, Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life. “We too shall be counted worthy of these things, if at all times we cleave to our Saviour, and if we are pure, not only in these six days of Easter, but consider the whole course of our life as a feast, and continue near and do not go far off.”<sup>135</sup> A worshipful attitude that centres upon the divine words of Scripture led to a stronger and deeper relationship with God: “For constant meditation, and the remembrance of divine words, strengthens piety towards God, and produces a love to Him inseparable and not merely formal.”<sup>136</sup>

As to the manner of fasting, Athanasius considered this aspect important to an overall comprehension of spiritual duty. “Behold, my brethren, how much a fast can do, and in what manner the law commands us to fast. It is required that not only with the body should we fast, but with the soul.”<sup>137</sup> In other words, the proper attitude towards fasting for the Christian was not simply an outward corporeal expression of self-denial. Far more was it to be recognised in and through the inner response of the worshipper. In such a unified manner, far from the body and the soul being understood as disjoined from one another and regarded as distinct physical and spiritual expressions of piety and fasting, they are offered together as a unified wholeness in which body, mind and spirit give worshipful expression to God the Creator in accordance with their integral natures.

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<sup>134</sup> FL 7.1.  
<sup>135</sup> FL 7.10.  
<sup>136</sup> FL 11.4.  
<sup>137</sup> FL 1.5.

### III. 4. 3. The Attitude of Faith and Godliness

The twin concepts of faith and godliness were given fullest expression in FL11 and emphasised by Athanasius as exhibiting essential doxological marks of the Church. Both characteristics called for a proper godly attitude on the part of the worshipper and evoked a right mind (φρόνημα or διάνοια) within the God-directed life and thought to which all within the Church should aspire at all times. "For faith and godliness are allied to each other, and sisters; and he who believes in Him is godly, he also who is godly, believes the more."<sup>138</sup>

Giving joyful expression to the faith of the apostle Paul, Athanasius enjoins the Church that she "should have regard to nothing more than to godliness, but above everything to adjudge the chief place to faith in God."<sup>139</sup> There is an obvious antithesis between wickedness and godliness in which the Church's faith is bound up. "He therefore who is in a state of wickedness, undoubtedly also wanders from the faith; and he who falls from godliness, falls from the true faith."<sup>140</sup>

For Athanasius, as he followed the Pauline model, faith and godliness went inseparably together: "faith is yoked with godliness."<sup>141</sup> Again, "...so faith and godliness, being of like growth, hang together, and he who is practised in the one, of necessity is strengthened by the other."<sup>142</sup> Faith and godliness, we find, are united in a common bond of expression and integrity of worship and life-style and attitude towards God. In essence, the life lived through faith and godliness is the life lived in Christ; and those who live such a faithful and godly life shall themselves inherit the promise of eternal life that Christ has obtained. Once more we come across the central theme of the Festal Letters, as Athanasius elected to understand it - not so much the announcement of the date of Easter, but rather the pronouncement of incarnational resurrection in and through Jesus Christ through the saving grace and

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<sup>138</sup> FL 11.9.

<sup>139</sup> FL 11.8. [cf. John 7.17]

<sup>140</sup> FL 11.9.

<sup>141</sup> FL 11.9.

<sup>142</sup> FL 11.9.

power of Almighty God. That soteriological theme we have sought to express as the central purpose of this thesis. "For of these two things we speak of - faith and godliness - the hope is the same, even everlasting life."<sup>143</sup> Within this earthly life, however, since the practice of evil is widespread, it requires a person, in the first instance, to reflect on the error of his ways; and, secondly, to adopt a God-ward attitude bound by godliness. Thereby that person can experience divine forgiveness and spiritual renewal and be restored to the Faith. "For a man will not otherwise depart from sin, and lay hold on virtuous deeds, than by meditation on his acts; and when he has been practised by exercise in godliness, he shall lay hold on the confession of faith...namely, the crown of righteousness."<sup>144</sup>

The pursuit of godliness was especially needful and appropriate as the festal season approached. The call to celebrate and participate in the feast was none other than the call of God through His Word to keep the feast with the saints of old. The connection between the Church's festal celebration "at the present time" and the ongoing celebration of the saints in heaven was one of the most important features which Athanasius reiterated. Thus the Bishop of Alexandria could write: "For such meditation and exercise in godliness, being at all times the habit of the saints, is urgent on us at the present time, when the divine word desires us to keep the feast with them if we are in this disposition."<sup>145</sup> Such an exhortation stirred Athanasius to remind his readers once again of the true nature and purpose of the feast: it remained spiritual in dimension and doxological in expression. "For what else is the feast, but the constant worship of God, and the recognition of godliness, and unceasing prayers from the whole heart with agreement?"<sup>146</sup>

The twin aspects of faith and godliness, for Athanasius, were of an importance that could not be measured. The proper and godly expression of faith represented the proper Christ-like attitude of worship before God: here was

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<sup>143</sup> FL 11.10.

<sup>144</sup> FL 11.10.

<sup>145</sup> FL 11.11.

<sup>146</sup> FL 11.11.

expressed its doxological centrality. Put another way, the faithful practice of godliness in life and worship was a true reflection of the worshipper's relationship to God in and through Jesus Christ. Moreover, the degree to which faith and godliness inhered within the worship of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, acted also as reflection of their actual knowledge of God. We find, therefore, that faith and godliness not only indwell within the doxological nature and calling of the Church, but also give expression to an epistemological dimension leading to a profounder understanding and knowledge of God through belief in accordance with the nature of his godliness. The *Festal Letters* we find bear ample witness to the godly worship and epistemological approach which Athanasius encouraged within the Church as he fearlessly affirmed the incarnate, saving grace of God in and through Jesus Christ the eternal word of the Father and Saviour of the world.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESURRECTION AND DOXOLOGICAL RESPONSE

#### IV. 1. The Eucharistic Approach to the Feast

Complementing the theological pattern and content of the Festal Letters, Athanasius laid great store by the doxological response which the Church was called to make in obedience to the Easter saving message of resurrection joy. An immediate example of this appropriate attitude of thankful praise to God in every circumstance occurs in the FL 3. "But the faithful and true servants of the Lord, knowing that the Lord loves the thankful, never cease to praise Him, ever giving thanks unto the Lord. And whether the time is one of ease or of affliction, they offer up praise to God with thanksgiving, not reckoning these things of time, but worshipping the Lord, the God of times."<sup>1</sup> Whether it was in the face of Jewish misunderstanding or when confronting Arian heresy, the Christian ought always to offer praise to God, as had the saints and apostles of scripture. "Let us, being followers of such men, pass no season without thanksgiving, but especially now, when the time is one of tribulation, which the heretics excite against us, will we praise the Lord."<sup>2</sup>

A doxological attitude went hand in hand with a soteriological Eucharistic approach to reflect an appropriate unitary response in affirming the faith of the Church. This link between Eucharistic action and doxological expression is given even greater emphasis in Athanasius' understanding of unconditional grace. In this respect Athanasius was always conscious of what he described as the "benefits" which God gives through both Word and Sacrament. He acknowledged rightly that there was no way by which we can make repayment for the gift of divine goodness: the only way was through the spirit of praise and thanksgiving. So he confessed and

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<sup>1</sup> FL 3.5.

<sup>2</sup> FL 3.5.



affirmed that "although nature is not able, with things unworthy of the Word, to return a recompense for such benefits, yet let us render Him thanks while we persevere in piety. And how can we more abide in piety than when we acknowledge God, Who in His love to mankind has bestowed on us such benefits?"<sup>3</sup>

Such an acknowledgement of God with thanksgiving was typical of the saints. They, too, recognised their inability and, indeed, inappropriate wishes to repay in some way the divine love. The gift of God's free grace to man, Athanasius readily admitted, required no form of recompense from man: simply the acknowledgement through faith and praise of the crucified, risen Christ who gave himself freely as the visible gift of God's grace. "But we imitate them (i.e. the deeds of the saints) when we acknowledge Him who died, and no longer live unto ourselves, but Christ henceforth lives in us; when we render a recompense to the Lord to the utmost of our power, though when we make a return we give nothing of our own, but those things which we have before received from Him, this being especially of His grace, that He should require, as from us, His own gifts."<sup>4</sup> In addition to a spirit of thankfulness, there must also be a spirit of virtue in which holiness and piety play their part. "And let us offer to the Lord every virtue, and that true holiness which is in Him, and in piety let us keep the feast to Him with those things which He has hallowed for us. Let us engage in the holy fasts, as having been prescribed by Him, and by means of which we find the way to God."<sup>5</sup>

The whole essence of the Easter feast lay in the nature of its appropriate celebration: that is to say, the expression of thanksgiving should in no way be a subjective event in which the festival could be seen as centring in man. Rather was the objective nature of the feast to be understood as directing people away from themselves and towards God in Christ who was Himself the Feast. Furthermore, the Passover was no longer to be seen as purely and simply the feast of the Jews.

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<sup>3</sup> FL 5.3.

<sup>4</sup> FL 5.4.

<sup>5</sup> FL 5.4.

Christians should celebrate it as the festival of the Lord. "But to us it (i.e. the true Passover) came: there came too the solemn day, in which we ought to call to the feast with a trumpet, and separate ourselves to the Lord with thanksgiving, considering it as our own festival. For we are bound to celebrate it, not to ourselves but to the Lord; and to rejoice, not in ourselves but in the Lord."<sup>6</sup>

That same contrasting theme of subjective and objective rejoicing occurs again in FL 6 where the call of Athanasius was to regard the feast not with a worldly approach, but with a spiritual understanding and practice: this in turn would bring its own heavenly rewards. "Wherefore let us not celebrate the feast after an earthly manner, but as keeping festival in heaven with the angels. Let us glorify the Lord, by chastity, by righteousness, and other virtues. And let us rejoice, not in ourselves, but in the Lord, that we may be inheritors with the saints."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, while Athanasius perceived the Church's approach to the festal occasion in doxological terms as marking what was an occasion of joy and thanksgiving, he discouraged any possibility of the holy season becoming merely a time for formal commemoration. By its very nature, here indeed was an occasion for holy joy – and, as such, should reflect nothing less than the inward expression of the heart in response to divine saving grace. "For what else is the feast, but the service of the soul? And what is that service, but prolonged prayer to God, and unceasing thanksgiving?"<sup>8</sup> This doxological approach he attributes to those who keep the feast, not in the worldly sense of outward pleasure and show, but in an inward and virtuous manner of praise to God. "Now those who thus live, and are partakers in such virtue, are alone able to give glory to God, and this it is which essentially constitutes a feast and a holiday. For the feast does not consist in pleasant intercourse at meals, nor splendour of clothing, nor days of leisure, but in the acknowledgement of God, and the offering of thanksgiving and of praise to Him. Now this belongs to the saints alone who live in

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<sup>6</sup> FL 6.7. cf. Festal Psalm 95.1

<sup>7</sup> FL 6.12

<sup>8</sup> FL 3.2.

Christ."<sup>9</sup> "For," Athanasius continues, "to praise and bless God belongs to those only who live in Christ, and by means of this they go up to the feast; for the Passover is not of the Gentiles, nor of those who are yet Jews in the flesh; but of those who acknowledge the truth in Christ."<sup>10</sup>

The doxological approach to the feast, by its very nature as a spiritual catalyst within the worship of the Church, brings Christians together in common liturgical practice. As such the problems of time and space are overcome by its translucent image. Writing from distant exile and while enduring afflictions, Athanasius could still rejoice in the very nature of Christ as the One self-offering for the sins of the world. For Christ is not only the centre of the festal event: he is the feast itself. "For although place separate us, yet the Lord the Giver of the feast, and Who is Himself our feast, Who is also the Bestower of the Spirit, brings us together in mind, in harmony, and in the bonds of peace. For when we mind and think the same things, and offer up the same prayers on behalf of each other, no place can separate us, but the Lord gathers and unites us together."<sup>11</sup>

FL 10 concludes with the reminder that the festal duty of the Christian is indeed doxological in nature. "What then is our duty, my brethren, for the sake of these things, but to praise and give thanks to God, the King of all? Let us keep the feast in that way which He hath dedicated for us unto salvation - the holy day of Easter - so that we may celebrate the feast which is in heaven with the angels."<sup>12</sup> That duty, furthermore, must centre on the personal life of the Christian, involving conversation, conduct and life-style, in which rises up glory to God. "Therefore, let us, performing our vows to the Lord, and confessing our sins, keep the feast to the Lord, in conversation, moral conduct, and manner of life; praising our Lord..."<sup>13</sup>

In accordance with the festal tradition and following the apostolic example,

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<sup>9</sup> FL 7.3.

<sup>10</sup> FL 7.3.

<sup>11</sup> FL 10.2.

<sup>12</sup> FL 10.11

<sup>13</sup> FL 10.11

Athanasius encouraged the Church to become united in prayer and thanksgiving. "...on this account especially I both give thanks to God myself, and exhort you to thank Him with me and on my behalf, this being the Apostolic custom...."<sup>14</sup> That Tradition, Athanasius explained, was one, which God established within the Church through the Apostles and Fathers so that future generations might also observe the feast as one Church in a unity of praise. "The Lord.... renewed and preserved that which was ordained by Him through the Apostle, so that we might keep the feast together, and together keep holy-days, according to the tradition and commandment of the fathers."<sup>15</sup>

The doxological language and call in the FL 10 reach a fitting climax of praise and adoration as Athanasius directs the right worship of the Church on earth towards the heavenly and eternal through the worshipful mediation of Jesus Christ with the Father. "For when we have first meditated properly on these things, we shall attain to be counted worthy of those which are eternal, through Christ Jesus our Lord, through Whom to the Father be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."<sup>16</sup>

The doxological call within the festive season of resurrection is one, which the whole Church must share, again, in a unity of faith and teaching, worship and doctrine. "So when in like manner from all in every place, praise and prayer shall ascend to the gracious and good Father, when the whole Catholic Church which is in every place, with gladness and rejoicing, celebrates together the same worship to God, when all men in common send up a song of praise and say, <Amen>...who will not, at that time, be engaged, praying rightly?"<sup>17</sup> "Since this is so," Athanasius continues, "let us make a joyful noise with the saints." From such examples as these, it can be seen how frequently Athanasius introduces the concept of the worship of the Church on earth as it is linked to the worship of the Church in heaven.

The introductory remarks in the FL 19 contain a Pauline statement of praise

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<sup>14</sup> FL 10.11.

<sup>15</sup> FL 10.11.

<sup>16</sup> FL 10.12.

<sup>17</sup> FL 11.11.

to God: "Blessed is God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>18</sup> Such an introduction, Athanasius states, is appropriate for such a Pastoral Letter as this, since "it brings thanksgiving to the Lord."<sup>19</sup> The offering of thanksgiving was always associated with the overall doxological response of the Church. For Athanasius, thanksgiving in its Eucharistic sense of reflecting the glory of Christ's resurrection was of central importance, as we have seen, throughout the Festal Letters. We may summarise this observation in a further doxological call to praise, prayer and thanksgiving. "For what is so fitting for the feast, as a turning from wickedness, and a pure conversation, and prayer offered without ceasing to God, with thanksgiving?"<sup>20</sup> Such a question requires no formal answer: its is self-evident. The answer, we find, lies in accordance with the nature of the feast itself which, in turn, is hallowed in accordance with the nature and being of Christ who himself is the feast. "Therefore," concludes Athanasius, "let us, my brethren, looking forward to celebrate the eternal joy in heaven, keep the feast here also, rejoicing at all times, praying incessantly, and in everything giving thanks to the Lord."<sup>21</sup>

For Athanasius, as he has so ably demonstrated in many areas of the Festal Letters, the doxological faith and practice of the Church were to be expressed as a totality, in which joyous celebration and meditative prayer united for the primary purpose of reflecting her theological stance and belief in and through the saving resurrection of Jesus Christ

#### **IV. 2. The Nature of Festal Nourishment**

The inner Christocentric approach to the Eucharist, which Athanasius promulgated with its emphasis upon the sacramental nature of the bread and wine, now draws our attention now to the related subject of inward nourishment. For just as

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<sup>18</sup> Ephes. 1.3.

<sup>19</sup> FL 19.1.

<sup>20</sup> FL 19.8.

<sup>21</sup> FL 19.8.

Athanasian theology developed out of scriptural truth and kerygmatic expression, so the relationship between sacramental food and spiritual nourishment bore a direct relationship to his eucharistic understanding of Easter and the observance of the feast. The partaking of spiritual food implied a feeding on God's Word whereby "He by His living Word, quickeneth all men, and gives Him to be food and life to the saints."<sup>22</sup>

This divine food partaken in faith brought about inward spiritual sustenance: it accompanied the external act of fasting: together, they were prior to the festal observance. Athanasius provides a number of statements, which illustrate this understanding of inward nourishment by means of the divine food which God gives through His living Word. "Wherefore, my beloved, having our souls nourished with divine food, with the Word, and according to the will of God, and fasting bodily in things external, let us keep this great and saving feast as it becomes us."<sup>23</sup> "... again the Lord has brought us to this season; so that when, according to custom, we have been nourished with His words, we may duly keep the feast."<sup>24</sup> "But now we, eating of the Word of the Father, and having the lintels of our hearts sealed with the blood of the New Testament, acknowledge the grace given us from the Saviour."<sup>25</sup> "But as soon as ever a man begins to walk in the perfect way, he is no longer fed with the things before mentioned, but he has the Word for bread, and flesh for food."<sup>26</sup>

To illustrate the concepts of external fasting and inner spiritual nourishment, Athanasius drew extensively from the Old Testament and to their place within Jewish sacramental understanding based largely upon Mosaic religious practice. In FL1, he points to the figure of Moses. Fasting, according to Jewish custom, adhered to the Law inasmuch as the tradition was external in form and corporeal in expression: nevertheless the true nurture of his soul came from the words which God

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<sup>22</sup> FL 7.4.

<sup>23</sup> FL 1.7.

<sup>24</sup> FL 2.1.

<sup>25</sup> FL 4.3.

<sup>26</sup> FL 10.4.

spoke. "Moses.....fasted indeed bodily, but was nourished by divine words."<sup>27</sup>

The outward forms, in which the laws of Judaism gave expression to fasting, as far as Athanasius perceived them, remained mere empty modes of religiosity. Formulated under the Old Covenant they sought to fulfil the legalistic necessities of the Deuteronomic and Levitical teachings. From the point of view of the New Covenant of God's saving grace, they were regarded purely and simply in themselves as ritualistic in manner and conditional in rationale. Within the circumscribing framework of the gospel of God's free and unconditional grace fulfilled in resurrection, they failed to give full and proper credence to the inner spiritual and soteriological nature of the Easter feast. Through the inward attitude of heart and mind open to God's Spirit, the Christian, through participation in the feast, comes fully into contact with divine nourishment. "Wherefore," Athanasius exhorts the Churches, "let us not merely proceed to perform the festal rites, but let us be prepared to draw near to the divine Lamb, and to touch heavenly food."<sup>28</sup> In parallel, the true partaking of divine food, Athanasius pointed out, must be accompanied by the gift of faith. This faith Jesus himself exemplified during his earthly ministry as being necessary to health of body, mind and spirit. "For our Saviour..... spoke of the faith without which a man cannot receive such food."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the spiritual nourishment which came of the Incarnate Word gave spiritual life to those Jesus taught, for the divine nourishment of the Logos was also the divine nourishment of God Himself given and received through the divine nature of Christ the Son or Logos of God. Here Athanasius re-emphasises the consubstantial nature of the Godhead. Thus, "To this end He continually nourished His believing disciples with His words, and gave them life by the nearness of His divinity."<sup>30</sup>

Nourishment in faith must also be accompanied by nourishment in knowledge: these, together with obedience to divine commands, brought lasting

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<sup>27</sup> FL 1.6.

<sup>28</sup> FL 5.5.

<sup>29</sup> FL 7.7.

<sup>30</sup> FL 7.7.

spiritual health. "For the righteous man, being nurtured in faith and knowledge, and the observance of divine precepts, has his soul always in health."<sup>31</sup> And again, "For he who partakes of divine bread always hungers with desire; and he who thus hungers has a never-failing gift, as Wisdom promises."<sup>32</sup> In sharp contrast, Athanasius observed that in accepting that godless men will strive for the spiritual food of life, while all the time seeking to satisfy their earthly appetites with earthly sustenance, it is the truly righteous who will always be fully and inwardly satisfied. "Now wicked men hunger for bread like this, for effeminate souls will hunger; but the righteous alone, being prepared, shall be satisfied."<sup>33</sup>

But it was the essential aspect of faith, which Athanasius understood as being germane to inward nourishment: but faith resulting from and reflected in the Christian's love to God. In FL7 we find Athanasius appealing to the Church: "Since these things are so, my brethren, let us mortify our members which are on the earth, and be nourished with living bread, by faith and love to God, knowing that without faith it is impossible to be partakers of such bread as this."<sup>34</sup>

Proceeding one stage further, several of the earlier Festal Letters provide evidence of a more deeply eucharistic understanding of the resurrection to which Athanasius turned ever more frequently as he emphasised the nature of the Body and Blood of Christ as spiritual food. We may select several examples: "...our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ," he affirmed in FL1, "being heavenly bread, is the food of the saints."<sup>35</sup> And again in the FL4: "When we are thus nourished by these things (i.e. Christ's Body and Blood), we also, my beloved shall truly keep the feast of the Passover."<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, partaking of the spiritual food that is Christ's Body was not to be understood as a singular Eucharistic act in isolation. Inward spiritual nourishment was to be complimented by a replenishing of that inner thirst which

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<sup>31</sup> FL 7.8.

<sup>32</sup> FL 7.6

<sup>33</sup> FL 7.6.

<sup>34</sup> FL 7.7.

<sup>35</sup> FL 1.5.

<sup>36</sup> FL 4.4.



could be assuaged only through the drinking of Christ's Blood. "We eat, as it were, the food of life, and constantly thirsting we delight our souls at all times, as from a fountain, in His precious blood."<sup>37</sup>

In this aspect of festal nourishment, Athanasius recognised that the provision of spiritual food came through the immediacy of Christ and was not dependent upon the actions of the recipient. The Christian who yearns for such spiritual food and drink is not compelled to search for them. Christ himself waits to offer them through himself. "He stands ready for those who thirst; and for those who thirst there is the word of our Saviour, which, in His loving-kindness, He uttered on the day of the feast...."<sup>38</sup>

We perceive from the various Eucharistic examples which Athanasius provides in the Festal Letters that the act in which the Christian partakes of bread and wine evokes a far deeper significance than that which the material substances themselves present or suggest. On the one hand, the substantive form of the Eucharistic elements, namely the visible and tangible bread and wine, exists as the outward symbol of communion with and through the Risen Christ. On the other hand, the truth which Athanasius expressly sought to proclaim lay in the fact that in the festal commemoration of the resurrection, the Christian is partaking, not merely in the outward form of the Passover, but in the living, risen reality of Christ Himself. For Athanasius, as indeed we find in the Pauline statement which Athanasius quoted frequently, Christ was Himself the Passover on whom the Christian is called to feed and be nourished and drink and be assuaged. "Christ our Passover is sacrificed, therefore let us keep the feast." The urgent call of Athanasius was ever, "...let us hasten as to the Lord, Who is Himself the feast."<sup>39</sup>

Crucial to everyone within the Church, as Athanasius strove to demonstrate through his own belief, Easter resurrection stood as both a weekly commemoration

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<sup>37</sup> FL 5.1.

<sup>38</sup> FL 5.1.

<sup>39</sup> FL 14.5.

as well as a daily feeding upon the risen Christ. Thus he exhorted: "But let us keep the feast, my beloved, not as introducing a day of suffering, but of joy in Christ, by Whom we are fed every day."<sup>40</sup>

#### IV. 3. Resurrection and Apostolic Tradition

As we discover throughout the writings of Athanasius where he confronted Arian philosophy, so we find in many of the Festal Letters the same imperative desire that the Church should recollect the deep scriptural roots of her theological understanding as they had been transmitted from of old through biblical teaching. It was above all upon a firm soteriological position founded in scripture that the faith, preaching and tradition of the Apostles and earlier Fathers were based. T.F. Torrance reminds us of the important relationship between the Apostolic Tradition and the thinking of Athanasius. "Athanasius was steeped in Apostolic Tradition, and everywhere manifests a thoroughly Hebraic cast of mind in which Greek rationalism had been overcome and the Greek spirit had been taken captive by the Mind of Christ. It was he who even as a young deacon had exercised such a decisive influence on the Nicene Council, helping it to penetrate through the confusions that prevailed at that time and seize upon the essential heart of the Christian Faith in Jesus Christ and give it clear and simple formulation, which all the world has acknowledged ever since. Moreover, it was Athanasius above all who gave the Church the fullest and best account of the Nicene faith, and laid the very foundations of classical Christian theology in the doctrine of the Trinity, giving us not only a full and clear understanding of the person and work of Christ but also of the Holy Spirit in his incomparable Letters to his friend Serapion."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> FL 13.7.

<sup>41</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Contribution of the Greek Community in Alexandria to the Intelligent Understanding of the Christian Gospel, and its Communication in the World of Culture and Science*. A Paper given to the Greek Schools of Addis Ababa and reproduced in ABBA SALAMA (A Review of the Association of Ethio-Hellenic Studies Vol.V. Athens, 1974.)

Athanasius had clearly observed those divisive forces borne largely of Gnostic and Hellenistic influences which had infected the Church's doctrine. Such a philosophic amalgam, taking concrete expression in the form of Arianism, threatened to destroy, as Athanasius knew full well, the very theological core of the Church's faith and doctrine which had lain at the heart of her belief and worship since apostolic times. We may express it another way. Arius could not accept the divinity of the Logos and, thereby, denounced the possibility of any consubstantial relationship between the Father and the Son. To him logically, the Son could only be creaturely in nature and being: the Son simply did not belong to the divine side of creation. From the Arian standpoint the Incarnation of Jesus Christ the Son of God could be regarded only from within a creaturely perception. If that was the case then could Arius really accept the truth of the resurrection in the light of its divine power? While there appears to be no evidence that Arius chose to deny the resurrection, nevertheless, the strength of his support admitting to its reality surely must be weakened. Did Arius really believe, for example, that the resurrection was possible by means of a creaturely power and not through the divine nature of God? Doubtless it can be argued that the human nature, being and form of the Logos was creaturely in the sense that it belonged to man and was of this world; and that it was this human form – the humanity of man – which was raised from the dead. We would wish to respond with this question. Was not the resurrection, as the very action of God, made possible through the nature and power of his *divinity*, as well as through the assumption of the humanity he took upon himself in and through his Son?

Since, as we have observed, the theological tenets of faith to which Athanasius witnessed were founded scripturally and epistemologically in the revelatory reality of God's incarnational truth and of saving atonement in and through His Son Jesus Christ and in his consubstantiality with the Father, Athanasius became convinced at an early stage that unless the Incarnation was re-affirmed in terms of

the Resurrection and unless the Resurrection was understood in the light of God's incarnational grace, the very foundations of the Church's doctrine and faith would collapse.

Therefore, for Athanasius, the call to commemorate the feast of resurrection was a theological and doxological necessity. That call stood also as an invitation for the Church to participate in the long festal tradition in which the apostles and early Fathers themselves had celebrated. That actively commemorative theme expresses itself from one Festal Letter to the next. Each one stands as a reminder of the intense manner in which Athanasius regarded his own Episcopal calling, standing as he undoubtedly did in the footsteps and traditions of the first apostles. Since, therefore, the festal commemoration was one in which the Christian shared in the festal glory of Christ's resurrection, so participation involved a sharing also with the apostles and saints in the glorious resurrection-life of the Son of God. In this expression of resurrection joy, it is not difficult to observe how an all-pervading note of gladness becomes so apparent in the mind of Athanasius. What we might describe as a sense of present eschatology seems to pour from his heart as he restates his powerful perception of resurrection, strengthened, as it was, through a sense of permanent communion with the saints on earth together with the saints in heaven. An awareness of heavenly joy was ever-present as he announced the apostolic festal summons to the Church: "Let us celebrate it then, even heavenly joy, with those saints who formerly proclaimed a like feast, and were ensamples to us of conversation in Christ."<sup>42</sup> Such "ensamples" reflected the "apostolic precept" which "exhorts us all."<sup>43</sup> The apostles, Athanasius reminded the Church, not only had been called to the task of proclaiming the evangelical message of divine love and power accomplished in resurrection. Their apostolic calling was such that in their own lives they demonstrated that self-same power. "For not only were they entrusted with the

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<sup>42</sup> FL 2.1.

<sup>43</sup> FL 2.1

charge of preaching the Gospel, but...its power was displayed in them."<sup>44</sup> Towards that same divine calling, "the commands of all the saints urge us on similarly..."<sup>45</sup> Furthermore the nature of the festal call revealed a certain urgency in which a distinction should be made between the auditory and the pragmatic: that is to say, between the response of the person who is a mere listener and the person whose response goes one step further when hearing is transformed into the more practical aspect of faith. "Let us then, as is becoming, as at all times, yet especially in the days of the feast, be not hearers only, but doers of the commandments of our Saviour, that having imitated the behaviour of the saints, we may enter together into the joy of our Lord which is in heaven, which is not transitory, but truly abides."<sup>46</sup>

The habit of saintliness Athanasius regularly contrasted with the attitude of both Jews and Arians. The former had been given their own prophetic tradition: yet this they had eschewed. "For they did not listen to the prophetic voice that reproved them." "Being blind to the truth they looked upon a stone as God, and hence, like senseless creatures, they walked in darkness."<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the belief held by the Sadducees led them to discount any credibility whatsoever towards the reality of the Easter message: in short, they "scoffed at the mystery of the resurrection."<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in their attitude towards scripture, the Jews tended to apply their own external application to the meaning and sense of words, yet in their own heart and mind remained aloof to the essential spiritual significance. "For not only in outward form did those wicked men dissemble...but they took those divine words in their mouth, while they inwardly cherished evil intentions."<sup>49</sup> Again, "they changed the commandments they received from God after their own understanding, preferring to observe the traditions of men."<sup>50</sup> It followed that there could be no relationship

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<sup>44</sup> FL 2.1

<sup>45</sup> FL 2.1

<sup>46</sup> FL 2.2.

<sup>47</sup> FL 2.3.

<sup>48</sup> FL 2.5.

<sup>49</sup> FL 2.6.

<sup>50</sup> FL 2.6.

between the apostolic example and practice of those of saintly calling who faithfully proclaimed the Gospel; and the attitude of those whose understanding stemmed from human philosophy. The latter led to fanciful propositions: the former disclosed divine truth. "For there is no fellowship whatever between the words of the saints and the fancies of human invention; for the saints are the ministers of the truth, preaching the kingdom of heaven."<sup>51</sup>

The apostolic tradition consisted of those who were "witnesses and ministers of the Word."<sup>52</sup> The message concerning that divine Word each of the saints received in turn. They fulfilled their task by carrying it out fully and without change or error, seeking on every occasion "to impart without alteration, for the confirmation of the doctrine of the mysteries."<sup>53</sup> In contradistinction to both Jewish and Arian anthropocentric interpretation, Athanasius provides a further reminder of the saintly mind within apostolic tradition, referring to the faithful example of the apostles as we find it handed down to the Christian community in Corinth through St. Paul. "Therefore Paul justly praises the Corinthians, because their opinions were in accordance with his traditions."<sup>54</sup> In the same way in respect of St. Luke: "Therefore blessed Luke reproves the inventions of men, and hands down the narrations of the saints...as those who from the beginning were witnesses and ministers of the Word.... delivered to us."<sup>55</sup>

For Athanasius, the person who truly understood and adhered strictly to the apostolic teaching, was thereby privileged to rejoice in the spiritual benefits which come of God speaking and acting in saving grace through His Word which He extends through His Son as the Incarnate Logos. In simple but effective rhetorical form Athanasius asks, "How shall we admire the loving-kindness of the Saviour?" His reply is couched in equally simple but effective exclamatory language: "With

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<sup>51</sup> FL 2.7.

<sup>52</sup> FL 2.7.

<sup>53</sup> FL 2.7.

<sup>54</sup> FL 2.6.

<sup>55</sup> FL 2.6.

what power, and with what a trumpet should a man cry out, exalting these his benefits! That not only should we bear His image, but should receive from Him an example and pattern of heavenly conversation."<sup>56</sup>

Through the deeply spiritual mind which lay at the heart of his faith and theology, it became fully apparent that Athanasius could, as it were, peer into the minds of the apostles and see that through their own Christ-like lives and conversation, they had left a spiritual legacy of rich profundity in which every Christian had been called upon to share. "For those who are thus disposed, and fashion themselves according to the Gospel, will be partakers of Christ, and imitators of apostolic conversation."<sup>57</sup> By being partakers of Christ, Athanasius meant being partakers of the whole life of the Son of God. In particular, he declared, the Christian welcomed and received the apostolic precepts of resurrection, which lay at the heart of his soteriology. "And let us not forget that which Paul delivered, declaring to the Corinthians; I mean His resurrection, whereby 'He destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.'<sup>58</sup> and raised us up together with Him, having loosed the bands of death, and vouchsafed a blessing instead of a curse, joy instead of grief, a feast instead of mourning, in this holy joy of Easter, which being continually in our hearts, we always rejoice."<sup>59</sup>

Upon this soteriological basis was affirmed the seasonal call to Easter faith and the Eucharistic expression of glory with which apostolic tradition had blessed the Church. "So," comments Athanasius, "we are not remiss in giving notice of its seasons, as we have received them from the Fathers. Again we write, again keeping to the apostolic traditions, we remind each other when we come together for prayer; and keeping the feast in common, with one mouth we truly give thanks to the Lord."<sup>60</sup> Then, as if to underline the scriptural essence within apostolic teaching,

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<sup>56</sup> FL 2.5.

<sup>57</sup> FL 2.5

<sup>58</sup> FL 2.7.

<sup>59</sup> FL 2.7.

<sup>60</sup> FL 2.7.

Athanasius turns to the Psalmist: In this manner of doxological expression, "giving thanks unto Him, and being followers of the saints, 'we shall make our praise in the Lord all the day.'"<sup>61</sup> "So," he concludes in a typically triumphant and eschatological sentence, "when we rightly keep the feast, we shall be counted worthy of that joy which is in heaven."<sup>62</sup>

The inherent relationship between the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ Athanasius sought to impart to the Church in the strongest terms: it was one which the apostles and Fathers understood in a creative and unifying sense. "Now some have related the wonderful signs performed by our Saviour, and preached His eternal Godhead. And others have written of His being born in the flesh of the Virgin, and have proclaimed the festival of the holy passover."<sup>63</sup>

For Athanasius the apostolic tradition, to which he sought to recall the Church, circumscribed the eschatological hope, which came of the resurrection. By means of faith and knowledge in godly endeavours, the saints obtained the heavenly reward to which every follower of Christ should aim. "When by such faith and knowledge the saints have embraced this true life, they receive, doubtless, the joy which is in heaven."<sup>64</sup> The godly men and women of old are of such a saintly and virtuous disposition. Again, in rejecting the material aspects of the world, they obtain an everlasting salvation. But the saints, and they who truly practice virtue...are pure and without spot, confiding in the promise of our Saviour. These, having become dead to the world, and renounced the merchandise of the world, gain an honourable death."<sup>65</sup> The apostolic example and faith of St. Paul are used to illustrate the saintly understanding of being incorporate in Christ. "They are also able, preserving the Apostolic likeness, to say, 'I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.'"<sup>66</sup> The real life is that of life in Christ. Such a life means

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<sup>61</sup> FL 2.7. cf. Ps.35:28

<sup>62</sup> FL 2.7.

<sup>63</sup> FL 2.7.

<sup>64</sup> FL 7.2.

<sup>65</sup> FL 7.3.

<sup>66</sup> FL 7.3. cf. Gal. 2:20



being dead to the things of the world, while at the same time, living within the world. Such a true life is the life of the saints whose hope is in heaven. "For that is the true life, which a man lives in Christ; for although they are dead to the world, yet they dwell as it were in heaven, minding the things which are above....."<sup>67</sup>

The inevitable result of living a Christ-like life leads to earthly affliction and persecution. Yet, in such times of testing and in contrast to the destructive teachings of the Jews and Arians, Athanasius continued to encourage his readers in being nourished in the faith and in engaging in Eucharistic practice. "....on this account especially I both give thanks to God myself, and exhort you to thank Him with me and on my behalf, this being the Apostolic custom, which these opponents of Christ, and the schismatics, wished to put an end to, and to break off."<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, the saints and apostles, as recompense for their Christian witness, have had to undergo many difficulties: their tradition of endurance should be a shining example to pursue. "For such things as these serve for exercise and trial, so that, having approved ourselves zealous and chosen servants of Christ, we may be fellow-heirs with the saints."<sup>69</sup> In this we look to the future life which Christ has won for us through his resurrection. "Therefore, my beloved brethren, we should not look at these temporal things, but fix our attention on those which are eternal."<sup>70</sup> "For all present matters are trifling compared with those which are future."<sup>71</sup>

The saints of old possessed an unassailable belief and trust in God through the revelatory and mediatory role of Christ. They also attained knowledge of God's redeeming grace and understanding of God's saving Word. In these they rejoiced through Eucharistic praise. "But the saints, having their senses exercised in self-possession, and being strong in faith, and understanding the word do not faint under trials.... they continue faithful, and awaking the Lord who is with them, they are

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<sup>67</sup> FL 7.3.

<sup>68</sup> FL 10.11.

<sup>69</sup> FL 13.1.

<sup>70</sup> FL 13.4.

<sup>71</sup> FL 13.4.

delivered.....they duly keep the feast, offering up prayers with thanksgiving to God Who has redeemed them."<sup>72</sup>

Through apostolic practice, the saintly mind does not concentrate upon the trials and difficulties that come of exercising faith and virtue: rather upon the hope that awaits, indeed that same hope which is created as a result of affliction. "Therefore it is not right, my beloved, to consider afflictions and persecutions, but the hopes which are laid up for us because of persecutions."<sup>73</sup> And again, "...we also.... should glory in afflictions, and that when we are persecuted, we should not be discouraged, but should the rather press after the crown of the high calling in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>74</sup>

Turning to the essential nature of the Easter feast in terms of the resurrection as God's act in delivering man from sin and death, Athanasius cites the apostolic witness of Old Testament scripture in relation to God's act of deliverance in Israel. There, not least, can be found examples of saintly lives bound up by praise and prayer, the very epitome of festal celebration. "For thus the saints all their lives long were like men rejoicing at a feast." There was David who "found rest in prayer to God": there was Moses who "gave glory in songs of praise": there were others who "performed worship with unceasing diligence", such as "great Samuel" and "blessed Elijah".<sup>75</sup> They now "have ceased from their course, and now keep the feast in heaven, and rejoice in what they formerly learnt through shadows, and from the types recognise the truth."<sup>76</sup> The devotion of the saints, Athanasius reminded the Church, was unceasing. Their festal offering was an offering of worship and a sacrifice of Eucharistic praise." For such is the love of the saints at all times, that they never once leave off, but offer the uninterrupted, constant sacrifice to the Lord, and continually thirst, and ask of Him to drink."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> FL 19.7.

<sup>73</sup> FL 13.4.

<sup>74</sup> FL 13.6.

<sup>75</sup> FL 14.1.

<sup>76</sup> FL 14.1.

<sup>77</sup> FL 20.1.

Always, the Apostolic Tradition was bound up with the one Truth of Almighty God as it has been revealed in the love of the Father and through His Son Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. As with the Apostles and earlier Fathers who allowed the Incarnate Truth of God's Being to be disclosed to the human mind and be comprehended in accordance with its very own nature, so in the same way, Athanasius sought not simply to grasp the nature of divine Truth, so much as be grasped wholly and completely by it and allow his understanding to be formed by its revelatory nature. Again, we refer to T.F. Torrance who has underlined the apostolic precept to divine Truth in Being which lay at the heart of Athanasius' epistemology.

"Throughout his long life Athanasius maintained an uncompromising relation to truth: he insisted on thinking only as he was led to think by the truth as it is in Jesus Christ. Here we see a profound integration between scientific fidelity, i.e., thinking of things only according to their nature or thinking of things as we are compelled to think of them according with what they really are, and unswerving devotion and faithfulness to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. But Athanasius taught us that it is not enough to acknowledge the truth, but to be rightly related to the truth, or, as he often expressed it, to be related, rightly (ὀρθῶς), to the truth. That is in point of fact what orthodoxy really means, not just to hold true and hold right opinions, but to be truly and rightly orientated to the truth."<sup>78</sup> It was that truth, rightly related and rightly centred in Christ upon which the traditions of the Fathers and Apostles were founded.

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T.F. Torrance op. cit. *The Contribution of the Greek Community in Alexandria to the Intelligent Understanding of the Christian Gospel, and its Communication in the World of Culture and Science.*

#### IV. 4. RESURRECTION AND THE NATURE OF SACRIFICE

For Athanasius, the concept and right understanding of the term "sacrifice"<sup>79</sup> is intimately caught up in his doctrine of redemption. Integral to this soteriological understanding, as this thesis seeks to prove, resurrection was to be expressed commemoratively in terms of the theological and doxological notion of sacrament, while the Eucharist was the visible feasting upon Christ and celebrated through the Easter festival. As such the Easter festival stood as the concrete manifestation within the Church's life and worship of the fulfilment of God's saving grace for the world in the sacrificial death and atoning resurrection of His Son the inhominated Logos of God.

One study of the Festal Letters<sup>80</sup> lays emphasis on the differing exegetical understanding between Jews and Christians in relation to the soteriology of the Passover. The author draws attention to the theory that it was an essential concern of Athanasius to demonstrate that the history of salvation, which the Old Testament expounds, is brought to fulfilment after the life of Christ within the Church. The writings of Athanasius as a whole bear constant reference to the relationship between the death of Christ and his sacrifice in atoning for human sin through conquering death and restoring the corrupted nature of man. As an illustration, we may quote from the *De Incarnatione*, although the same theme occurs in the Festal Letters. "The Word, perceiving that not otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by

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<sup>79</sup> For further discussion on several aspects of sacrifice, cf. The Rev. Professor Robert Dobbie *Deuteronomy And The Prophetic Attitude To Sacrifice*. *SJT*. Vol. 12, No. 1 March 1959 p. 68. The Rev. Nahum Levison *Lutron* *SJT*. Vol. 12, No. 3 September 1959. p. 277. The Rev. A. Ian Dunlop *Christ's Sacrifice For Sin* (with reference to the Scots Confession of 1560) *SJT*. Vol. 13, No. 4. December 1960 p. 383.

<sup>80</sup> Pius Merendino *Paschale Sacramentum. Eine Untersuchung ueber die Osterkatechese des hl. Athanasius von Alexandria in ihrer Beziehung zu den fruehchristliche exegetisch-theologischen Ueberlieferungen*. The work is referred to by Robert L. Wilken in *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind - A Study of Cyril of Alexandria's Exegesis and Theology*. (Yale University Press, 1971).

death as a necessary condition, while it was impossible for the Word to suffer death, being immortal, and Son of the Father; to this end He takes to Himself a body capable of death, that it, by partaking of the Word Who is above all, might be worthy to die instead of all, and might, because of the Word which was come to dwell in it, remain incorruptible, and that henceforth corruption might be stayed from all by the grace of the resurrection. Whence, by offering unto death the body He Himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway He put away death from all His peers by the offering of an equivalent. For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by His death. And thus He, the incorruptible Son of God (ὁ ἄφθαρτος τοῦ Θεοῦ), being conjoined with all by a like nature (διὰ τοῦ ὁμοίου), naturally (εἰκότως) clothed all with incorruption (ἀφθαρσίαν) by the promise of the resurrection (ἐν τῇ περὶ τῆς ἀναστάσεως ἐπαγγελίᾳ.)"<sup>81</sup>

In a detailed study of the various writings of Athanasius, G.D. Dragas has indicated that there are three forms of sacrifices to which Athanasius refers: the pagan, the Jewish and the Christian.<sup>82</sup> For Athanasius, pagan sacrifice signified irreligious practice,<sup>83</sup> whereas his understanding of Jewish sacrifice was that in all its aspects it had been accomplished as the type of what was to come and, in fact, had been "replaced by the once and for all sacrifice of Christ, which rests upon his unique and incommunicable high-priesthood."<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, "Jewish sacrifices were insufficient, untrustworthy, ineffective and time-conditioned, whereas Christ's sacrifice is trustworthy, effective and everlasting."<sup>85</sup>

We turn now to the text of the Festal Letters where we find the ways in which Athanasius approached and compared the Jewish sacrifice of the Passover, together with other Old Testament references to sacrifice, with the Christian concept of

<sup>81</sup> *De Incar.* 9.1.

<sup>82</sup> For a more complete background on this cf. G.D. Dragas *St. Athanasius On Christ's Sacrifice* in *Durham Essays in Theology* Ed. S.W. Sykes.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p.77.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p.79.

<sup>85</sup> G.D. Dragas, *op. cit.* p.79.

Christ's own sacrifice. The text most frequently quoted is Pauline - I Corinthians 5:7. It occurs no less than thirteen times throughout the Festal Letters (1.3; 2.7; 3.1; 6.2; 7.3; 10.2; 10.10; 11.14; 13.7; 14.1; 14.5; 19.1; Frag. 42).

In FL1, Athanasius with his mind clearly concentrating on the divine food of salvation offered in the resurrection, exhorts the Church to be nourished with the Word which is the divine food and partake in fasting externally. Thereby, he writes, "let us keep this great and saving feast as becomes us."<sup>86</sup> Athanasius refers to the Jews who eat the lamb of their Passover, but fail to understand its typological significance, as pointing to the sacrifice of Christ the Lamb of God. "Even the ignorant Jews received this divine food, through the type, when they ate a lamb in the Passover. But not understanding the type, even to this day they eat the lamb, erring in that they are without the city and the truth."<sup>87</sup> Further on, Athanasius continues, "And besides this, the law commanded them to offer whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices, there being no other altar than that in Jerusalem. For on this account, in that city alone was there an altar and temple built, and in no other city were they permitted to perform these rites, so that when that city should come to an end, then those things that were figurative might also be done away."<sup>88</sup>

We may observe that in spite of the deeply religious nature of the Jewish concept of sacrifice, it fell far short of the Christian understanding. While the former was treated as literal in interpretation and mechanical in practice, the latter saw the Jewish rite as a necessary, but preparatory episode within the whole framework of God's saving purposes, as, in losing its figurative garment, the Passover pointed to the complete sacrifice of Christ demonstrated in death and resurrection. G.D. Dragas puts it thus: "... for Athanasius Jewish sacrifices are both false and demonic - false, as rejecting the truth (reality) of Christ's sacrifice in the name of its type and shadow, and demonic, in rejecting Christ's Godhood and attributing his miraculous works to

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<sup>86</sup> FL 1. 7.

<sup>87</sup> FL 1. 7.

<sup>88</sup> FL 1. 7.

the devil or a demon."<sup>89</sup>

In FL3, Athanasius abhors the way in which the Jews attributed greater importance to the actual day of the Passover. By contrast, the Christian Church was called to commemorate the significance of the festal sacrifice itself, since the day was solemn (or holy) on account of the festival and not the reverse. "And we do not keep the festival as observers of days...But rather do we consider the day solemn because of the feast; so that all of us, who serve God in every place, may together in our prayers be well-pleasing to God."<sup>90</sup>

In FL4, Athanasius turns, in the first instance, to a discussion on the nature and import of Jewish religious feasts: they were often regarded as a time for celebration when an enemy was overcome and freedom from oppression was gained, such that "temporal feasts and holidays were observed in Judaea."<sup>91</sup> Thus when Israel was delivered from the oppression of the Egyptians, the Jewish Passover was established to mark that event within the historical and divine context of the life of God's People. It failed to be understood as a type of the future deliverance of mankind from oppression to sin and death through the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. It was to the significance of that event that the Christian Passover pointed. For Athanasius the sacrificial nature of the Jewish Passover had a temporal, earthly and finite aspect; whereas the Christian Passover commemorated Christ's sacrifice in terms that were for ever eternal, heavenly and infinite. "Now, however, that the devil, that tyrant against the whole world, is slain, we do not approach a temporal feast, my beloved, but an eternal and heavenly. Not in shadows do we shew it forth, but we come to it in truth. For they being filled with the flesh of a dumb lamb, accomplished the feast, and having anointed their doorposts with the blood, implored aid against the destroyer. But now we, eating of the Word of the Father, and having the lintels of our hearts sealed with the blood of the New Testament, acknowledge

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<sup>89</sup> G.D. Dragas, *Durham Essays in Theology* op.cit. p.80

<sup>90</sup> FL 3. 1

<sup>91</sup> FL 4. 2

the grace given us from the Saviour.... For no more does death reign; but instead of death henceforth is life.... so that everything is filled with joy and gladness."<sup>92</sup>

In terms of the typological aspect of the Jewish Passover, Athanasius returns to the theme upon which he had previously concentrated in FL1 and FL3, that is the temporal or seasonable nature of the feast which should no longer dictate its new and proper understanding or purpose. Here the doxological element is further revived. With the type and shadow relating to the Passover now past, Christ the one true Passover, summons his Church to true worship in spirit and in truth. "By these things Israel of old, having first, as in a figure, striven for the victory, came to the feast, for these things were then foreshadowed and typified. But we, my beloved, the shadow having received its fulfilment, and the types being accomplished, should no longer consider the feast typical, neither should we go up to Jerusalem which is here below, to sacrifice the Passover, according to the unseasonable observance of the Jews, lest, while the season passes away, we should be regarded as acting unseasonably; but, in accordance with the injunction of the Apostles, let us go beyond the types and sing the new song of praise."<sup>93</sup>

The Eucharistic nature of sacrifice is expounded by reference to a passage from the prophet Malachi<sup>94</sup> in which the celebration of the Eucharist becomes the only true way in which to celebrate the Passover. In the Eucharist the Church partakes in the humanity of Christ: this, for Athanasius, is an inner spiritual act in accordance with Christian understanding and contrasts with what was an external typical act which accorded with Jewish tradition.

In FL5, the concepts of type and shadow receive further mention, but fresh emphasis is put upon understanding the sacrifice of Christ in relation to the Christian Passover. "Again the time has arrived," Athanasius joyfully proclaims, "which brings to us a new beginning, even the announcement of the blessed Passover, in which the

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<sup>92</sup> FL4. 3.

<sup>93</sup> FL4. 4; cf also FL1.1; FL1. 2; FL3.1; FL3. 5.

<sup>94</sup> Malachi 1:11.



Lord was sacrificed."<sup>95</sup> In this respect we see how the notion of self-sacrifice impelled the Church to partake of Christ's sacrificial body and blood in Eucharistic celebration. "We eat, as it were, the food of life, and constantly thirsting we delight our souls at all times, as from a fountain, in His precious blood."<sup>96</sup> Here the language graphically reflects the Cross and the saving grace that emerged out of death and resurrection. The redemption of man was the purpose behind Christ's sacrifice and the fulfilment of it: therein lay the reason for the resurrection feast. "For it is God, my beloved, even the God Who at first established the feast for us, Who vouchsafes the celebration of it year by year. He hath both brought about the slaying of His Son for salvation, and gave us this reason for the holy feast."<sup>97</sup>

The divisive nature of both the Jewish and Arian interpretation of the Passover is underlined by Athanasius. Their Christological misunderstandings brought about doctrinal schism and ecclesiastical confusion: together they divide the Church and the nature of Christ Himself. "But let us, my brethren, be superior to the heathen, in keeping the feast with sincerity of soul, and purity of body; to the Jews, in no longer receiving the type and shadow, but as having been gloriously illumined with the light of truth, and as looking upon the Sun of Righteousness; to the schismatics, in not rending the coat of Christ, but in one house, even in the Catholic Church, let us eat the Passover of the Lord, Who, by ordaining His holy laws, guided us towards virtue, and counselled the abstinence of this feast."<sup>98</sup> The link between the death of Christ through his self-sacrifice and the resurrection life, which he has obtained, is then simply but thoroughly expressed in terms of the Passover. "For the Passover is indeed abstinence from evil for exercise of virtue, and a departure from death unto life."<sup>99</sup>

In FL6, Athanasius reminds the Church that in order for Christ's sacrifice in

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<sup>95</sup> FL5. 1.

<sup>96</sup> FL5. 1

<sup>97</sup> FL5. 2.

<sup>98</sup> FL5. 4

<sup>99</sup> FL5. 4.

death should be effective in winning salvation for mankind, it was necessary for the incorruptible nature of Christ to assume the corruptible nature of humanity. Athanasius abhorred the Jewish practice whereby the name of Passover had been associated in a generic sense in relation to the Jewish people, rather than in a godly sense in relation to the divine offering namely Christ himself. Because the Jews persecuted Christ, Athanasius comments, the Passover for them had lost its true significance. No longer could it be celebrated in a spiritual and godly manner: it has now become the Passover, not of the Lord, but of the Jews themselves, for "they denied the Lord of the Passover."<sup>100</sup>

In the opinion of Athanasius, the heretics and schismatics, in Arian guise, are as blameworthy as the Jews. As he sees the situation, both parties together vent their opposition to Christ and therefore each one is excluded from the feast. "Now the cause of this to them was the slaying of the Lord, and that they did not reverence the Only-Begotten. At this time the altogether wicked heretics and ignorant schismatics (along with the Jews) are in the same case; the one in that they slay the Word, the other in that they rend the coat. They too remain expelled from the feast, because they live without godliness and knowledge...."<sup>101</sup> As G.D. Dragas has put it so precisely, "For Athanasius a sacrifice based on Jewish, or heretical or schismatical premises is unlawful and unacceptable because it does not rest on a sound Christological faith."<sup>102</sup>

In the view of Athanasius the Jews had failed to understand the Passover in terms of the Old Covenant. He points to the example of Abraham, the "root" of Israel. Whereas the nation of Israel had in later times disobeyed the voice of God, there remained the father of Israel, namely, Abraham, whose loyalty and faithfulness were put to the test through the sacrifice of Isaac.

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<sup>100</sup> FL6. 2.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 6. 6.

<sup>102</sup> G.D. Dragas, *Durham Essays in Theology* op.cit. p. 83.

In a discussion paper on the Doctrine of the Trinity,<sup>103</sup> Dr C.B. Kaiser has provided an insight into the epistemological concepts within the relationship between the Trinitarian foundation of Christian belief and its centre in scriptural teachings. Interpretation is made of the Hebrew word "Akedah" (or "binding" motif) in relation to Abraham and Isaac in which lies a paradigm for the understanding of the term sacrifice within scriptural doctrine. "The Hebrew type of <akedah> was Abraham's willingness to make the greatest sacrifice of his life." With reference to the thought of Athanasius, Dr. Kaiser states: "...the Son of God is so called according to the sense in which Isaac was the son of Abraham, for what is naturally (φύσει or κατὰ φύσιν) from any one...that in the nature of things is a son, and that is what the name (of son) implies."<sup>104</sup>

For Athanasius, the test of the sacrifice was not to examine the faith of Isaac, but the faith of Abraham who offered to God his only son - a direct reference in the Old Testament to the offering by God of His Son Jesus Christ. "For the sacrifice was not properly the setting to rights of Isaac, but of Abraham who also offered, and by that he was tried. Thus God accepted the will of the offerer, but prevented that which was offered from being sacrificed. For the death of Isaac did not procure freedom for the world, but that of our Saviour alone, by whose stripes we all are healed."<sup>105</sup> In this connection we find the soteriological nature of the Passover is again underlined by Athanasius in terms of the doxological expression appropriate to such an occasion. In this respect Athanasius affirms that only those who belong to Christ and live in accordance with his truth are enabled fittingly to partake of the Passover. "For to praise and bless God belongs to those only who live in Christ, and by means of this they go up to the feast; for the Passover is not of the Gentiles, nor of those

<sup>103</sup> *Biblical and Patristic Doctrine of The Trinity. In What Ways Can Their Relationship Be Established?* pp. 166-168. A Paper delivered by Dr. Christopher B. Kaiser at the Second Consultation within Orthodox and Reformed Theological Dialogue at Minsk, 1990.

<sup>104</sup> *De decretis* 10. Cf. *Epistle ad Serapionem* I.16; II.6; IV.6. The analogy to the Abraham-Isaac relationship included awareness of the <akedah> motif. Cf. *FL* 6. 8. Also *C.Arianos* IV.24.

<sup>105</sup> *FL* 6. 9.

who are yet Jews in the flesh; but of those who acknowledge the truth in Christ."<sup>106</sup> Such a Christological reminder re-enforces Athanasius' own theological stance, namely, that the redemption of Man centres upon and was made possible through the relationship of consubstantiality between the Father and the Son. In and through the incarnation and sacrificial death of the Son of God for the sake of mankind, lay the redemptive purposes of God. "This is the Lord, Who is manifested in the father, and in Whom also the Father is manifested; Who, being truly the Son of the Father, at last became incarnate for our sakes, that He might offer Himself to the Father in our stead, and redeem us through His oblation and sacrifice."<sup>107</sup> The sacrifice of Christ was also seen as the antitype of Israelite redemption from their enslaved condition under Pharaoh. "This is He (Jesus Christ) Who once brought the people of old time out of Egypt; but Who afterwards redeemed all of us, or rather the whole race of men, from death, and brought them up from the grave. This is He Who in old time was sacrificed as a lamb, He being signified in the lamb; but Who afterwards was slain for us..."<sup>108</sup>

The continuing typological theme is discussed in FL11 where Athanasius lays further emphasis upon the relationship between Christ's sacrifice and the Passover in terms of the fulfilment of God's Word. Whereas the Word as evidenced in the Old Testament witnesses to the fulfilment of the Law in which the Passover is central, so in the New Testament the Gospel witnesses to the fulfilment of God's Word in Jesus Christ. "For as the Gospel of Christ is the fulfilment and accomplishment of the ministration which was supplied by the law of Israel, so future things will be the accomplishment of such as now exist, the Gospel being then fulfilled."<sup>109</sup>

Athanasius compares the sacrifice of the Passover lamb by the Israelites to the saving significance of the Christian Eucharist. On the one hand, the Israelites found themselves enslaved to the wickedness of the Egyptians and were unable at

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<sup>106</sup> FL 7. 3  
<sup>107</sup> FL 10. 10  
<sup>108</sup> FL10. 10.  
<sup>109</sup> FL11. 1.

that time to partake of the Passover, which had yet to come. On the other hand those within the Church are called to renounce all evil and wickedness so that they may be enabled to partake of the Eucharist with a proper approach and understanding. "For it is well that a man should depart from wickedness and deeds of iniquity, that he may be able properly to celebrate the feast; for he who is defiled with the pollutions of the wicked is not able to sacrifice the Passover to the Lord our God."<sup>110</sup>

As part of the purpose of Christ's sacrifice, Athanasius sets out the manner in which he perceives the redeeming act in relation to corruptibility and incorruptibility. The victory of Christ over death was to accomplish a victory over bodily corruptibility. That victory brought about through resurrection has obtained an everlasting incorruptible state in which man has been granted the gift of eternal life. Here the eschatological thought of Athanasius is bound up with the joy of what the resurrection Eucharist commemorates. "It is truly a subject of joy," Athanasius affirms, "that we can see the signs of victory against death, even our own incorruptibility, through the body of the Lord. For since he rose gloriously, it is clear that the resurrection of all of us will take place; and since His body remained without corruption, there can be no doubt regarding our incorruption..... so by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall rise."<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, since Christ was sacrificed, the Eucharistic call goes out for the Church to be nourished by His Body and Blood. "Therefore, because He was sacrificed, let each of us feed upon Him, and with alacrity and diligence partake of His sustenance."<sup>112</sup>

In FL13, the understanding of sacrifice is again bound up with the differentiation, which Athanasius makes between the Jewish Passover and the Christian Eucharist. Referring to the theme of suffering, Athanasius emphasises that Christ's sacrifice was in no way a passive undertaking: rather was it actively demonstrated in total obedience and self-offering and won life out of death. "For our

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<sup>110</sup> FL11. 10.

<sup>111</sup> FL11. 14.

<sup>112</sup> FL11.14.

Saviour did not redeem us by inactivity, but by suffering for us He abolished death."<sup>113</sup>

Once more the mind of Athanasius concentrates upon the central tenet of salvation where the danger lay in understanding the notion of sacrifice as undermining the reality of the resurrection; for he could see that it was not the actual Passover rite or eucharistic practice that is important, so much as the knowledge of Christ Himself who is the Passover. On Him we feed and are inwardly nourished. "But let us now keep the feast, my beloved, not as introducing a day of suffering, but of joy in Christ, by Whom we are fed every day. Let us be mindful of Him Who was sacrificed in the days of the Passover; for we celebrate this, because Christ the Passover was sacrificed."<sup>114</sup>

FL14 contains a re-emphasis by Athanasius of the typological nature of the Jewish Passover. As a paradigm of the Eucharist the Passover was typified as a shadow of what was to come in fulfilment. "For when in former time the children of Israel acted in this way, they were counted worthy to receive the type, which existed for the sake of this feast, nor is the feast now introduced on account of the type... These things, which took place before in shadows, were typical. But now the Truth is nigh unto us, <the Image of the invisible God, our Lord Jesus Christ, the true Light..."<sup>115</sup> The coming of Jesus Christ as the Truth of God and as Himself the Passover generates a further invitation to partake of the feast and once more establishes the true nature of the Eucharist. "Therefore, let us also, when we come to the feast, no longer come as to old shadows, for they are accomplished, neither as to common feasts, but let us hasten to the Lord, Who is Himself the feast...."<sup>116</sup>

In FL19, Athanasius develops further the theme of contrasting the typological nature of the Jewish Passover with that of the Christian Passover, which, since it has now been fulfilled in and through Christ has become the new saving feast in which

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<sup>113</sup> FL13. 6

<sup>114</sup> FL13. 7.

<sup>115</sup> FL14. 3

<sup>116</sup> FL14. 5.

the Church partakes and to which the Church belongs - "Henceforth the feast of the Passover is ours, not that of a stranger, nor is it any longer of the Jews."<sup>117</sup> No longer does the season require to be announced through the sound of trumpets, as in Old Testament tradition. Rather has the truth and reality of the festal season of resurrection been "brought near to us by the Saviour, Who suffered on our behalf and rose again."<sup>118</sup>

The new festal season now has been accomplished: the type or shadow has now passed and the Church is called to celebrate the feast in obedience to Christ who is the festal Passover. "For the time of shadows is abolished, and those former things have ceased, and now the month of new things is at hand, in which every man should keep the feast, in obedience to Him who said, <Observe the month of new things, and keep the Passover to the Lord thy God>."<sup>119</sup>

The sacrifices of Jews as presented in Old Testament tradition are condemned as unworthy and unacceptable in the sight of God, for "God does not need anything." The Jews lacked proper knowledge of what God required of them: they performed the necessary sacrifices as stated in the Law, but failed to perceive the truth beyond them. "But the Jews knew not, neither did they understand, therefore they walked in the daytime as in darkness, feeling for, but not touching, the truth we possess..."<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, the sacrificial practices of the Jews are not acceptable to God, since they were done in a godless and idolatrous manner. "For this cause, they continue without a feast until the end, although they make a display now of eating flesh, out of place and out of season. For, instead of the legally appointed lamb, they have learned to sacrifice to Baal...." and "..... although they pretend to keep the Passover, yet joy and gladness is taken from their mouth...."<sup>121</sup>

Athanasius proceeds to draw upon the Old Testament Law and sacrifice

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<sup>117</sup> FL19. 1.

<sup>118</sup> FL19. 1.

<sup>119</sup> FL19. 1.

<sup>120</sup> FL19. 2.

<sup>121</sup> FL19. 2.

inasmuch as the notion of sacrifice was not wholly contained within the Law. However, there was in the Law reference to sacrifice whose purpose was that of persuading people from idolatrous sacrifice and returning them to the worship and sacrifice of God. "Therefore, the holy law did not treat of sacrifices, though there was in the law a commandment concerning sacrifices, that by means of them it might begin to instruct men and might withdraw them from idols, and bring them near to God, teaching them for that present time."<sup>122</sup>

Athanasius introduces a further epistemological purpose: the commandment was given within the overall law not to introduce the practice of sacrifice, but to bring about a right knowledge of God in the hearts and minds of Israel. "Therefore neither at the beginning, when God brought the people out of Egypt, did He command them concerning sacrifices or whole burnt-offerings, nor even when they came to Mount Sinai. For God is not as man, that He should be careful about these things beforehand; but His commandment was given, that they might know Him Who is truly God, and His Word..."<sup>123</sup> Within the life of Israel, the temptation was to see sacrifice as the interceding offering by man to God; whereas Athanasius endeavoured to underline sacrifice in terms of Christ's life, death and resurrection as the offering of God to man in and through His Son. This understanding leads to a worshipful attitude: "all these things should be fulfilled in a purely spiritual manner, and by constant prayer."<sup>124</sup> We must "offer the sacrifice of righteousness"<sup>125</sup>; in a phrase of G.D. Dragas "right praise and right conduct - orthodoxy and orthopraxy."<sup>126</sup>

Among this collection of Paschal Epistles, FL19 contains by far the greatest concentration by Athanasius on the subject of Christian sacrifice, as fulfilled in Christ's sacrifice on the Cross; and sacrifice in relation to the Jewish Passover and

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<sup>122</sup> FL19. 4.

<sup>123</sup> FL19. 4.

<sup>124</sup> FL19. 4.

<sup>125</sup> FL19. 4.

<sup>126</sup> G.D. Dragas, *Durham Essays in Theology* op. cit. p. 88



the Law. Athanasius presents a critique against the Jews in their mistaken concept and mis-interpretation of liturgical sacrifice as the correct way in leading them to God. For Athanasius the centrality of sacrifice was a call to live within the Spirit of Christ, this being centred upon the offering of Christ within the Eucharist. "For what is so fitting for the feast, as a turning from wickedness, and a pure conversation, and prayer offered without ceasing to God, with thanksgiving? Therefore let us, my brethren, looking forward to celebrate the eternal joy in heaven, keep the feast also, rejoicing at all times, praying incessantly, and in everything giving thanks to the Lord."<sup>127</sup>

FL20 reveals the saintliness in Athanasius' own personality and the saintly worship, which he endeavours to promulgate within the life of the Church through the sacrifice of worship in and through the death and resurrection-life of Jesus Christ.

".... but we celebrate His death as a feast, rejoicing because we then obtained rest from our afflictions."<sup>128</sup>

The sacrificial understanding of worship as a response to the self-offering of Christ, Athanasius reminded the Church, was central to the Christocentric tradition of worship as handed down by the saints. That worshipful sacrifice of the saints was not infrequent, nor intermittent, but was expressed as a continual and regular offering in praise, adoration and thanksgiving. In essence it was entirely Eucharistic and founded in the sacrifice of Christ. "For such is the love of the saints at all times, that they never once leave off, but offer the uninterrupted, constant sacrifice to the Lord, and continually thirst, and ask of Him to drink..."<sup>129</sup>

In a fragment from FL24 we come across a contrast which Athanasius exposes in terms of the topics of faith and the lack of faithful expression within the life and worship of the Israelites. Athanasius takes his cue from the tradition of the saints. Through faith they were able to foresee that Christ had fulfilled what the Old

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<sup>127</sup> FL19. 8.

<sup>128</sup> FL20. 1.

<sup>129</sup> FL20. 1.

Covenant pointed to through his sacrifice: that is, the actual fulfilment of the Law itself. In this, he contrasts such a saintly understanding with the anthropomorphic attitude of the Jews who "adopted a superficial approach to the Law which has made them celebrate Easter in a fleshy manner, eating the flesh of an irrational animal and never arriving at the rational nurture of the true Lamb, our Saviour Jesus Christ, who is the true Bread, come down from heaven and giving life to the world."<sup>130</sup> Once again Athanasius reveals the inability of the Jewish mind to penetrate beyond the types and the shadows and arrive in true understanding at the truth to which they point, namely Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the Cross which stands as the fulfilment of every Old Testament sacrifice.

The fragment of FL25 contains a call that every Christian should live in a saintly manner and in such a way as to incorporate that life with the celebration of the Eucharist. For Athanasius, the two are intimately related, for the Eucharist stands as the Christocentric expression of that supreme sacrifice on the Cross whereby man is sanctified and redeemed from sin and death and restored out of his corrupt nature. Citing St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, Athanasius states that it is only when we "obey the Apostle at all times and especially at the time of the feast, that is, if we present our bodies as a living sacrifice, pure and acceptable to God, which is our rational worship, can we sit at the table with the Lord, like the apostles in participating at the spiritual nurture which he administers to us."<sup>131</sup> The saintly life of holiness, Athanasius underlines, "should be especially proclaimed at Easter, since on our Easter, Christ was sacrificed for us."<sup>132</sup>

FL 26 and FL 27 contain a similar theme. In the latter, Athanasius criticises the manner in which the Jews regard the Easter Passover. Instead of understanding what Athanasius described as "the heavenly vocation" as a celebration of Christ's death and sacrifice leading to life in and through resurrection, the Jews understood

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<sup>130</sup> FL Frag. 24 cf. G.D. Dragas *Durham Essays in Theology* op. cit. p. 89.

<sup>131</sup> FL Frag. 25

<sup>132</sup> FL Frag. 25. referring to I Cor. 5:7.

the feast simply in an anthropocentric way, that is in terms of themselves and their "earthly pleasures."<sup>133</sup>

One of the most significant texts in which we find the term "sacrifice" occurs in FL Frag. 28.<sup>134</sup> Here Athanasius emphasises the link between the offering of Christ as a sacrifice for the whole of mankind and the promise that those who partake of Christ in Word and Truth will attain heavenly joy. ".....In order that while He might become a sacrifice for us all, we, nourished up in the words of truth, and partaking of His living doctrine, might be able with the saints to receive also the joy of Heaven." Again, in a fragment from FL 40, Athanasius speaks of the eschatological nature of Christ's sacrifice in that it points to that life after death in which the Christian will be called to participate in the heavenly feast. Quoting from St. Luke, Athanasius writes: " '.....and I appoint unto you a kingdom, as My Father has appointed unto Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom.' Being called, then, to the great and heavenly Supper, in that upper room which has been swept, let us cleanse ourselves....."<sup>135</sup> Similarly in a fragment from FL 42, we come across the call "to that great and heavenly Supper, and sufficient for every creature; I mean, to the Passover, - to Christ, Who is sacrificed; for Christ our Passover is sacrificed."<sup>136</sup>

FL 45 begins with the call to "take up our sacrifices, observing distribution to the poor, and enter into the holy place...."<sup>137</sup> Athanasius returns to two previous themes in which, firstly, the notion of sacrifice is related to the life of holiness and godliness; and, secondly, the sacrificial worship offered in the tabernacle during the time of Moses was a type or shadow of the sacrifice of worship in which the Church has been called to partake. "For if Moses made all things according to the pattern showed him in the Mount, it is clear that the service performed in the tabernacle was

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<sup>133</sup> FL Frag. 27.

<sup>134</sup> FL Frag. 28. has been preserved in both Coptic and Greek and found in Cosmas Indicopleustes.

<sup>135</sup> FL Frag. 40.

<sup>136</sup> FL Frag. 42.

<sup>137</sup> FL Frag. 45.

a type of the heavenly mysteries, whereto the Lord, desirous that we should enter, prepared for us the new and abiding way. And as all the old things were a type of the new, so the festival that now is, is a type of the joy which is above, to which coming with psalms and spiritual songs, let us begin the fasts."<sup>138</sup>

We may now draw together a number of conclusions on Athanasius' understanding of sacrifice, particularly relating to the Jewish and Christian context.

In examining the above citations, many of which Athanasius referred to on a number of occasions, either in passing or in fullest quotation, we may conclude how central the theme and understanding of Christ's sacrifice was for a right understanding both of the Eucharist, the feast of Easter, and the resurrection to which the feast pointed and in which the Christian hope of eternal life could be joyfully commemorated. We may observe how Athanasius relied upon the foundation of scripture as the Christological basis for his arguments and counter-arguments against Jewish and heathen or heretical teachings. Athanasius rejected out of hand both Jewish and heathen concepts of sacrifice: in either case, they were equally unacceptable to the Christian understanding.

The point stressed frequently by Athanasius was that the Jewish notions of sacrifice, as they accorded with the Law, had a temporal connotation only. Within the divine economy of salvation they were not meant to be permanent: they pointed in paradigmatic manner to the sacrifice of Christ as the fulfilment of the Old Covenant in deliverance and saving power. We may quote once again from G.D. Dragas: "As types and shadows they (the Old Testament sacrifices) were symbolic, temporal, earthly, limited and even parochial, in contrast to the Christian sacrifice which is real and spiritual (true), eternal and heavenly, unlimited and universal."<sup>139</sup>

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FL Frag. 45.

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G.D. Dragas, *Durham Essays in Theology* op. cit. p. 91.

## CHAPTER V

### THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE FESTAL LETTERS

#### V. 1. General Observations

The initial premise on which we have been working in this examination of the Festal Letters has been constructed upon the nature of Athanasius' understanding of resurrection within the theological approach in which he established his defence of orthodoxy against Arianism. As the ground for this thesis we have sought to re-affirm the strong emphasis which Athanasius placed upon the resurrection through his exposition of theological, doxological and soteriological concepts. Indeed, from an earlier observation, we would reiterate that the import and commemoration of the Easter Feast of Resurrection was, to his mind, of even greater significance for the spiritual health of the Church, than the computation and announcement relating to the actual date of Easter itself.

In view of this fact we shall now undertake to examine the main principles within Athanasius' theological thought and observe the way in which the central theme of resurrection pervades his festal writings. We shall begin by noting what some commentators have said regarding Athanasius' theological approach.

A number of patristic commentators have proffered their own thoughts on the role Athanasius was called upon to play in support of Orthodoxy. F. Cayré, for example, has described Athanasius as, "not only an untiring man of action and a courageous fighter; he was also, in the strictest meaning of the word, a man of doctrine."<sup>1</sup> However, Cayré's description of Athanasius that "he was not a theologian in the technical acceptance of the term"<sup>2</sup> seems somewhat harsh. It is true, as Cayré states, that Athanasius "was a doctor who commented upon dogma as he received it

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<sup>1</sup> F. Cayré, *A. Manual of Patrology*. p. 349. Trans. by H. Howitt, A.A., B.A. First Volume. Society of St. John The Evangelist, Paris, Tournai, Roma.

<sup>2</sup> F. Cayré, *ibid.* p. 349.

from tradition and the Scriptures."<sup>3</sup> Yet there is much more to the great Bishop. After all, was he not theologically, scripturally and pastorally, "the pillar of the Church" as Gregory Nazianzus solidly referred to him?<sup>4</sup> He was, above all, the steadfast champion of the true faith.<sup>5</sup> To Basil the Great, Athanasius was the "God-given physician of her wounds".<sup>6</sup> This is the description of character and theology which we find revealed within the Festal Letters, and in which we would choose to regard Athanasius - as a Bishop of Christ-like faith and as a theologian *par excellence*, deeply cognisant of the true doctrine in which that faith was bound up and altogether aware of the theological divisions within the Church which he sought to heal through the unifying nature of God's Word in Jesus Christ One with the Father and One in the Spirit. But what is even more important to maintain is that the theology of Athanasius was doxological in expression rather than analytical in outlook and revealed a methodology that was systematic and scriptural in setting forth its Theocentric and Christological depth.

To F. Cavallera, however, the theological groundwork of Athanasius appeared to be empty of any coherent methodological form or content. To a large extent this reveals something of the western or Latin mind. But as far as Cavallera is concerned, "the works of Athanasius may be searched in vain for any trace of a system, that is to say a series of principles co-ordinating and linking together dogmatic truths from which it is possible to deduce new conclusions."<sup>7</sup> In respect of the Festal Letters, while, to some extent, they may not in themselves reveal any such dogmatic "system", however that is defined or understood, nevertheless, we come across in great frequency dogmatic truths upon which Athanasius built his particular theological "system" of thought. The word "system", however, is not one we would choose to use in describing the theological approach of Athanasius. For whenever we seek to refer to any such "system" of thought, we run the risk of expressing

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Greg. Naz. *Orat.* 21, n.26.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Basil *Ep.* 82.

<sup>7</sup> F.Cavallera *Saint Athanase* p.33 (Coll.La Pensée chrét.).Paris,

theological (and soteriological) concepts in terms of man-made constructs and anthropocentric forms of understanding, rather than in accordance with the nature and centrality of divine truth which Athanasius firmly believed was expressed within and emanated out of the economy of God's incarnational and atoning grace. For Athanasius the reality of God's self-revelation in and through Jesus Christ stands in all its mysterious totality. Any other method of encapsulating such divine truth within a system of thought would be to distort, if not destroy, the very essence of that divine truth. Athanasius recognised this danger within Arianism. We see only too well how such a man-centred and creaturely approach to Christian doctrine was strongly rejected by Athanasius, not only within the Festal Letters, but throughout the wider compass of his writings, whether they were doctrinal, apologetic or polemic. It seems to us that it was not the intention of Athanasius to create a system, but rather to establish the groundwork for a proper biblical soteriology. It was upon this soteriological foundation that Athanasius' complete theological doctrine and belief were built and affirmed.

G. Bardy, also reflecting a Latin mind, is even more condemnatory towards Athanasius, with regard to his use of words and terms. To Bardy, the proper utilisation of words and terms, along with a well-constructed vocabulary, presented themselves as the "indispensable tool of the theologian; and Athanasius lacked such a tool."<sup>8</sup> Again, our analysis of the Festal Letters prompts us to disagree. The use of words and terms enabled Athanasius to construct a theological stance of such strength and dimension that he was able to counteract the Arian cause at every juncture. Indeed, by contrast, it was the particular use of words and terms on the part of Arius - many of them misleadingly extracted from Scripture - which Athanasius seized upon in order to undermine the illogical nature of Arian schematisation.

In strong support of Athanasian theology, Johannes Quasten spoke of Athanasius' task as being "for the defence of the faith of Nicaea."<sup>9</sup> "Again and again

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<sup>8</sup> G. Bardy *Saint Athanase* (Coll. Les Saints), Paris 1914.

<sup>9</sup> J. Quasten *Patrology* Vol. III. p. 22

he submits the dialectical and exegetical argumentation of his opponents to a critical examination and refutes the accusations which unscrupulous enemies flung against him."<sup>10</sup> Quasten recognises the scriptural and apostolic tradition, which Athanasius followed whereby, his "knowledge of Scripture, his skill in debate and the depth of his conviction have gained the admiration of succeeding generations."<sup>11</sup> Quasten quotes Photius that, "in all his works his style is clear, free from redundancies and simple, but earnest and deep, and the arguments of which he has an abundant store, are extremely forceful."<sup>12</sup> But Quasten confesses -along similar lines to those of F. Cavallera - that Athanasius himself was not a "scientific theologian."<sup>13</sup> Nor, it appears did Athanasius offer a theological presentation that was novel or original. "He contributed almost nothing speculative, nor did he develop any system nor invent new terminology."<sup>14</sup> To this we must strongly suggest that, while it may be true that the theology of Athanasius was in no way presented as a series of speculative concepts - for it was not Athanasius' intention to do so - the whole of his theology, far from being speculative, was founded upon the twin realities of Gospel truth and scriptural efficacy. Not only apostolic teaching supported that, but also practically every argument Athanasius placed against the non-scriptural interpretations of Arianism. Far from the contribution of Athanasius being speculative, it was without doubt the heretical stance of Arius, which sought truth through speculation - speculation based on Hellenistic philosophy and Platonic dualism. Quasten proceeds to underline this precise fact. "His (i.e. Athanasius) greatest merit remains his defence of traditional Christianity against the danger of Hellenization hidden in the heresy of Arius and his followers."<sup>15</sup> Quasten reminds us of the Origenistic influence which helped mould the mind and thinking of Athanasius, but, at the same time, of the even greater influence of divine revelation.

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<sup>10</sup> Quasten, op. cit. p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* cf. Photius *Bibl. cod.* 140.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 66.



"A true disciple of Origen, he uses forms and concepts of Greek thought but fills them with a content taken from revelation."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the epistemological task, which Athanasius faced, took the form of the challenge of Christian Orthodoxy in the face of Greek rationalism: it involved an ἀπολογία of Christology over against Platonism, of faith over against reason. For Athanasius, the use of reason led to an interpretation that was based upon the human mind and stemmed from human understanding. Reason could not be used to probe the nature and being of man, far less investigate the Nature and Being of God.<sup>17</sup> A rational form of philosophy may have been suitable in certain areas of thought, such as establishing and confirming ecclesiastical doctrine. But philosophy and rationalism remain inappropriate instruments with which to discern the things of God or affirm the truth of the Gospel. For the Athanasian mind to engage truly in theology was to participate in that field of understanding and faith in which knowledge of God is given and demonstrated solely in accordance with the nature and Being of God; and in the manner in which God Himself has chosen to reveal Himself to the world of human comprehension.

## V. 2. TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

Central to the emphasis that Athanasius placed upon the soteriological nature and purpose of Resurrection lay his understanding of Christological concepts. These concepts took root, as R.V. Sellers has pointed out,<sup>18</sup> within the Christological traditions of the Alexandrian School and were inherited and developed later by Cyril particularly in his stand against the teachings of Nestorius. While it might appear that it was Athanasius who laid the foundations of Alexandrian Christology, the theological groundwork upon which Athanasius would place his own indelible mark had already been established by his predecessors, as we have already observed, more

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also *In Illud* 6 ff.

<sup>18</sup> R.V. Sellers *Two Ancient Christologies*, London 1940. p. 1.

especially by Origen, although in a more philosophical manner also by Clement. With that in mind therefore, the question arises: What exactly lay at the theological heart of these Alexandrian teachers?

As a general, but important reply, they sought to enunciate a revolutionary epistemological approach in terms of the Nature of God and the relationship between God and the world and between the creative existence of Man in relation to the creative-redemptive Being and Power of God. Such an approach had not been undertaken before, largely if not solely, on account of the deep-seated dualistic concepts which had been incorporated within Alexandrian philosophy through the influence of Hellenistic ideas and, not least, the teachings of Gnosticism. Essentially what Greek philosophy promoted was the idea that God was completely separate from the world. Within himself God remained utterly holy, invisible, immortal and transcendent. With such divine qualities inherently present, it was accepted as impossible that there could be any contact between the divine nature and being of God and the human nature and being of man. That deep-seated assumption meant that a gulf existed between God and man. To the detriment of any epistemological possibilities, there was created, in the words of T.F. Torrance, "a radical disjunction between the κόσμος αἰσθητός and the κόσμος νοητός which in different ways lay behind Origenism and Gnosticism, and gave rise to the problem of mythology."<sup>19</sup> The question was how, if at all, was it possible for God to be related to the life of man? How could God ever be known or understood? Such crucial problems confronted the very heart of Greek thought whose response was that because God remained distinct and divorced from the world, it was quite impossible for God to be related directly and personally to the world. To the world of Hellenistic thought God could only remain indirect, distanced and impersonal. On that basis, what came between the world of God and the world of man was a deep spatial and temporal disjunction (or χωρισμός) which, by its very nature, denied any possibility of contact between God and man. These two worlds, where God and man existed

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<sup>19</sup> T. F. Torrance *Theology in Reconstruction*, (SCM Press, London 1964), p. 34 f.

separately, were not even capable of existing tangentially with one another since that would imply some form of contact, however small. It was this concept of separation and the dualist notion which in essence divided God from man that lay at the heart of Greek thought and became the main stumbling-block to confront Athanasius in his bid to establish incarnational truth at the heart of Christian belief.

What particular difficulties confronted the early Alexandrian teachers in the face of dualist teaching? In the first place we must remind ourselves that the Greek thought had been deeply influenced by the legacy of Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy. But in its striving after even deeper religious understanding, Greek thought sought to determine a coming-together of established philosophical concepts which centred upon the relationship between God and man in terms of the human soul and the internal quality of virtue or blessedness associated with it. Blessedness, it was believed, was attainable only when the human soul was freed from its earthly prison within the human body. Only then was the soul able to strive in an upward direction in its search for divine truth. Sellers' perception reminds us that "as in Neo-Platonism, (the Greeks) were now seeking to effect a closer fusion of traditional philosophical ideas with that essentially religious idea which is to be found at the heart of the Hellenic genius, namely, that blessedness is to be found as the human soul, liberated from all earthly bounds, mounts higher and higher in its contemplation of the Divine."<sup>20</sup> But no matter the extent to which Greek thought endeavoured to search for a closer knowledge and understanding of divine truth, there remained that unbridgeable epistemological *χωρισμός* which prevented any proper epistemic relationship between the mind and heart of man in his temporal and spatial humanity and the Nature and Being of God in His eternal divinity. God was understood as utterly transcendent and quite beyond the limitations of human knowledge. The God envisaged by Plato, for example, was "beyond knowledge and being"<sup>21</sup>

In sharp contrast to this Platonic epistemological understanding of God in

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<sup>20</sup> Sellers op. cit. p. 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> *Republic* vi. 509.

relation to man, the perception posed by Christianity presented a radically different approach. Here the emphasis switched from an understanding of God, which had its foundation in Hellenistic dualism, to one whose epistemological foundation centred upon Hebraic thought. According to the latter, God remained transcendent in nature, but now He had chosen to bridge the epistemological and soteriological χωρισμός in order to disclose His immanent nature and being to the world in self-revelatory form. In Sellars words, "Christianity proclaims not that God is the One who, highly exalted and enshrouded in mystery, is banished from the world, but that He is the all-holy and all-loving Creator, who, yearning that man, made in His image, should enjoy perfect communion with Him, and rule his life in accordance with the divine will, again and again intervenes in history – 'rising up early and sending' – as He works out His good purpose for His creation."<sup>22</sup>

In seeking to understand Athanasius' doctrine of God we see clearly that he approaches his subject-matter not from the side of philosophical concepts, which Hellenism had sought to promote and which, as we have noted, resulted in dualistic notions which divided God from the world, but from the basis of scriptural truth as it was revealed in accordance with the very nature of God. Doxologically expressed, the supreme truth, as Athanasius saw it, centred upon the Hebraic expression of praise: "Blessed by the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed His people." At the heart of Athanasian thought lay the incarnational truth that underpinned the whole of his soteriological understanding. We may quote Sellars, "for central to his teaching is the Christian fundamental that God Himself has intervened in history in order to effect man's redemption."<sup>23</sup> It was this creative-redemptive relationship between God and the world which lay at the heart of Athanasius' soteriological understanding as to the nature and purpose of God in entering the world of man in incarnational love in and through the Person of His Son Jesus Christ the eternal and incarnate Logos of the Father. Athanasius regarded God

<sup>22</sup> Sellars op. cit. p. 2. No source is given for the phrase "rising up early and sending".

<sup>23</sup> Sellars op. cit. p. 6.

not as One who on account of His transcendent nature was altogether removed from the finite world of man, but as One who, while remaining transcendent, nevertheless as Creator, has entered into and become one with his creation in immanent, visible, rational, and human form. In contrast to the established philosophical interpretation which sought to understand God from the point of view of man, Athanasius chose to understand the actual Being of God, as it were from the point of view of God, that is in accordance with the very Nature of God - who He really is both within His inherent Nature and Being and through his Self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Thus we find that in the mind of Athanasius there was no question of posing any form of polarisation between divine transcendence and divine immanence, that is to say between what Khaled Anatolios has described as “the relation between God’s otherness to the world and God’s positive involvement and engagement with the world.”<sup>24</sup> We find this phrase occurring in the opening chapter of Anatolios’ wide-ranging examination of Athanasian thought. In this initial instance, Anatolios engages upon a discussion of the relation between God and creation (in the Hellenistic and Judaeo-Christian era prior to Athanasius) in which he reminds us of the importance in Athanasius’ mind in stressing the coming together of the divine nature and the human nature in such a way as to be one with the humanity of the world. This emphasis on what Anatolios calls “the simultaneity of divine otherness and divine nearness to the world”<sup>25</sup> remained central to Athanasius’ understanding of the relation between God and the world. By contrast and particularly in terms of the workings of Hellenistic philosophy and Judaeo-Christian monotheism, the problem of reconciling divine transcendence and divine immanence was not a simple one to resolve. On the one hand the philosophy of “Middle Platonism” insisted on making a distinction between “absolute transcendence” and “divine immanence” and relating each of these aspects to “distinct entities.”<sup>26</sup> On the other hand from the biblical point

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<sup>24</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius The coherence of his thought*. (London and New York, 1998), p. 6 f.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Anatolios. op. cit. p. 6.

of view within Judaeo-Christian thought, divine participation in the world should not be regarded in any antithetical light with regard to divine transcendence. Rather, as Anatolios points out, "divine involvement" as he describes it, should be understood as "a function and a demonstration of God's transcendence." In other words neither is mutually exclusive, as, in the light of scriptural revelation divine transcendence and divine immanence are "convergent". In this we see "both movements being united in the conception of a God who paradoxically reveals his majestic greatness through his liberating and beneficent involvement in the world."<sup>27</sup>

In his pre-Athanasian enquiry into the relation between God and the world, Anatolios proceeds to examine the Hellenistic background in detail. The Platonic concept of the two worlds, to which we have referred, is his starting-point: the world as it exists for men and women and the realm of the divine as it is conceived in man's understanding. The Platonic acceptance of these two worlds is developed in a more "global" form to produce a "radical ontological distinction" between the twin conceptual realms of Becoming and Being. The realm of Becoming reflects the physical world as we know it in all its tangible and visible nature, its constant state of flux and its spatial, temporal and materialist patterns. The realm of Being relates to world beyond - what Plato described as the τόπος ὑπερουράνιος<sup>28</sup> - namely what we might refer to as the spiritual world of divine being which was unchangeable and not subject to change or alteration, beyond the material and not subject to spatio-temporal influences. In spite of the ontological distinctions between the two worlds, however, we are reminded of the Platonic desire to establish a constructive relationship between them. This attempt comes in two forms: the idea of participation in which Plato promoted the belief that the visible, material world of Becoming was not altogether empty of Being, but had the ability to participate to a certain extent in the "Ideas" in the divine realm of intelligibility. There was also the Platonic understanding of the human soul which was perceived as residing not in the

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<sup>27</sup>

Ibid. pp. 6-7

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*Phaedrus* 247c.

present world of tangible and visible objects, as well as change and indeterminacy, but in the divine world of "Ideas" "with which it enjoys a radical kinship - *syngeneia*." <sup>29</sup> By means of dialectic and moral purification it was possible for the soul to pass over from the tangible world of Becoming to the immaterial world of Being. Clearly, we can recognise the ontological and epistemological struggle which engaged the Platonic mind as it searched to find a way of bridging the gap between the two worlds and establish a form of conceptual reconciliation in bringing divine transcendence and divine immanence together.

From Plato and the notions of participation and the human soul, Anatolios turns his attention to Aristotle. Here, the Aristotelian conception of worldly realities was understood not from the manner in which they could be related to transcendent Forms, but, instead, through the immanence of their inherent nature or φύσις. Aristotle, however, in his attempt to define motion, postulates the existence of a "prime mover", whose being he describes by reference to "absolute actuality" and "thinking thought" (νόησις νόησεως).<sup>30</sup> This prime mover is seen as transcendent in being and having no involvement with the world.

Within the teaching of the Stoics, Anatolios recognises that the solution to the unbridgeable cosmic relationship between transcendence and immanence is found by dismissing the whole idea of transcendence. Logically, such a move would appear to rule out also the idea of divine being in favour of a purely worldly perception of being that transposed divine qualities upon naturalistic phenomena. In this way, the Stoic response in seeking to resolve the dilemma revealed itself in pantheistic form.<sup>31</sup>

Since the world of Stoicism, therefore, insisted upon denying the very notion of transcendence, although they retained the concept of divinity and applied it in a

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<sup>29</sup> Anatolios op. cit. p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> Anatolios makes reference to Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy. Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974, p. 149. "The existence of God, or what comes to the same thing in Stoicism, the divinity of nature, is a thesis which the Stoics devoted great energy to proving." "Fundamentally, Stoic theology is pantheist." *ibid.* p. 150.

pantheistic manner, we can accept that they worked out an understanding of worldly existence through an immanentist notion of reality where, in the final analysis, the governing principles of existence were not regarded as external to the world but inherent within the order of creation. Stoic teaching made use of the terms *pneuma* (Πνεῦμα) or *logos* (Λόγος) in referring to divine being. *Logos* was the reason that was understood as being immanent in everything. This *Logos* was held to pervade the λόγοι σπερματικοί or seminal reasons which permeate all things. We see the contrast in approach with Aristotelian thought. Whereas Aristotle engaged in a dualistic conceptualisation of a transcendent moving principle or νοῦς and an immanent teleological principle or φύσις, the Stoics effectively engaged also in a dualistic notion. But while they had rejected the dualist disjunction between the two worlds of the transcendent and the immanent, the Stoics replaced this with “a strictly immanent duality”<sup>32</sup> in which the Platonic notion of participation continued to exercise influence. This “immanent duality”, Anatolios clarifies as “that between the active principle, *to poioun*, which was the *logos* actualising itself, and the passive principle, *to paschon*, akin to Aristotle’s “matter” and the “receptacle” of the *Timaeus*...”<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to the philosophical notions that arose within Platonism, Athanasius set out to establish a doctrine of God that was scripturally based in form and theologically expressed in content. We repeat the affirmation that central to his teaching lay the fact that God Himself had intervened within the history of mankind in order, through his own means and purposes, to bring about man’s salvation and redemption. Over against the thinking of Platonic dualism which separated God from the life of man, Athanasius regarded God not as One who was so utterly transcendent as to be completely removed from the finite world of physical existence, but as One who as Creator, has entered into and has become one with his creation in a personal and living form. The Being of God Athanasius understood in terms of the Nature of

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<sup>32</sup> Anatolios op. cit. p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



God - Who God is - the revelation of that Nature and Being having been expressed supremely in and through the Person of Jesus Christ, consubstantial with the Father. By use of the term *ousia* Athanasius referred to the Being of God in His inmost form - God as he actually is within Himself. "When we hear it said, <I am that I am>... we understand nothing else than the very simple, and blessed, and incomprehensible essence itself of Him that is...". Furthermore, in emphasising the consubstantiality between the Father and the Son, Athanasius goes on, "and if ye too have said, that the Son is from God, it follows that you have said that He is from the <essence> of the Father."<sup>34</sup> Sellars makes the noteworthy observation<sup>35</sup> "that we can find no trace in the writings of Athanasius of the question which had disturbed Origen: Is God above *ousia* in dignity and power, or is he himself *ousia*?". Athanasius, however, did not reject Platonic terminology if it could be used or restructured in order to express a theological point. For example, by means of the Neo-Platonic term "hyperousios"<sup>36</sup> Athanasius could refer to God as "beyond all being" in the sense of being separate from creation as Creator. Thus in *C. Gentes*, "For God, Maker of all and King of all, that has His being beyond all substance and human discovery..."<sup>37</sup>.

It is interesting to note that Athanasius inserts the adjective "created" as he emphasises the differentiation in the divine relationship with creaturely affairs. Thus God is not simply beyond being, but beyond created being.<sup>38</sup> Yet, in reaffirming the divine transcendence over creative existence, Athanasius never fails to reaffirm the abiding nearness of God's Presence in the world through the divine immanence in the person of the Son.

To Athanasius, the Being of God reflected divine goodness and saving grace. Again he borrows a phrase from Plato. God is not only "good", but also "essentially the source of goodness."<sup>39</sup> He does not grudge existence to anyone, but wishes all to

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<sup>34</sup> *De Synod.* 35.

<sup>35</sup> *Two Ancient Christologies* op. cit. p. 6. Note 2. cf. *C. Celsum*, VI. 64.

<sup>36</sup> *Republic* VI. 509.

<sup>37</sup> *C. Gentes* 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 35, 40.

<sup>39</sup> *Timaeus*, 29E. cf. Sellars op.cit. p. 7.

exist as objects of his loving-kindness, demonstrated and made visible in the presence of his Logos in creation. Not surprisingly, Athanasius underlines the truth, as he sees it, which differentiates the content of the gospel from the concepts of neo-Platonism through the unique fact that the Son or Logos "as the unchanging image of His own Father" has come in human form for the salvation of mankind.<sup>40</sup> For Athanasius, if the Christian doctrine remained true that in Jesus Christ God Himself has come down into the world and assumed the nature of our humanity, then it had to be affirmed that the Son or Logos who became man is co-eternal, co-essential and consubstantial with the Father. In this central proposition to his theological argument, Athanasius rejected the philosophical notion of the Logos. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted with Prestige that the doctrine of the Logos "harboured deadly perils in its bosom."<sup>41</sup> The dilemma was one of theological linguistics. While the Church found itself able to affirm the divinity of Christ's Godhead, it then had to confront the problem of how it should express what it saw as the distinction between the first and second persons of the Trinity. On the one hand the Church insisted on preserving the unity of God's nature. At the same time, how could they best understand the Oneness of the divine being and affirm it in relation to the unity of Nature in terms of the Father-Son relationship. There were two possible answers:

- (a) Sabellianism - but this would lead to a denial of the very existence of the Son.
- (b) Subordinationism - but this would lead to the concept of Christ as an intermediary or even a kind of second God, between God and the world. The Son would therefore be subordinate to the Father, rather than united consubstantially.

Sellars posits the important reminder that it was the teaching of Origen on the subordination of the Son (over against his teaching on the Son's eternal generation) which was developed by his pupils as they sought to confront and resist Sabellian teaching. The teachings of the latter school, we must note, would eventually contribute to the Arian scheme expressed by means of logical deductions that they

<sup>40</sup> C. Gentes 41, *De Incar.* 3.

<sup>41</sup> G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, (SPCK, London 1936), reprinted 1969. p. 129.

used in arguing from scripture for the creaturely nature of the Son. The danger that Athanasius realised stemmed from the dualist form of Arian teaching which in essence, divided the Nature and Being of the Son from the Nature and Being of the Father. Athanasius realised, in the face of Arianism, that it was not possible to hold together what he saw as contradictory principles, namely belief in the divinity of the Son on the one hand, and his inferiority to the Father on the other. Athanasius recognised the express need to affirm that it is no less than God Himself - and not some secondary or intermediate deity - who has assumed created being in order to redeem mankind from within human nature. In this saving purpose it was abundantly clear to Athanasius that the being of the Son is identical with the Being of the Father. The Logos who is the very Son of the Father is no creature or work, but an offspring (γέννημα) proper to the Being (οὐσία) of the Father. "Therefore it is more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call Him Father, than to name Him from His works only and call Him Unoriginate. ...the title Father has its significance and its bearing only from the Son."<sup>42</sup> Again, "the fulness of the Father's Godhead is the Being of the Son, and the Son is wholly God."<sup>43</sup>

### VI. 3. The Nature of Athanasian Christology

For Athanasius, a scriptural understanding of the nature of Christ and of the Christological relationship between the Father and the Son was crucial to his whole theological approach towards the redemptive act of God. If the biblical expression were to be true, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, then such a statement must be founded upon a direct ontological relationship in which God and Christ were One in such a way that no separation could exist or be found between the nature of the Father and the nature of the Son. By contrast, the counter-arguments of Arius sought to destroy that inner cohesive relationship by their

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<sup>42</sup> *C. Arianos* I. 9, 34.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* III. 6.

misunderstanding of scripture and the application of disjunctive Hellenistic philosophy.

While it remains clear that the Fathers of Nicaea accepted the *homoousion* as an effective means of countering the teachings of Arius, it was not Athanasius who created the term. What was required in the face of Arianism was a solid form of theological terminology. According to Robertson<sup>44</sup> the "test formula of Nicaea" emerged from two influences within the Council – the anti-Origenists (or Antiochenes) in the east and the Western bishops "who presided both at Nicaea and Sardica" and "put forth the Nicene Confession." In the face of growing Arian heresy, the Fathers were compelled to restate the theological stance of the Church as an affirmation of traditional orthodox belief and to ensure also that the doxological mind of the Church was right and proper in expressing its worship as a reflection of scriptural tradition and apostolic practice. The acceptance of Arianism would make such goals impossible to accomplish. "But it was one thing to perceive this," Robertson observes, "another to formulate the positive belief of the Church in such a way as to exclude the heresy; one thing to agree in condemning Arian formulae, another to agree upon an adequate test of orthodoxy."<sup>45</sup> The sudden intervention of the Emperor Constantine in support of the "test" enabled the formula to be accepted. Athanasius would also give his loyal support to the new term. "He was moulded by the Nicene Creed, did not mould it himself."<sup>46</sup>

When the Fathers of Nicaea adopted the term *homoousion*<sup>47</sup> they established the fundamental key to Athanasian theology. Although the term itself was in no sense scriptural in origin, it sought to describe in language that was both clear grammatically and expressive theologically what precisely was signified by that inner relationship in Nature and Being in which the Son was described as being of

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<sup>44</sup> LNPNT Vol. IV, Intro., p. xvii

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Loofs, p. 134, quoted by Robertson, op. cit. LNPNT, p. xviii.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. also further background to the term "homoousion" in G.C. Stead, *Divine Substance*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, pp. 242-266. and J.H.C. Newman *Select Treatises of Athanasius*, Vol. II, Pickering and Co., 1881, pp. 438-442..

One Substance with the Father (ὁμοουσίος τῷ πατρὶ). By their action, the Ecumenical Council in fact was reflecting Athanasius' own perception that the theology of the Incarnate Word must always be perceived in accordance with the very Nature of God through His Self-revelation in His Son Jesus Christ. The *homoousion* stands at the heart of Athanasius' incarnational Christology. Furthermore, it underpins his whole soteriological approach in which the saving power of God, manifest in Jesus Christ in death and resurrection within space and time on the Cross at Calvary, was the actualised fulfilment of the divine-human incarnational event manifest in the birth of Jesus Christ within space and time at Bethlehem. Were there no inherent ontological relationship between the Father and the Son, as Athanasius understood it, then Jesus could not possibly be the Son of God, nor could the saving Being and Acts of God be properly demonstrated and directed towards the redemption and restoration of mankind.

Before coming to the Festal Letters, for a defence of the *homoousion* formula as the basis of Athanasius' Christology, we shall turn briefly to another of his writings. In his Letter concerning Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (*De Sententia Dionysii*) Athanasius provides a counter-response to the Arians who had reacted violently to the *Definition of Nicaea* as it came to be expressed in the term *homoousios*. The Arian stance was both irrational and failed to be supported by scripture. "For (Athanasius states) whereas their heresy has no ground in reason, nor express proof from holy writ, they were always resorting to shameless subterfuges and plausible fallacies."<sup>48</sup> Writing in defence of Dionysius' position in face of Arian accusation that he had subordinated the Son, Athanasius seized upon the Arian assertion that the Son was a creature. He refers to the creative being of the eternal Logos of God (John 1.3) and to the Pauline affirmation of the unity of the Word in his all-creative power (I Cor. 8.6 and Col. 1. 16). "...how will they have the boldness (or rather how will they escape disgrace) to oppose the sayings of the saints, by saying that the artificer of all things is a creature, and that He is a created thing in

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*De Sententia* 1.

whom all things created have come into being and subsist?"<sup>49</sup> "...he (Dionysius) was compelled to meet their shameless conduct by writing the said letter, and to expound from the Gospels the human nature of the Saviour, in order that since those men waxed bolder in denying the Son, and in ascribing His human actions to the Father, he accordingly by demonstrating that it was the Son and not the Father that was made man for us, might persuade the ignorant persons that the Father is not a Son, and so by degrees lead them up to the true Godhead of the Son, and the knowledge of the Father."<sup>50</sup> In support of apostolic evidence Athanasius refers to the fact that the Apostles referred to Christ in terms of his divinity as well as his humanity. There was no division between the two natures: Christ was revealed in the Person and Nature of both man and God. The two could not be separated. The Word was consubstantial with the Father and the Father was One in Being with the Word. "The Jews of that day, in error with themselves and misleading the Gentiles thought that the Christ was coming as a mere man of the seed of David, after the likeness of the rest of the children of David's descent, and would neither believe that he was God nor that the Word was made flesh."<sup>51</sup> "For this reason...the blessed Apostles began by proclaiming to the Jews the human characteristics of the Saviour, in order that by fully persuading them from visible facts, and from miracles which were done, that the Christ was come, they might go on to lead them up to faith in His Godhead, by showing that the works He had done were not those of a man, but of God."<sup>52</sup> For Athanasius, to recognise the humanity of Christ is also to acknowledge the divinity of the Son. Together they reveal and share in a unity of being where neither Christ's humanity nor his divinity is divided one from the other; nor is one negated at the expense of the other. "And he that writes of the human attributes of the Word knows also what concerns His Godhead: and he who expounds concerning His Godhead is not ignorant of what belongs to His coming in the flesh."<sup>53</sup> The importance which he

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>50</sup> *De Sententia* 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid 8.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 9.

placed upon the consubstantial relationship between the Father and the Son led Athanasius to an understanding that the risen body of Christ was by corollary also the Body of God Himself - a statement in which God is recognised as putting on human form through the divine-human hypostasis. Referring to the human characteristics of Jesus Christ Athanasius points to various expressions of humanity - in anger - at the money-changers in the Temple and in weeping at the death of Lazarus when God raises him from the dead. "...when therefore he speaks of His weeping, he knows that the Lord, having become man, while he exhibits his human character in weeping, as God raises up Lazarus; and he knows that he used to hunger and thirst physically, while divinely He fed five thousand persons from five loaves; and knows that while a human body lay in the tomb, it was raised as God's body by the Word Himself."<sup>54</sup>

When we return to the Festal Letters, we find at the outset that Athanasius drew attention to this ontological relationship as necessary to Christian belief and theological knowledge. Speaking of Christ as "heavenly bread" and "the food of the saints",<sup>55</sup> Athanasius reminded the Church that true spiritual nourishment depended essentially upon the Father-Son relationship.<sup>56</sup> ".... let them (the Jews) believe and know that the contemplation of God, and the word which is from Him, suffice to nourish those who hear...."<sup>57</sup>. Thus, the Word or Logos of God remains integrally related to God in Being and Nature. Furthermore, belief and knowledge of God depend upon and stem from the Word who is consubstantial with God. In such a relationship whereby the divine and the human come together, the divine nature of God has been brought into the field of human life in such a way as to make possible the salvation of man. By no other way could God's plan of salvation be

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<sup>54</sup> *De Sententia* 9. cf also *Ad Episcopos* 14, 15, 16.

<sup>55</sup> FL1. 5.

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion on understanding between the Logos Christology of the Apologists and the transition to the paradigms of Christ as Son or Son/Image, cf. A.I.C. Heron "Logos, Image, Son": Some Models and Paradigms in Early Christology in *Creation Christ and Culture* - Studies in Honour of T.F. Torrance, Ed. by Richard W. A. McKinney. Edinburgh, 1976, pp. 43-62.

<sup>57</sup> FL 1.6.

accomplished. Through the immediacy of the Father's divine Being in and through the Son, the life of the world is nourished with the life that comes of God. "To this end He continually nourished His believing disciples with His words, and gave them life by the nearness of His divinity."<sup>58</sup>

For Athanasius, the corollary was perfectly clear, namely, that had God Himself not become man and if Christ were not God, the redemption of the world from the side of God would not have been possible. The Word or Logos in assuming human nature "deified"<sup>59</sup> mankind through the life he lived, the death to which he died and the resurrection-life which he obtained. Thus in FL 6, we find Athanasius' statement of the incarnational truth and its corresponding doxological expression: "For the Lord died in those days, that we should no longer do the deeds of death. He gave us life, that we might preserve our own from the snares of the devil. And, what is most wonderful, the Word became flesh, that we should no longer live in the flesh, but in spirit should worship God, who is Spirit."<sup>60</sup> Later on in FL6, Athanasius reminds the Church that the nature of festal celebration centres upon the redemptive gift of God through the death of Christ. The incarnate Word assumed the corruptible nature and form of man in order to transform it and redeem it to an incorruptible form. "No longer then ought we to live to ourselves, but, as servants to the Lord. And not in vain should we receive the grace, as the time is especially an acceptable one, and the day of salvation hath dawned, even the death of our Redeemer."<sup>61</sup> For even for our sakes the Word came down, and being incorruptible, put on a corruptible body for the salvation of all of us."<sup>62</sup>

FL 10 provides a condensed series of theological statements out of which

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<sup>58</sup> FL 7.7.

<sup>59</sup> For a fuller expression of this term, cf. *De incar.* 54 LNP Vol. IV. "He was made man that we might be made God (θεοποιηθόμεν) and He manifested Himself by a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; and He endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality."

<sup>60</sup> FL 6.1.

<sup>61</sup> Robertson (TNP Vol. IV. p. 520 Note 18) here points to the *Paschal Homilies* of St. Cyril, xxiv.

<sup>62</sup> FL 6.4.



Athanasius provides the soteriological purpose behind each one. He begins by establishing the theme of divine grace and then proceeds to balance a number of statements concerning the physical, if not incarnational, nature of Christ. "This is the grace of the Lord," Athanasius states, "and these are the Lord's means of restoration for the children of men."<sup>63</sup> Each statement is then followed by its due purpose.

- (1) "For He suffered... to prepare freedom from suffering for those who suffer in Him."
- (2) "He descended ... that He might raise us up."
- (3) "He took on Him the trial of being born... that we might love Him who is unbegotten."
- (4) "He went down to corruption.... that corruption might put on immortality."
- (5) "He became weak for us... that we might rise with power."
- (6) "He descended to death... that He might bestow on us immortality and give life to the dead."
- (7) "He became man... that we who die as men might live again, and that death should no more reign over us."<sup>64</sup>

As a comparative outline of the Arian position, Athanasius provided a further series of reasoned statements which the heretics espoused, each one followed by its own resultant dichotomous assertions concerning the Being and Nature of the Son. Again we may enumerate them as follows and note their negative tone:

- (1) "Because of His coming down, which was on behalf of man, they have *denied* His essential Godhead."
- (2) "and seeing that He came forth from the Virgin, they *doubt* His being truly the Son of God."
- (3) "and considering Him as become incarnate in time, they *deny* His eternity."
- (4) "and, looking upon Him as having suffered for us, they *do not believe* in Him as the incorruptible Son from the incorruptible Father."

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<sup>63</sup> FL 10.8.

<sup>64</sup> FL 10.8.

(5) "And finally, because He endured for our sakes, they *deny* the things which concern His essential eternity."<sup>65</sup>

Athanasius was altogether aware that in denying the inherent relationship within the Godhead between the Father and the Son, the Arians were also denying the truth of the incarnation and therefore also placing doubt upon the truth of the resurrection. In short, the illogicality of Arius' statements lay both in denying the divinity of the Son, as well as in negating the relationship of consubstantiality between the Father and the Son. Had the Arian heretics fully realised "that the Lord did not descend for His own sake, but for ours," then they "would the more have admired His loving-kindness." And, respecting the eternal nature of the Son had they "considered what the Father is, and what the Son," they would not have "blasphemed the Son, as of a mutable nature." Further, with regard to the Father-Son relationship, had they "understood His work of loving-kindness towards us," they would not have "alienated the Son from the Father."<sup>66</sup>

Athanasius referred to the Jews as "schismatics" who shared the same approach to the Arians as being "men of kindred feelings."<sup>67</sup> The manner in which the Arians perceived the relationship between the Father and the Son Athanasius described by assimilating its ontological unity in terms of a seamless garment or coat which the Arians had cause to divide. "For they have learned to rend the seamless coat of God: they think it not strange to divide the indivisible Son from the Father."<sup>68</sup>

A similar analogy can be found in FL 5 where Athanasius drew attention to the risk of a divided Church resulting from a schismatic understanding of the Nature of Christ. "But let us, my brethren, be superior to the heathen, in keeping the feast with sincerity of soul, and purity of body; to the Jews, in no longer receiving the type and the shadow but as having been gloriously illumined with the light of truth, and as looking upon the Sun of Righteousness; to the schismatics, in not rending the coat of

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<sup>65</sup> FL 10. 9.

<sup>66</sup> FL 10.10.

<sup>67</sup> FL 10. 9.

<sup>68</sup> FL 10. 9

Christ, but in one house even in the Catholic Church, let us eat the Passover of the Lord, Who, by ordaining His holy laws, guided us towards virtue, and counselled the abstinence of this feast. For the Passover is indeed abstinence from evil for exercise of virtue and a departure from death unto life."<sup>69</sup>

The problem, as Athanasius perceived it, was, for Arian and Jew, not only an epistemological one but deeply theological, and, as a result, also doxological. They had failed to comprehend the full reality and saving grace, which belonged to the divine Nature of Christ. Thereby, they were "troubled by the declaration of the true glory concerning the Redeemer."<sup>70</sup>

In FL11, Athanasius went a step further by countering the Arian statements, which propounded a division between the Father and the Son. The corresponding argument put forward by Athanasius was very simple. If the Church is led to believe that the Father and Son are not inherently One in Being and Nature, then, since the Son is not of God and, accordingly, not divine in nature, he must belong ultimately not to the side of God as Creator and Redeemer, but to the side of man as creature. Such a deduction must automatically lead to the conclusion that the Son, if a creature, can have no place whatsoever in the creative and redemptive Being or Activity of the Father. That means, in turn, that the assumption by God of man's state and condition of sin cannot be real or possible, for how could God come down to Man in order to save and redeem Man from within humanity except through the actual assuming of human flesh and form? On this issue, the soteriological stance of the Arians remains, at best, questionable. The teaching which Athanasius extended to the Church through the Festal Letters emphasised repeatedly the soteriological truth, namely, that the reality of Christ's resurrection could only have been possible through His unique filial and hypostatic relationship with God<sup>71</sup>: as Athanasius underlined, quoting the words of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, "I am in the Father, and

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<sup>69</sup> FL 5. 4.

<sup>70</sup> FL 10. 10.

<sup>71</sup> cf. *The Second Epistle of Cyril to Nestorius* for further discussion on the hypostatic relationship in T. H. Bindley and F. W. Green *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith*, p.210. Also p. 22 f. on creatureliness and derivation.

the Father in Me."<sup>72</sup> as also "I and my Father are One." "He who has seen me has seen the Father." This relationship which the *homoousion* expressed, remained fundamental for any proper understanding of God's act of Redemption over man's fallen nature in terms of sin and death.

W. Bardenhewer<sup>73</sup> has indicated that the Christology of Athanasius may be found revealed in the phrase "God became man in order to deify men", that is in order to raise men to the rank of adoptive sons of God.<sup>74</sup> Inasmuch as we have a part in the Son, we have also, according to Scripture, a part in God.<sup>75</sup> Unless Christ were true God, He could not fulfil his office as Redeemer, for how could the complete divine plan of redemption for the whole man be possible, if Christ were not true God?

Furthermore, it is quite impossible that there should be an intermediary form of being between the Creator and the creature. The thesis of Arius, that in order to create the world God needed middle being, is very easily shown to be false. God is neither so impotent that He could not have created all things Himself, nor so arrogant that he would have disdained to create them.<sup>76</sup> Christ is therefore true God.

The very name Father, Athanasius insisted, presupposed the existence of a Son. The Son however is not from nothing, nor from the will of the Father, but from the substance of the Father (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς)<sup>77</sup> and this origin of the Son from the Being of the Father is essentially different from the origin of creatures from the will of the Father. The Son is co-eternal with the Father, and there was never a time when the Son was not. The Son shares with the Father the entire plenitude of His divinity. "...the very Being of the Son is the proper Offspring of the Father's Essence."<sup>78</sup> Generation as predicted of the Son, however, does not mean the

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<sup>72</sup> FL 10. 10.

<sup>73</sup> Quasten *Patrology* p. 258f.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. *C. Arianos* I. 39.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* II. 24,

<sup>77</sup> *De Decretis* V.19.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. *C. Arianos* III. 6.

act of being made, but signifies participation in the entire substance of the Father. They are two, Father and Son, but their nature is one, and that unity is indivisible and inseparable.

Athanasius fully recognised that the truth of the Gospel was most fully demonstrated in the incarnation and specifically through the soteriological nature of God's purpose towards mankind within and through the whole life of His Son Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word of the Father. It was this same Word who became flesh, assuming human form and encompassing the entire human dimension of life in order to redeem it from within. We find, therefore, that while endeavouring to establish the divinity of Christ's Nature and Being within the Godhead against Arian heretical teachings, Athanasius did not neglect to stress the importance of Christ's humanity. In the words of G. D. Dragas, "Athanasius' Soteriology may be seen as resting on two major premises. Firstly, on the thesis that only God can save, and secondly that salvation requires a human act. Athanasius gives several reasons as to why only God can save. The final one is connected with the headship of God, and particularly the Son-Logos, in Creation, i.e. the fact that Creation in general and men in particular do not ultimately exist in themselves, but in the Logos who made them." <sup>79</sup>

Throughout the Festal Letters, Athanasius underpins his anti-Arian arguments by reference in Scripture to God's saving Acts within Israel. In a paradigmatic fashion, Athanasius regarded God's redemptive love and power towards His people as having been fulfilled in the redemptive act of the Cross through the death and resurrection of His Son.

In this light, commenting on the biblical and redemptive theology of Irenaeus, T.F. Torrance has propounded the soteriological relationship between the teaching of Irenaeus and that of the Nicaean Fathers, notably in the theology of Athanasius himself. Taking as his basis the *Paschal Homilies* of Melito of Sardis and Hippolytus of Rome, Torrance sets out to establish how the account in the Book of Exodus of the

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<sup>79</sup> *Athanasiana* Essays in the Theology of Saint Athanasius, (London, 1980) Vol. I. p. 145 f. cf. *De Incar.* I.

Passover sacrifice and the deliverance of Israel points in a paradigmatic manner towards the fulfilment of the divine work of salvation in the life of Christ from birth to death and resurrection. "The events recorded in the Exodus," he comments, "are transposed into terms of the advent of the Son of God in the flesh and the physical reality of his saving passion on the Cross. All the major Old Testament conceptions of redemption show through, but they are Christologically reinterpreted, for the shadowy prefigurements of redemption under the old covenant have now given way to the final truth of redemption through the sacrifice of Christ in the new covenant." <sup>80</sup>

The theological understanding of this biblical interpretation is then developed by Irenaeus and, through Irenaeus, taken over, in particular, by Athanasius. In Torrance's words, "...the incipient Credal formulations found emerging in Irenaeus' interpretation of the truth of the Gospel and his unfolding of the Trinitarian pattern implicit in the deposit of faith, contributed to the content and structure of the Nicene confession of the faith." <sup>81</sup>

That confession of faith, however, was further developed in the Church by a profounder Eucharistic understanding of the Paschal Mystery of Christ. Thus in FL 10, where, incidentally, we find some of the finest Athanasian theology enunciated within the Paschal Letters, Torrance again draws attention to Athanasius' clearly phrased incarnationally-redemptive theology. "This is the Lord, who is seen in the Father and in whom the Father is also seen. Although he was the true Son of the Father, he became at last incarnate for our sakes, that he might offer himself to the Father in our stead, and redeem us through his oblation and sacrifice. This is he who once brought his people out of Egypt, but who afterwards has redeemed all of us, nay, the whole race of men, from death, and rescued them from the grave. This is he who of old was sacrificed as a lamb (for it was under the figure of a lamb that he was

<sup>80</sup> T.F. Torrance *The Trinitarian Faith* p. 172.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 174. Also cited for reference are Oscar Cullman, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, trans. by J.K.S. Reid, and T.F. Torrance *The Deposit of Faith*, *SJT*, Vol. 36, 1983, pp.1-28.

designated) but who was afterwards slain for us, 'for Christ our Passover has been sacrificed'." <sup>82</sup>

In his wide-ranging discussion on the nature of atonement, Hastings Rashdall saw the resurrection as the central means of salvation. "The Resurrection," he commented, "is the real source of redemption."<sup>83</sup> - something in which Athanasius was able to rejoice, for God "raised up together with Him (Christ), having loosed the bands of death, and vouchsafed a blessing instead of a curse, joy instead of grief, a feast instead of mourning, in this holy joy of Easter, which being continually in our hearts, we always rejoice...."<sup>84</sup> The resurrection alone provided the reason for the Easter feast, since God "both brought about the slaying of His Son for salvation, and gave us this reason for the holy feast."<sup>85</sup> Indeed, the eschatological promise was also fulfilled in Christ's death and resurrection, for "This also leads us on from the cross through this world to that which is before us, and God produces even now from it the joy of glorious salvation...."<sup>86</sup>

#### V. 4. Corruption and Incorruptibility

Fundamental to Athanasian theology was the belief that since man as creature of God had sinned against God as Creator, the restoration of man was possible only by the will of God being fulfilled through the assumption by the Logos or Word of human corruptibility. In this way, the corrupt nature of humanity was taken up into divine incorruptibility. "For even for our sakes," he affirmed, "the Word came down, and being incorruptible, put on a corruptible body for the salvation of all of us."<sup>87</sup> Thus the glory of resurrection brought about a transformation within man's humanity

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<sup>82</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, op.cit. pp.174-175.

<sup>83</sup> H. Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*. The Bampton Lectures for 1915, London, p. 298.

<sup>84</sup> FL 2. 7.

<sup>85</sup> FL 5. 2.

<sup>86</sup> FL 5.2.

<sup>87</sup> FL 6.4., FL 10. 8., FL 10. 9.

whereby man has been delivered from corruption and decay and illumined with the risen body of incorruption. "For this is the work of the Father's loving-kindness and goodness, that not only should He make him alive from the dead, but that He should render His grace illustrious through the Spirit. Therefore, instead of corruption, He clothes him with an incorruptible garment." <sup>88</sup>

The gift of an incorruptible body which has resulted through the resurrection, Athanasius stressed, meant that man in his wholeness and totality as man, would also rise bodily without corruption or decay. "It is truly a subject of joy, that we can see the signs of victory against death, even our own incorruptibility, through the body of the Lord. For since He rose gloriously, it is clear that the resurrection of all of us will take place; and since His body remained without corruption, there can be no doubt regarding our incorruption." <sup>89</sup>

The Festal Letters remind us that while Athanasius's theology is grounded upon Christological constructs, its development overall reveals a theology of man in relation to creation – and emanating from that a theology of man as creature in relation to God the Creator. In the *De Incarnatione – Contra Gentes* the created cosmos is presented as being contingent and provisional in its existence. It has been brought into being *ex nihilo* through the creative power of the Logos or Word in accordance with the divine will. As such it is sustained in existence and upheld by the Word who preserves it in case it reverts to pursuing its natural tendency towards dissolution. Therefore creation together with the life and being of Man within its divine provenance remain wholly dependent for their existence and eschatological fulfilment upon the restoring power and love of God.<sup>90</sup> Man has been created in accordance with the image of the Word. The Word is himself "the express image of the Father"<sup>91</sup>. Man has been created "for eternal contemplative union with God."<sup>92</sup> If

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<sup>88</sup> FL 7.10.

<sup>89</sup> FL 11.14.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. *C. Gentes* 41.1-12.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Hess, op. cit. p. 233.



the image of the divine is lost,<sup>93</sup> man will return by virtue of his own nature to the nothingness out of which he was created. Hess comments that it is not clear if Athanasius perceived the image of God to have been defaced or lost. Athanasius, however, recognised that Man has indeed turned away from God and concentrated his attention upon what is mortal and perishable. Man has lost the image of God revealed in and through His Word and is now in the process of corruption (φθορά) and death (θάνατος). By “corruption” Athanasius saw it in terms of spiritual, mental, moral and physical dissolution, both individual and collective, in the life of mankind and ending in death and nothingness (μη ὄντων).<sup>94</sup>

When we return to the Festal Letters the same outlook is reflected.<sup>95</sup> The mind of Man has been dulled, his knowledge has been clouded, and he is morally and spiritually alienated from God. Man has lost the image of the Word that was so graciously bestowed upon him and is gradually journeying towards non-existence in death, a state of decay and corruption that belongs to his mortal nature as creature. Nevertheless, while such a description may mirror gloom and doom for humanity, Athanasius recognises that the heart of the problem calls for man to be rescued from his alienated state. He must, Athanasius insisted, be delivered from corruption and death, far more than from actual sin, although he recognised that sin was the cause and the consequence of the loss of the divine image.<sup>96</sup> It is Athanasius’ belief that man has been delivered from the prospect of corruption and death in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ whereby the whole of Man’s being has been rescued and restored. As the eternal Logos of God, Jesus Christ has come as God’s incarnate, saving Word to reconcile humanity. “We were strangers, and have become his, who suffered for us.”<sup>97</sup> And “whereas we were strangers, we are called

<sup>93</sup> C. *Gentes* 34. 23 where Athanasius speaks of the time when “the soul has put off every stain of sin with which it is tinged.” Cf. J. Roldanus, “Le Christ et l’homme dans la théologie d’Alexandrie” (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1968) pp. 65-98; and in Hamman, “L’homme image de Dieu”, pp. 158-159 and pp. 166-167.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. *De Incar.* 4.4; 5.1; 6.1; C. *Gentes* 3 and 4.

<sup>95</sup> FL2.2-3 et al.

<sup>96</sup> *De Incar.* 7.4.

<sup>97</sup> FL20.1.

friends.”<sup>98</sup> Christ came also to save humanity and to restore the life-giving image of the Word.<sup>99</sup> It is important to note that Athanasius regarded the restoration of incorruptibility to be a prerequisite for the restoration of the image. This is consistent with *De Incarnatione* 7ff, whereas *Contra Gentes* 2.2, for example, reflects something of the Platonic teaching that knowledge and contemplation are responsible for incorruptibility.<sup>100</sup> So from Athanasius’ point of view the work of salvation is entirely due to the divine initiative. “For this is the work of the Father’s loving-kindness and goodness.”<sup>101</sup> This restoration to incorruptibility and the reinstatement of the divine image has to be matched by a human response. Athanasius emphasises the freedom of choice given to Man in the matter and the varying consequences that result.<sup>102</sup> On a positive note Man is encouraged in “looking forward to celebrate the eternal joy in heaven, keep the feast here also, rejoicing at all times, praying incessantly, and in everything giving thanks to the Lord.”<sup>103</sup>

While in Athanasian theology the death of Christ stood as a central plank within the divine scheme of redemption, it was not alone the source of man’s salvation. Redemption to Athanasius did not mean only or primarily forgiveness of sins. God may pronounce forgiveness of sins when man repents. But repentance by itself would not remove the corruption of Man, which resulted from the Fall. “For He made the world free by the blood of the Saviour; then, again, He has caused the grave to be trodden down by the Saviour’s death, and furnished a way to the heavenly gates free from obstacles to those who are going up.”<sup>104</sup> The nature of redemption is the restoration to man’s body of that incorruptibility which was lost by the Fall. Athanasius understands corruptibility not as an arbitrary penalty imposed by

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<sup>98</sup> FL45.

<sup>99</sup> FL6.4; FL7.10.

<sup>100</sup> Roldanus, *Le Christ et l’homme*, pp. 107 – 123.

<sup>101</sup> FL7.10. also FL10.4.

<sup>102</sup> FL19.6-8.

<sup>103</sup> FL19.8. cf other refs (“heavenly calling”, “calling from above,” “the heavenly vocation”  
in FL7.9; FL13.6; FL26; FL28; FL38 and FL43.

<sup>104</sup> FL 5. 3.

God, but as the natural and inevitable consequence of sin. Man was not by nature incorruptible or immortal. His body and rational soul were by nature mortal. But Man alone was made in the image of God: on him alone was bestowed the gift of reason, which carried with it the chance of winning incorruption by freely acting in accordance with reason. This argument Athanasius brings out very fully in the *de Incarnatione*. "Again, it were unseemly that creatures once made rational, and having partaken of the Word, should go to ruin, and turn again toward non-existence by the way of corruption."<sup>105</sup> In FL 6 the theme of Man being delivered from death centres upon the assumption by the Incarnate Word of human form and the redemptive gift of life which resulted from that divine act of grace. "For the Lord died in those days, that we should no longer do the deeds of death. He gave His life, that we might preserve our own from the snares of the devil. And, what is most wonderful, the Word became flesh, that we should no longer live in the flesh, but in spirit should worship God, who is Spirit."<sup>106</sup>

With this emphasis upon worship, Athanasius sought constantly to remind the Church that the festal commemoration of Easter was the collective expression of thanksgiving in which these theological and doxological truths of resurrection joy were acknowledged together in one united celebratory and Eucharistic commemoration. The proper meaning and sense of the Easter feast could only be understood in its Christological and soteriological centrality in terms of the consubstantial relationship between the Father and the Son. As Athanasius expressed it most fully: "For we do not institute days of mourning and sorrow, as some may consider these of Easter to be, but we keep the feast, being filled with joy and gladness. We keep it then, not regarding it after the deceitful error of the Jews, nor according to the teaching of the Arians, which takes away the Son from the Godhead, and numbers Him among creatures; but we look to the correct doctrine we derive from the Lord."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *De Incar.* 6. 4.

<sup>106</sup> FL 6. 1.

<sup>107</sup> FL 11.13.

## V. 5. Resurrection and the Atoning Work of Christ

Within the light of this incarnational-redemptive approach, let us now attest its validity in terms of the rather one-sided emphasis upon atonement purely and simply through resurrection, rather than atonement in relation to the complete act of salvation through Incarnation *and* Resurrection - the former charge which has sometimes been levelled at Athanasius - and, we would argue, levelled mistakenly.

Hastings Rashdall, for example, has described Athanasius "as the one Greek Father, or at all events the first of them who imitated the Latins in emphasising the idea of atonement as distinguished from that of the incarnation."<sup>108</sup> This is an astonishing statement to make, for to us, it would appear clear that the very opposite is the case. In fact, far from distinguishing or separating atonement from incarnation, or emphasising one over the other, the pattern of Athanasian thought aimed to reaffirm their unitary relationship. Rashdall refers to what he sees as an over-emphasis by Athanasius (in contrast to other Greek Fathers) "on the Fall and on the atoning efficacy of Christ's death". The Athanasian view of redemption, Rashdall claims, "is still in great part ethical and intelligible."<sup>109</sup> He also finds support in a statement by A. Harnack that Athanasius "referred everything to the thought of redemption."<sup>110</sup> While each of these statements appears to be partially true, nevertheless they appear to do grave injustice to the idea of that soteriological wholeness to which Athanasius strongly adheres. Certainly Athanasius fully encompassed the "thought" of redemption, in Harnack's phrase. But surely not just the mere consideration: the nature and purpose and reality which lay behind the redemptive "thought" exercised a far stronger influence in his theological approach. Nowhere in the Festal Letters do we come across such a one-sided understanding of redemption where everything depends upon a limited soteriological process. Nor do

<sup>108</sup> H. Rashdall *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*. supra, p. 294 .

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. p. 294.

<sup>110</sup> A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* III., quoted by Rashdall. op. cit.

we find Athanasius separating the saving power of Jesus Christ through resurrection from that same saving power revealed through incarnation. We would reiterate the fact that Athanasius insisted on retaining the ontological unity between incarnation and resurrection. Conjointly they reflect the completeness of God's love in Jesus Christ within the divine economy of salvation.

To understand more completely the reasons why atonement was necessary, Athanasius recognised that the atoning nature and purpose of Christ's death arose out of the need to restore man from the sin of falling from grace through Adamic man's disobedience of God. In his arguments when confronted by Arian misunderstandings about the creaturely nature of Christ over against his divinity, Athanasius insisted that this task of redemption towards Man could only be fully accomplished by one who was truly and essentially divine. Thus of the Arians Athanasius remarks, "Because of His coming down, which was on behalf of man, they have denied His essential Godhead; and seeing that He came forth from the Virgin, they doubt His being truly the Son of God, and considering Him as become incarnate in time, they deny His eternity; and, looking upon Him as having suffered for us, they do not believe in Him as the incorruptible Son from the incorruptible Father."<sup>111</sup>

But the divinity of Christ was not something to be understood in isolation from his humanity. Without the former, the salvation of Man would not have been possible from the side of God. Without the latter, Christ would not have been able to heal Man in his humanity from within. That healing process was possible only through Christ putting to death the human nature, which he had assumed, along with its corruption, sin and death. The idea in Athanasius' mind, which we find reflected in the *De Incarnatione*,<sup>112</sup> revolves round the necessity that the divine threat of death should be fully satisfied. His argument proceeds along these lines: Because Man had sinned as a result of Adam's disobedience, death had been bestowed upon Man. The nature of Man was now corrupted and Man's life subject to deterioration. The

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<sup>111</sup> FL10.9.

<sup>112</sup> *De Incar* 6.

rational image in which God had created Man had been lost. The possibility for Man to repent of his disobedient and corrupt condition sounds perfectly plausible. If Man repented, then surely God would forgive? But any such act would be dependent upon Man's wish to repent and man's act of repentance, rather upon the free grace of God. In other words any dispensation of divine grace that depended upon the will of Man to repent would be contrary to the true nature of God. "But repentance would, firstly, fail to guard the just claim of God. For he would still be none the more true, if men did not remain in the grasp of death; nor, secondly, does repentance call men back from what is their nature - it merely stays them from acts of sin."<sup>113</sup>

A further aspect to which H. Rashdall draws attention is the understanding of Christ's death in terms of its absolute necessity with regard to Man's salvation. Rashdall makes the point that Athanasius understood the death of Christ as being necessary to fulfilling what he described as "the divine threat of death."<sup>114</sup> "Man must die," according to Rashdall, "and die by the particular form of death which involved a curse."<sup>115</sup> In Athanasius' words, "For He came Himself to bear the curse laid upon us, how else could He have 'become' a curse, unless He received the death set for a curse?" and that is the Cross."<sup>116</sup> Through the death of Christ, therefore, the threat of Man's bodily destruction is confronted and through the resurrection of Christ the threat is lifted forever. Just as the threat to bodily humanity is erased, so the promise of bodily resurrection is fulfilled. Again we turn to the *De Incarnatione*. "The Lord was especially concerned for the resurrection of the body which He was set to accomplish. For what He was to do was to manifest it as a monument of victory over death, and to assure all of His having effected the blotting out of corruption, and of the incorruption of their bodies from henceforth; as a gauge of which and a proof of the resurrection in store for all, He has preserved His own body incorrupt."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> *De Incar.* 7.3.

<sup>114</sup> H. Rashdall op. cit. p. 294.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p. 295.

<sup>116</sup> *De Incar.* 25. 2.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* 22.4.

Once more we are brought back to the fact that, quite clearly, the remedy for Man's original disobedience and Fall from grace could only be accomplished if the whole of human nature were assumed by God through His Son the Incarnate Logos of God. We may sum up the overall effects of Christ's death, as Athanasius understood them. "For the Word, perceiving that not otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition, while it was impossible for the Word to suffer death, being immortal, and Son of the Father; to this end He takes to Himself a body capable of death, that it, by partaking of the Word Who is above all, might be worthy to die in the stead of all, and might, because of the Word which was come to dwell in it, remain incorruptible, and that thenceforth corruption might be stayed from all by the grace of the Resurrection."<sup>118</sup> And, "thus He, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption, by the promise of the resurrection."<sup>119</sup> It is here that Rashdall indicates what he regards as sufficient evidence for a doctrine of substitutionary sacrifice, although he denies that it relates to substitutionary punishment. By Christ undertaking death on behalf of Man as the victim for Man's sin and disobedience, the debt of sin has been cancelled. That is, the Incarnate Word, having united Himself with the body in which abides human sinfulness, has satisfied the price of restoring humanity to God. The death of Christ, Rashdall observes, "is represented as not merely equivalent to, but actually identical with, the death of all: all literally did die in the death of the One."<sup>120</sup> In the words of Athanasius, "But by virtue of the union of the Word with it (i.e. the body), it was no longer subject to corruption according to its own nature, but by reason of the Word that has come to dwell in it was placed out of the reach of corruption."<sup>121</sup> So we perceive the necessity of Christ's death in putting to death the corruptible nature of Man's humanity. But we discern something further. Important as this act of self-sacrifice is on the part of the Incarnate Word was

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<sup>118</sup> *De Incar.* 9.1.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* 9.2.

<sup>120</sup> H. Rashdall op. cit. p. 296.

<sup>121</sup> *De Incar.* 20. 4.

for the life of man, Athanasius stressed even more so the importance of the resurrection in bringing about the restoration of Man's being. "The stress is, however, not upon the retrospective act of sacrifice," Rashdall writes, "but upon the regenerative effects which followed, and followed from the resurrection rather than from the death."<sup>122</sup> In the mind of Athanasius two aspects are clear: on the one hand the main purpose of the incarnation was the assumption of humanity on the part of the Word the Eternal Logos of God so that the being of Man might be restored into the image of God - what has often been described as the "deification" of man - "For He was made man that we might be made God."<sup>123</sup> On the other hand it is the resurrection which remains the proper source of redemption. Yet, there is no real division between Christ's death and resurrection, or between incarnation and atonement. Together they advance and fulfil the saving purposes of God for his world. Let Athanasius prove his point, "Or who else has given men such assurance of immortality, as has the Cross of Christ, and the Resurrection of His Body?"<sup>124</sup>

We have made reference to the *De Incarnatione* to illustrate the essential relationship in which incarnation and resurrection are directly linked. It is important to retain that relationship in our consideration of the way Athanasius understood the purpose and work of resurrection within the Festal Letters.

When we analyse the theological mind of Athanasius, as ever, we find indeed that soteriology lies at the very heart of his thinking, whether in his apologetic writings in defence of the faith, whether in polemical works when confronted by Arian controversy, whether in his dogmatic treatises or more ascetic and pastoral letters. Soteriology stands central to faith and life: and central to soteriology lie the twin theological planks of incarnation and resurrection. Soteriology is made possible through incarnational truth. Put another way, as we have sought to underline, the nature and purpose of the incarnation are bound up within the inter-related nature and purpose of the resurrection. No separation exists in the way Athanasius understands

<sup>122</sup> H. Rashdall op. cit. p. 296.

<sup>123</sup> *De Incar.* 54. 3.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* 50. 5.



their twin purposes within the divine plan of salvation. No dualist notions can be entertained within the unitive manner in which Athanasius posits their saving nature.

#### V. 6. Resurrection and the Ontological Nature of the *Homoousion*

At first sight when we are confronted by the teachings of Arianism concerning the nature of the Person of Jesus Christ, we might be tempted to assume that this was the first occasion in which the Church had come face to face with such an important issue. However, even long before the Arian controversy the Church had held firmly to the belief in the two-fold nature of Christ. As the Incarnate Word of the Father, Jesus was held to be divine as well as human. The Nature and Person of the Son was united hypostatically with the Nature and Person of the Father. Methodios Fouyas reminds us that the first of the Fathers to refer to the two natures of Christ was Melito of Sardis, "though in his mind nature simply meant something real or true."<sup>125</sup> Melito affirmed that "For being at once both God and perfect man likewise, he gave us sure indications of His two natures."<sup>126</sup> Thus only through the twofold nature of Christ in which the divine and the human had come together, was there created the basic ground for the salvation of man in which the full effects of God's creative and redemptive power became manifest in and through the eternal Son and Word of God.

The idea of divinely creative mediation through the Logos was not lost on Irenaeus, whose theological understanding left such a profound influence upon Athanasius. Irenaeus understood the Logos of God as head of the invisible world, which had been created through him, and also as head of the divinely contingent visible and corporeal world. But this was no dualist notion which Irenaeus had adopted: it did not involve any separation between the visible and the invisible,

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<sup>125</sup> M. Fouyas *Christology : The Person of Jesus Christ in the Decisions of the Ecumenical Councils*. Addis Ababa 1976. p. 27.

<sup>126</sup> Melito of Sardis *On the Nature of Christ* The Ante-Nicene Father's, Vol. viii, p.760.

between the world of human sense and phenomena (which man could perceive and comprehend) and the world of divine truth and intelligibility (which lay beyond human perception and understanding). For Irenaeus, it was the Incarnation, which had brought together the creative nature of God's Divinity and the created nature of Man's humanity. In the statement of Methodios Fouyas that "The Incarnation unites the Logos and the flesh,"<sup>127</sup> we find a direct reference to Irenaeus thought.

In marked contrast to this incarnational theology, the teaching of Hellenistic dualism, far from formulating a belief in the hypostatic union founded upon the assumption of humanity by the divine Word, based its theological critique upon the separation between the nature of God's inherent divinity and the nature of man's inherent humanity. Arius was unable to accept that God, in the perfection of his Divine Being, could have any contact with the imperfect nature of Man's being. So, not surprisingly, Arius rejected any form of thought, which implied a direct relationship between God and this world, that is between the divine Creator and the world of His creation. He insisted that the eternal Word or Logos of God be not in fact grounded in the very being of God at all. The Word was divided (*διαίρετος*) or separated (*χωριστός*) and, as such, belonged to the side of creation. The Word was therefore subject to the nature of created realities and was thus prone to alteration (*τρέπτος*) and change (*ἀλλοιούμενος*): the Son was in nature mutable. In the mind of Athanasius there could be no such thing as the mutability of the Son, for as the eternal Word of the Father he was in respect of his divinity immutable, otherwise how could the Son as Word ever be of the same nature as the Father who remained immutable? "... then wouldest thou have known that the Lord did not descend for His own sake, but for ours; and for this reason, thou wouldest the more have admired His loving-kindness. And hadst thou considered what the Father is, and what the Son, thou wouldest not have blasphemed the Son, as of a mutable nature. And hadst thou understood His work of loving-kindness towards us, thou wouldest not have

<sup>127</sup>

M. Fouyas, op. cit. p. 27.

alienated the Son from the Father, not have looked upon Him as a stranger.”<sup>128</sup>

With regard to this aspect of mutability, it is of interest to note the way Athanasius refers to it in another setting.<sup>129</sup> In posing the question about the Arian understanding that the Word was subject to change and was therefore “alterable”, Athanasius simply dismisses the point altogether, for “it is superfluous to examine it.” But what was meant by the adjective τρέπτως? Robertson makes the point that “changeable” suggests not so much a physical alteration as “a moral nature capable of improvement.”<sup>130</sup> Does this suggest then that in determining the moral nature of the second Person of the Trinity, Athanasius’ concern lay in determining the relationship between the Father and the Son? We believe not. Furthermore, would the theological mind of Athanasius seek to ground its argument upon moralistic tones rather than ontological realities? Again, we believe not. Furthermore, as far as we can conclude, there is little evidence if any, that Arius chose to adopt a moralistic basis for arguing in favour of the mutability of the Son. Quite simply, Arius could not accept the ontological relationship, which revealed that the Eternal Word of the Father took flesh and became Man. To Arius it remained an impossibility that Jesus Christ could be both God and Man. In his human capacity the Word could only belong to the creaturely side of existence. God remained utterly unknown and beyond knowledge in Being and Nature and Person. As such He remained apart from the world. We may cite H.M. Gwatkin in his criticism of the Arian standpoint: “If Christ is distinct from the Father, he is not God, and if he is a Son, he is not co-eternal with the Father. And what was not God is a creature, and what is not eternal is also a creature. On both grounds, then, the Lord is only a creature...Thus the Arian trinity of divine persons forms a descending series, separated by infinite degrees of honour and glory, resembling the philosophical triad or orders of spiritual existence, extending outwards in concentric circles.”<sup>131</sup>

<sup>128</sup>

FL 10. 9.

<sup>129</sup>

*C. Arianos* I. 35.

<sup>130</sup>

LNPNE Vol. IV. *C. Arianos* I. 35. Note 1.

<sup>131</sup>

H. M. Gwatkin *The Arian Controversy*, London, 1898, p. 7.

What effect did Greek dualistic thought leave upon the Arians' knowledge and perception of God in relation to Jesus Christ? In the first place it left Arian thought without any real or proper knowledge of God. God was beyond knowledge and God's Word or Logos remained on the creaturely side of being and knowledge. Therefore knowledge of God could be perceived only from a creaturely point of view. From an epistemological point of view, this meant that knowledge and perception of God became founded in the Arians' own powers of understanding. In other words, knowledge of God was possible only from the basis of creaturely notions, dependent largely upon a subjectivist perception. Athanasius recognised that Arian thought revealed a form of understanding based upon human invention and may best be described as *epinoetic*, that is to say, a form of thinking (stemming from a centre in the mind of man and based upon man's own powers of intelligibility. It contrasted with the corresponding form of *dianoetic* thought in which proper knowledge and understanding centred in and stemmed from the mind and Being of God. Thus Athanasius accuses those who have rejected "the true and real God" for "having degraded their understanding and darkened their mind."<sup>132</sup> For, "They have invented and deified things..."<sup>133</sup> In this way they have "confused the rational with the irrational and linked things naturally dissimilar, worshipping them as gods."<sup>134</sup> For the Arians, any possibility of acquiring divine knowledge, far from being a rational activity, had become irrational, for its epistemic source had become dependent upon human conceptualisation, rather than stemming from divine truth as it has been revealed through the Son and in accordance with the very Nature and Being of God Himself. But, as Athanasius was ever keen to affirm, the very fact of God's creative being did not mean that God remained separate. "For God, the creator of the universe and king of all, who is beyond all being and human thought, since he is good and bountiful, has made mankind in his own image through his own Word,

<sup>132</sup>

*C. Gentes* 9: 1-2.

<sup>133</sup>

*Ibid.* 9: 24.

<sup>134</sup>

*Ibid.* 9: 25-6.

our saviour Jesus Christ; and he also made man perceptive and understanding of reality through his similarity to him, giving him also a conception and knowledge of his own eternity....”<sup>135</sup>

The epistemological dichotomy which had arisen in the Arian mind not only divided God from the world, but also divided God from His eternal Word or Logos. The statement by Methodios Fouyas that “The Person of Christ, as the self-revelation of God, is the meeting point of the divine and human natures” could never be accepted or affirmed by the Arians. They could never regard Jesus Christ as the one true Mediator of divine truth and being. One of Athanasius’ condemnations underlines how the Arians, through their creaturely understanding, separated the Father from the Son. “And hadst thou considered what the Father is, and what the Son, thou wouldest not have blasphemed the Son, as of a mutable nature. And hadst thou understood His work of loving-kindness towards us, thou wouldest not have alienated the Son from the Father, nor have looked upon Him as a stranger, Who reconciled us to the Father.”<sup>136</sup> For Athanasius, we can easily observe how the essential unity between the Father and the Son was grounded upon the self-revelation of the Father in the Son: this formed the key to his whole soteriological understanding. Fervently he could proclaim: “This is the Lord, Who is manifested in the Father, and in Whom also the Father is manifested; Who, being truly the Son of the Father, at last became incarnate for our sakes, that he might offer Himself to the Father in our stead, and redeem us through His oblation and sacrifice.”<sup>137</sup>

For Athanasius, Christ as the very Logos and incarnate Word of God, was God of God. What the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea accepted through adopting the term *Homoousios* reaffirmed the apostolic faith in the one true nature of God as he has chosen to reveal it in the Person of his Son Jesus Christ.

At this juncture, we feel that it is worth while considering the various factors

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<sup>135</sup> C. *Gentes* . 2: 4-11.

<sup>136</sup> FL 10. 9.

<sup>137</sup> FL 10. 10.

that helped the Athanasian mind to formulate this vital theological term. In the first place, there was the immediate need to counteract the Arian division of the Son from the Father. A theological formulation was required that would reflect biblical truth through affirming the relationship between the Son and the Father and thus underlining the unity of the Godhead. Secondly, there was the desire to recapture the apostolic teachings and traditions the Church, particularly with their emphasis upon the application of Sonship to Christ alone where Christ as Son and eternal Word possesses and reveals the essential Nature and Being of the Father. In the third place, Athanasius held a perception of Divine Grace which, he acknowledged, had directed the heart and mind of the Church since apostolic times and, he believed, continued to guide the faith of the Fourth Century Church in its struggles against heretical forces. The Church, Athanasius believed, remained "the judge and interpreter of Revelation and Tradition."<sup>138</sup>

We can see clearly how deeply these factors came into play in the final formulation in which Scripture and Apostolic Tradition came together in a reflection of theological expression based upon the truth of divine revelation so that the term *homoousios*<sup>139</sup> affirmed within the life and worship of the Church the essential ontological and soteriological relationship that God was in Christ, not partially or tangentially, but wholly and completely, reconciling the world to himself. The ontological and epistemological significance of the *homoousion* meant that as the eternal Word of the Father, Jesus Christ as Son of God, in nature both divine and human, remained One in Being One with the Father eternally and forever.

As a counter to the Arian position that the Logos was merely a creaturely reality, the Fathers of Nicaea declared their belief in the full and complete divinity of

<sup>138</sup> M. Fouyas, *supra*. p. 31. cf. G. C. Stead, "'Homoousios' dans la pensee desaint Athanase in Politique et Theologie chez Athanase d'Alexandrie", *Actes du colloque de Chantilly 23-25 Sept.*, edited by Charles Kannengiesser (Theologie Historique) 27. (Beauchesne, Paris), pp. 213-254.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. M. Fouyas *op. cit.* and also J. B. Walker, *Convenance epistemologique de l' "Homoousion" dans la theologie d'Athanase*, *ibid.* pp. 255-276.

Christ. Yet, important as that fundamental principle was in underlining the consubstantial relationship between the Father and the Son, we must not make the mistake of imagining that Athanasius' thinking was in any way one-sided. We have no hesitation in affirming the fact that Athanasius did not hold monophysite tendencies: the Son was neither solely divine, nor solely human. Yet in seeking to re-emphasise the divinity of the Son, Athanasius had to guard against accusations that in doing so, he ran the risk of overplaying his position and thus losing sight of the humanity of the Son. Here we must stress that his primary endeavour in disproving Arian teaching about Christ's nature was not only to uphold the divinity of the Son, but at the same time was indeed to place equal emphasis upon his humanity and thus direct the faith of the Church towards a scriptural and apostolic understanding of divine salvation. Methodios Fouyas reminds us of the theological balance, which Athanasius held between the divinity and the humanity of Christ and, through this union of hypostases, the relationship between Incarnation and Atonement. "In the teaching of St. Athanasius there is equally a stress upon the saving significance of the humanity of Christ, and in his teaching there is a full and satisfying account of the Atonement, in which Incarnation and Atonement are very closely associated, and interdependent. When he uses the word *Homoousios*, he means that the Son is not the creation of the divine will, but of the same *ousia* with the Father."<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, because of the internal dynamic relationship that the term signified, *homoousios* implied not merely a sense of similarity in terms of outward resemblance, but an inward relationship in which the being and nature of the Father is bound up in a oneness with the being and nature of the Son. The unity of the Godhead is preserved. "*Homoousios*, to Athanasius, means not merely sameness or likeness, but undivided

and unbroken unity of *ousia* or essence." <sup>141</sup> Further support for this observation can be found from Athanasius' own declaration in his *Defence of the Nicene Definition* that "the Word of God is not a work or creature, but an offspring proper to the Father's essence and indivisible". <sup>142</sup> The term *ὁμοούσιον* sought to emphasise the complete unity of the God and not simply the likeness between the Father and the Son. So Athanasius could state, "But since the generation of the Son from the Father is not according to the nature of men, and not only like, but also inseparable from the essence of the Father, and He and the Father are one, as he has said Himself, and the Word is ever in the Father and the Father in the Word."<sup>143</sup> Bethune-Baker further develops the theme of unity of being and therefore inseparability between the Father and the Son. "It is from this essential unity that there follows equally the unchangeableness of nature without which the Son could not remain identical with himself, and the sameness of being without which he could not be thought of as one with the Father".<sup>144</sup> Thus "Μία θεότης and εἷς θεός are synonomous conceptions, and the οὐσία of God is God himself, numerically one."<sup>145</sup>

The term *Homoousios* was the most all-encompassing description the Fathers of Nicaea were able to construct as they attempted to define the nature of Christ's Being in relation to God. That First Ecumenical Council in accepting the term *homoousios* considered that "the Son is not the creation of the divine will, but (is) of the same *ousia* as the Father."<sup>146</sup> By so doing, the Council proclaimed, as a unitary basis for the faith and doxological expression of the catholic Church, the supreme

<sup>140</sup>

M. Fouyas, *ibid.*

<sup>141</sup>

M. Fouyas, *supra.* p. 30. note 8.

<sup>142</sup>

*De Decr.* VI. 26.

<sup>143</sup>

*Ibid.* V. 20.

<sup>144</sup>

J.F. Bethune-Baker, *The Meaning of Homoousios in the Constantinopolitan Creed.* Texts and Studies, vol.vii, Cambridge University Press, 1901, p. 29. cf. *De Decr.* V. 23 and 24.

<sup>145</sup>

Bethune-Baker, *supra.* cf. *De Decr.* 22.

<sup>146</sup>

M. Fouyas *supra.* p.31.



unity of the Godhead in Three persons. At the same time the Council anathematised (though not without opposition) the Arian contention which insisted on dividing the Son from the Father and the Father from the Son. So a twofold Athanasian rebuttal emerged "By the name Father we confute Arius, by the name of Son we overthrow Sabellius."<sup>147</sup> Athanasius insisted upon the ontological truth of the *homoousios*, in contradistinction to the Ariomaniacs who divided the nature of Christ, denied his essential Godhead and doubted his divine Sonship. Athanasius could affirm the consubstantiality upon which he insisted. "This is the Lord, who is manifested in the Father, and in whom also the Father is manifested; who being truly the Son of the Father, at last became incarnate for our sakes, that he might offer himself to the Father in our stead, and redeem us through his oblation and sacrifice."<sup>148</sup>

Methodios Fouyas recounts Robertson's approach to the problems of theological definition. "In the terms Person, Hypostais, Will, Essence, Nature, Generation, Procession, we have the embodiment of ideas extracted from experience, and, as applied to God representing merely the best attempt we can make to explain what we mean when we speak of God as Father and of Christ as His Son. Even these last sacred names convey their full meaning to us only in view of the historical person of Christ and of our relation to God through him. That this meaning is based upon an absolute relation of Christ to the Father is the rock of our Faith. That relation is mirrored in the name Son of God: but what it is in itself, when the empirical connotations of Sonship are stripped away, we cannot possibly know. *Homoousios* to the Father, from the *ousia* of the Father: these words assert at once our Faith that such relationship exists and our ignorance of its nature. To the simplicity of faith it is enough to know (and this knowledge is what our formula secures) that in Christ we have not only the perfect Example of Human Love to God, but the direct expression and assurance of the Father's Love to us."<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> M. Fouyas, *supra*. p. 31.

<sup>148</sup> FL 10. 10.

<sup>149</sup> M. Fouyas, *supra*. p. 31.

We may conclude fittingly with Methodios Fouyas in his affirmation that the Nicene doctrine of the *Homoousios* remains essential to our understanding of the Self-revelation of God in Nature and Being through the undivided Nature of Jesus Christ the Son begotten of the Father before all worlds. "Christ is God of God, by whom all things were made. As the definition of this, the *Homoousios* is the core of all Christian Theology."<sup>150</sup>

#### **V. 7. The Inhomination of the Word and the Salvation of Man**

The overall nature and content of the Festal Letters clearly reveals the celebration of the resurrection as the doctrinal and liturgical high-point of the festal season. We acknowledge that the original purpose of these Paschal Letters was to notify the Church of the date of Easter. At the same time we cannot dismiss the additional - and, arguably, the more important - purpose in the mind of Athanasius, namely of underlining through the Easter feast, the fact and the central purpose of Christ's resurrection. This determination supported the truth of orthodoxy over against the contentions of heretics (and Arians in particular) who denied the divinity of Christ and, therefore, reduced the very possibility that Christ could have been raised from the dead. The resurrection, Athanasius affirmed, was the central plank in the Church's faith and worship. The Pauline pro-resurrection statement in I Corinthians<sup>151</sup> argued logically that if the resurrection had not taken place, then faith was utterly void and without purpose. Without the resurrection, not only does Man remain in a state of sin, but also death and the grave remain unconquered and the promise of eternal life - a frequent eschatological reference in the Festal Letters - stands condemned as an empty gesture. It could be argued also that the life and witness of the Church would never have been possible, since none of the early witnesses would have been present to validate Christ's post-resurrection

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<sup>150</sup>

Ibid. supra. p 29.

<sup>151</sup>

I Cor. 15:12 ff.

appearances. Events, historical and factual, however, proved otherwise.

Furthermore, within Athanasian soteriology, the resurrection stood as the primary issue in the divine economy of man's redemption: it was the fulfilment of God's act of atoning and redeeming grace. In the face of the Arian denial of Christ's divinity and the legalistic perception of Judaism towards divine righteousness, the voice of Athanasian orthodoxy affirmed the unconditional love of God in making Himself One with Mankind. Through the assumption of humanity the divine saving grace was made manifest to the world; and through the redemption of that humanity the gospel of man's salvation had been revealed in the form of God's New Covenant with Israel, thereby fulfilling the divine economy for His Chosen people and for the world at large. In Athanasius' words, "as the Gospel of Christ is the fulfilment and accomplishment of the ministration which was supplied by the law of Israel, so future things will be the accomplishment of such as now exist, the Gospel being then fulfilled."<sup>152</sup> The Gospel message of resurrection stands therefore as the kerygmatic proof of the divine work and purpose by which Man has been healed wholly and completely. Man has been made one with God and restored to the divine image of his Creator. Moreover, as Athanasius regularly affirmed, Christ's victory over death resulted in the assurance of the great eschatological hope of life hereafter - the Call "to the great and Heavenly Supper, in that upper room which has been swept."<sup>153</sup> Here, indeed, the call to celebrate the feast was a preparation for heavenly celebration. "Let us keep the feast on the first day of the great week, as a symbol of the world to come."<sup>154</sup> Again, the proper observance of the feast brings the reward of heavenly joy: "So, when we rightly keep the feast, we shall be counted worthy of that joy which is in heaven."<sup>155</sup>

For Athanasius it is perfectly clear that this life-giving, healing and restoring process was made possible only through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and must be

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<sup>152</sup> FL 11. 1.

<sup>153</sup> FL Frags. 40 and 42.

<sup>154</sup> FL 1.10.

<sup>155</sup> FL 2. 7.

seen in the light of this atoning event. In this saving act through His Son the eternal Logos, God brought about a wonderful exchange in assuming Man's humanity. "For this is His glory," Athanasius could proudly proclaim, "this the miracle of His divinity, that He changed our sufferings for His happiness. For, being life, He died that He might make us alive, being the Word, He became flesh, that He might instruct the flesh in the Word, and being the fountain of life, He thirsted our thirst, that thereby He might urge us to the feast."<sup>156</sup>

Since the re-creative purpose towards humanity came through the incarnate Word Jesus Christ and, as a result of the incarnational act, is therefore of God, we find ourselves being confronted with the fact that the atoning purpose could only be possible in accordance with the divine nature of the resurrection. Such an act could never be imagined as anthropocentric: for how could the life of Man be restored to the divine image through the efforts of Man alone? Once we have established that vital fact, namely, that the restoration of Man's life comes from the side of God, we may perceive the resurrection in a twofold light:

- (1) The saving grace of resurrection should be viewed essentially within that God-Manward direction in which Jesus Christ the Incarnate Son of God came into the world in order to fulfil the Father's work of salvation. Here we see the divine plan of salvation taking effect in its *katabatic* or downward form, in the sense of God descending into the world and condescending to enter human existence in incarnational form.
- (2) As a corollary to this, that same notion of divine grace may be perceived in its inverted form, that is, in terms of the Man-Godward direction in which Jesus Christ as the Son of God has restored the life of man to the Father. Here we see the divine plan of salvation in its *anabatic* or upward form as Christ's fulfils the atoning purpose of the Father through resurrection.

Taken together we can now observe the twofold nature of salvation where Jesus Christ, having assumed human form and, *de facto*, human sin and

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<sup>156</sup>

FL 11. 4.

disobedience, has put them to death on the Cross, and thereafter has been raised to glory. Through resurrection the act of at-one-ment of God with Man has thereby been complete. Any understanding of the atonement as God's act of redeeming grace, however, cannot be separated from the One through whom it was made possible. Here we are confronted by the Person and Being together with the Word and Activity of Jesus Christ. For Athanasius, Word and Act went together. Through the Incarnate Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Act of salvation and atonement has been both demonstrated and fulfilled. The understanding of God as One who interacts with this creaturely world through His own Being and Act in Jesus Christ has been highlighted by T.F.Torrance on more than one occasion. "Athanasius showed that since the Act and Word of God we meet in Jesus Christ are eternally inherent in the Being of God, and since none other than the very Being of God himself is mediated to us through the incarnation of his love in Act and Word in Jesus Christ, God's Being is revealed to be his Being in his Act and Word - Being that is intrinsically dynamic and eloquent, the Being of the ever living, acting, and loving God."<sup>157</sup> For Athanasius, it was necessary to understand the atoning, redemptive work of God's Word and Work in and through Jesus Christ in terms of the whole Man, that is, the liberation of man from his enslaved state and self-inflicted condition of sin and corruption. "Redemption means the emancipation of man from his bondage and corruption under judgement, his restoration from that condition in which his being is menaced and undermined by death and degenerating into nothingness."<sup>158</sup> "Redemption ...conceived in terms of resurrection," meant the total restoration of man - body, mind and spirit. Thus, through the Inhomination of the Word and the assumption of man's humanity in Jesus Christ, human nature has been healed and restored "in the fullness and integrity of his human being, including the emancipation of his body" and "in all the fullness of his *humanity*."<sup>159</sup>

<sup>155</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Christian Journals Limited, Belfast, 1980), pp. 66-67

<sup>156</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (The Handsel Press, Edinburgh, 1976), p. 74.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. p. 74.

Perhaps above all, we discover that the assumption by God of man's humanity through the Incarnate Word ensures that a proper epistemological foundation is laid for the growth and development of Man's knowledge of God. No longer is God distanced from Man, but has entered the world through a rational act. "...it is in and through this relation to the Logos in his incarnate reality that we may be liberated from all that is irrational and disorderly to apprehend in an appropriate and worthy manner the loving and rational activity of God in creation and salvation."

<sup>160</sup> Furthermore, this epistemological approach led Athanasius to construct his whole soteriology upon the understanding that resurrection should always be seen in accordance with the nature and work of Christ, that is in accordance with the nature of the one who was raised from the dead. T.F. Torrance puts it thus: "If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, then the *rose again* must be understood as determined by the nature of the Subject of that event, Christ himself."<sup>161</sup> The resurrection should therefore be seen in accordance with the nature of Jesus Christ as the one who has come into the world as the Incarnate Son and inhuman Word or Creator Logos of God. The whole life of Christ is seen as creative within the fallen and degenerate life of man, into which he has come to heal, restore and re-create. So the resurrection of Jesus Christ in bodily form cannot be separated from his entry into the world in bodily form or from the resurrection of the humanity of Man in bodily form. It was in accordance with the nature of this humanity that Christ came into the world to assume human flesh and restore the very nature of Man the creature to wholeness with God the Creator.

In criticising the Arians for dividing the Son from the Father Athanasius argues, "And hadst thou considered what the Father is, and what the Son, thou wouldest not have blasphemed the Son, as of a mutable nature. And hadst thou understood His work of loving-kindness towards us, thou wouldest not have alienated the Son from the Father... For they have learned to rend the seamless coat of God:

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<sup>159</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Transformation of Natural Theology*, Chap. 7. p. 77.

<sup>161</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* p. 75.

they think it not strange to divide the indivisible Son from the Father.”<sup>162</sup> Therefore, whenever we seek to clarify the questions, for example, which the Arians posed in relation to the Person of Jesus Christ, our understanding must be directed by reference to everything He was and is (as Word of God) and to everything he has achieved (as Act of God). Christ’s incarnate life and Christ’s redemptive work are one. That is to say, everything must be directed in accordance with the nature of Christ’s Being as it has been revealed to us, both in relation to the Nature and Being of God Himself (His Divinity) and also in relation to the Nature and Being of Man (His Humanity). Taking them together we see revealed the *Inhominatio* (as Athanasius delighted in describing it) of God’s eternal Logos the Word made flesh in and through whom God Himself has come down into the world in saving love and power. We may select one example - from FL 10 - where Athanasius affirms, “This is the Lord Who is manifested in the Father, and in Whom also the Father is manifested; Who, being truly the Son of the Father, at last became incarnate for our sakes, that he might offer Himself to the Father in our stead, and redeem us through His oblation and sacrifice.”<sup>163</sup> As Andrew Louth has indicated, “Athanasius sees man’s redemption as achieved by the union in Christ of the ‘Very Word, God, impassable and incorruptible,’ with created manhood, i.e. man subject to *πάθη*, *φθορά* and *θάνατος*. Athanasius wants to see this as a real union. It is not a mere theophany: for he did not wish simply to be in a body, nor did he wish merely to appear, for if he had wished only to appear he could have made his theophany through some better means”.<sup>164</sup>

The Athanasian position, therefore, is quite clear. Certainly, the salvation of Man was made possible through resurrection, but not through resurrection alone. We return to the emphasis Athanasius placed upon the necessity of the Incarnation in order that God’s saving purposes might be accomplished. Without the incarnational requirement, we would contend, the resurrection would not have been possible.

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<sup>162</sup> FL 10. 9.

<sup>163</sup> FL 10. 10.

<sup>164</sup> A. Louth *Studia Patristica* Vol. XVI . p. 312.

## V. 8. Resurrection in the Light of Creation

For Athanasius, not only was resurrection dependent upon incarnation: resurrection was bound up also with creation. There existed in his mind a direct connection between God as Creator and God as Redeemer. Through the divine act of creation, all things visible and invisible had been brought into being and given form. However, that created life, more particularly the life of Man, had become corrupted. Man as creature had disobeyed God His Creator. As a result an abyss had been created in the relationship between Man and God. For Man to be wholly restored required the Creator to act also as Redeemer to prevent the world lapsing into nothingness. Just as the rational nature and being of Man was created by the will of God, so only through the will of God could that nature and being be re-created and restored to its divine origin. In FL 2 Athanasius draws attention to the divine rationality through which man was formed as a rational creature. But through disobedience to God's Word Man has deprived himself of rationality and goodness. "Let a man see what these become like, that they bear not the likeness of the conversation of the saints, nor of that right understanding, by which man at the beginning was rational, and in the image of God. But they are compared to their disgrace to beasts without understanding..."<sup>165</sup>

So then, once rational and created in the image of God, man can no longer be seen in the light of saintliness nor does he possess an understanding of that godly relationship in which he was once placed. "Having their minds set on nothing beyond visible things, they esteem these things good, and rejoicing in them, serve their own lusts and not God."<sup>166</sup> And yet, in spite of this state of separation and also because of it, God came Himself into the life of Man in the form, as Athanasius describes it, of

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<sup>165</sup> FL 2.2.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*



“the man-loving Word” who came for this very reason, that he might seek and find that which was lost.”<sup>167</sup>

We find the same kind of thought stressing God’s creative activity in bringing Man and the entire cosmos into being from non-being, for example, in the *De Incarnatione*. “It was not spontaneously, because forethought is not absent; nor of existing matter, because God is not weak; but that out of nothing and without its having any previous existence, God made the universe to exist through His word.”<sup>168</sup> Such a creative act was both generous and abundant, “whence, grudging existence to none, He has made all things out of nothing by His own Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>169</sup> But God did not merely create mankind as such: there was purpose in the divine act, creating man in the divine image and extending to man the very life of God’s Word. “He gave them a further gift, and he did not barely create Man, as he did all the irrational creatures on the earth, but made them after His own image, giving them a portion even of the power of His own Word; so that having as it were a kind of reflection of the Word, and being made rational, they might be able to abide ever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise.”<sup>170</sup>

Having been created in the image of God, man was endowed with rationality: he was made λογικός,<sup>171</sup> that is to say, made in the image of the Logos of God. We find then that the Logos of God could never be separate from human kind. Neither could the love of the Creator be absent from His creation, otherwise it would surely lapse back into nothingness and Man himself would remain in a state of sin with death as his ultimate and final retribution.<sup>172</sup> R.C. Moberly describes the sequence in the following manner: “First there is the inherent connection between the Redeemer and His creation which He came to redeem. The relationship of created man to God, the eternal Logos, did not begin in the fact of the Incarnation; but the fact of the

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<sup>167</sup> FL 2.3.

<sup>168</sup> *De Incar.* 3.1.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.* 3.2.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* 3.3.

<sup>171</sup> *De Incar.* 3.3.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.* 8.2.

Incarnation grew, as it were naturally, out of it. As in the Person of the Eternal Logos God created man, so by inherent aptness, it was in the Person of the Eternal Logos that God restored man to life”<sup>173</sup>

The theological tradition, which Athanasius pursued, was a soteriological one in which redemption was akin to deification. “He (the Eternal Logos) was made man that we might be made God.”<sup>174</sup> This creative-redemptive ontological relationship was vitally important in Athanasian thought for it brought to light in a divine and human hypostasis the invisible nature of God: that same nature which came to be revealed in and through the visible nature of Christ. “As, then, if a man should wish to see God, Who is invisible by nature and not seen at all, he may know and apprehend Him from His works: so let him who fails to see Christ with his understanding, at least apprehend Him by the works of His body, and test whether they be human works or God’s works.”<sup>175</sup> Again, “He manifested Himself by a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; and He endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality.”<sup>176</sup>

The revelation of divine love and mercy in terms of God’s saving grace also lay at the heart of Athanasius’ understanding of resurrection. Khaled Anatolios gives the relation between God and Creation in the context of grace a wide discussion.<sup>177</sup> We are reminded of the ways in which Athanasius uses the term χάρις to speak of the way in which God has bridged the gap between the created nature of man and the uncreated nature of God. Without the aid of the divine saving and re-creative power, created nature would lapse back into nothingness. But God has bestowed his saving grace upon his creation in such a way as to participate in the saving life of his Word, the Eternal Logos.

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<sup>173</sup> R.C. Moberly, *Atonement and Personality* p.349 cf also *De Incar.* 2.

<sup>174</sup> *De Incar.* 54. 3.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.* 54. 1 & 3

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Word and World: Structural Elements in the Theology of St. Athanasius.*

## V. 9. The Vicarious Humanity of Christ

While Athanasius argued in favour of the deity of Christ in face of the Arian emphasis upon what they saw as the creaturely nature of Christ, the nature of Christ's humanity, as we have observed, remained a vital theological component within the Athanasian soteriological position. Taken together, Athanasius understood Christ's divinity *and* humanity as reflecting the hypostatic union in which the economy of God's grace was made possible. In stressing the importance of Christ's divine nature in being consubstantial with the Father, Athanasius laid great store upon his humanity in which Christ was one with the whole being of man. In this way, Athanasius insisted, Christ as Word of the Father, was able both to minister the things of God to man and to minister the things of man to God.<sup>178</sup> It was within and through this high priestly ministry that Athanasius understood the doxological expression of Christ's entire life. At the same time it is important to notice that while Athanasius did indeed emphasise the humanity of Christ, he also observed the *vicarious* aspect of that humanity - that is to say, the act of saving grace and self-sacrifice, which Christ wrought for and on behalf of man.

Christian D. Kettler has drawn attention to the profound influence of Athanasius upon the theology of T.F. Torrance, underlining particularly the significance of the *vicarious humanity* of Christ.<sup>179</sup> Kettler posits a reminder that, after all, the name of Athanasius is generally associated with his defence of the deity of Christ. And yet, in face of the Arians' emphasis upon what they perceived as the human, creaturely nature of Christ, it was precisely the assumption by Christ of man's humanity which, Kettler points out, counteracted the Arian position. This vicarious aspect of Christ's humanity Athanasius saw in terms of the high priestly ministry of Christ whereby he "not only ministered the things of God to man, but

<sup>176</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p.228.

<sup>177</sup> Christian D. Kettler, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation*, (University Press of America, Maryland, 1991.).

also ministered the things of humanity to God.”<sup>180</sup> So much so that, in Kettler’s view, “for Torrance, it is entirely logical for Athanasius to move from the deity of Christ to his humanity.”<sup>181</sup> We find the truth of this suggestion sufficiently convincing since “the humanity of Christ is so inseparable from ‘the Creator Son,’ ‘the Word of God,’ that we are able to be ‘humanised’ through union with him in the Spirit.”<sup>182</sup> Kettler recognises that it is this “double movement” of Christ as the way of God to humanity and as the way of humanity to God which the Fathers used to critique the twin heresies of Docetism and Ebionitism. The distinction is clear and worth noting. Docetism began by taking “the way of deduction” in order to formulate an abstract concept of God. Finding this concept particularised in Jesus Christ, it found there was no need to hold any notion of humanity, since humanity was not necessary to reveal the being of God. On the other hand Ebionitism began from the manhood of Christ and, using “the way of induction,” endeavoured “to rise toward God as the goal or end of man’s thought, only then to end up in the idealising of man himself.”<sup>183</sup> For Torrance, however, the correct starting-point entails beginning “positively” with God Himself meeting us in Jesus Christ, giving Himself to us not simply in this Man but as Man, and yet without resolving Himself into the Man Jesus in such a way that He ceases to be the God who gives Himself even when he really gives Himself to us as Man in Jesus.”<sup>184</sup>

The vicarious nature of Christ’s humanity is brought out strongly in the Festal Letters where Athanasius recognised the vicarious link between the one self-offering of Christ on the Cross and the salvation of Man that was made possible through death and resurrection. “This is the grace of the Lord,” Athanasius writes,” and these are the Lord’s means of restoration for the children of men. For he suffered to prepare freedom from suffering for those who suffer in Him, he descended that he might

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<sup>180</sup> Kettler, *ibid.* p. 122.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> T.F. Torrance, *op.cit.* p. 210.

<sup>181</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Theological Science*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 45-46.

<sup>184</sup> Torrance, *op. cit.* p. 46.

raise us up, he took on Him the trial of being born, that we might love Him Who is unbegotten, he went down to corruption, that corruption might put on immortality, he became weak for us, that we might rise with power, he descended to death, that he might bestow on us immortality, and give life to the dead. Finally, He became man, that we who die as men might live again, and that death should no more reign over us.”<sup>185</sup>

Kettler reminds us of the common obstacle to understanding which Docetism and Ebionitism shared with Apollinarianism and Nestorianism, namely, the concept of God whose nature was immortal, unchangeable and eternal, assuming human flesh, “with its contingency and passion.”<sup>186</sup> How could such a God be contingent upon Himself? How could such a God experience the pain and suffering of humanity? The Athanasian understanding of God as one who had come into the world not simply in a human being, but as human being aptly resolved such questions. The distinction is again important. The first represents a human being who has been “divinised” or empowered by divine being. The second reveals the genuine participation of divine being in human existence. In this way there can be no “deistic disjunction” between God and creation, nor any separation of God from space and time. This form of dualism was encountered by Athanasius in Arian thought which depended largely upon its divisive insistence on the creaturely aspect of Christ’s nature. With Arianism, God was essentially severed from his own Logos, for, being a creature, the Logos belonged to the world of man. In this way, God could only be perceived as being separate from the life of man and remained ultimately unknowable and beyond understanding.

C.C. Twombly<sup>187</sup> has drawn attention to the rise in dualism among some 20th century scholars of Athanasius (to whom earlier reference has been made) who, he reminds us, “seize on the almost complete absence, in Athanasius, of references to

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FL 10. 8.

<sup>186</sup>

Kettler, op. cit. p. 122.

<sup>187</sup>

C.C. Twombly, *The Nature of Christ's Humanity: A Study in Athanasius*. Patristic and Byzantine Review, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1989), pp. 227-241.

Christ's soul."<sup>188</sup> We shall engage later in a theological analysis involving body and soul. But at this stage, we may note the manner in which a dualist attitude, by depriving Christ of a soul, immediately divided him from the very humanity into which, as Logos or Word, he had become incarnate and for whom divine salvation was to be demonstrated. "This is the Lord," Athanasius writes in FL10, "Who is manifested in the Father, and in whom also the Father is manifested; Who, being truly the Son of the Father, at last became incarnate for our sakes, that he might offer Himself to the Father in our stead, and redeem us through His oblation and sacrifice."<sup>189</sup> Again, we can observe the way in which Athanasius draws out the importance of the vicarious nature of Christ's humanity. "For this is His glory, this the miracle of His divinity, that he changed our sufferings for His happiness. For, being life, he died that he might make us alive, being the Word, He became flesh, that he might instruct the flesh in the Word, and being the fountain of life, He thirsted our thirst, that thereby he might urge us to the feast."<sup>190</sup> In his battle against Arian dualism, Athanasius endeavoured to stress the central purpose of Christ's humanity - that the Word or Logos was fully human and, in fulfilling the work of God, set himself to undertake everything on behalf of man and took our place and gave himself in sacrificial love for the salvation of the world. In Twombly's summary, Athanasius maintained that in the Incarnation the Son of God ministered not only of the things of God to man but ministered of the things of man to God. That is to say, he understood the humanity of him who is not only Apostle from God but High Priest taken from among men, and the saving work of Christ in terms of his human as well as his divine agency. It is the human priesthood and the saving mediatorship of Jesus Christ in and through his human kinship with us that Athanasius found so significant."<sup>191</sup>

<sup>188</sup>

Ibid. p. 235.

<sup>189</sup>

FL10. 10.

<sup>190</sup>

FL14. 4.

<sup>191</sup>

Twombly, op. cit. p. 236. (quoting T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, 1976), pp. 215 -266.

## V. 10. Resurrection and Divine Grace

We have seen the extent to which Athanasius focuses upon the understanding of Christ' vicarious humanity within the economy of divine salvation and his belief that Christ acted on behalf of the world – “for us men and for our salvation” – and took upon himself the sinful, corruptible nature of Man in order that he might redeem and restore it. For Athanasius, such a salvific act was nothing less than the free, unconditional outpouring of divine grace. Khaled Anatolios – to whom reference has already been made – has provided an analysis of the context of Grace in terms of the relationship between God and Creation.<sup>192</sup> Grace is that qualitative power that bridges the epistemological and soteriological chasm which human sinfulness has brought about between man as creature and God as his Creator. Thus, “God acts to qualify this ontological poverty of creation by granting it a participation in the Word.”<sup>193</sup>

This theme of divine grace revealed in and through the Incarnate Word is given considerable prominence throughout the Festal Letters. Athanasius draws frequent reference to the Arian insistence upon the creaturely nature of the Word and the resultant division in the relationship between the Son and the Father. The teaching of the Arians “takes away the Son from the Godhead, and numbers him among creatures.” And, again, “they say He is not the Creator, but a creature. For if He were a creature, he would have been holden by death; but if He was not holden by death, according to the scriptures, He is not a creature, but the Lord of the creatures, and the subject of this immortal feast.”<sup>194</sup> For Athanasius, the Incarnate Word, according to Arian perception, lies on the wrong side of the Creator-creature relationship. On the other hand, within the context of grace, the Incarnate Word has brought about victory

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<sup>190</sup> Khaled Anatolios, op. cit. *Word and World: Structural Elements in the Theology of S. Athanasius*.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.* p. 227.

<sup>194</sup> FL 10. 13.

over the corruptible nature of man. What the resurrection has succeeded in bringing to fruition is the divine gift of incorruptibility. "For he (the Word) does not derive His being from those things which are not, but from the Father. It is truly a subject of joy, that we can see the signs of victory against death, even our own incorruptibility, through the body of the Lord. For since He rose gloriously, it is clear that the resurrection of all of us will take place; and since His body remained without corruption, there can be no doubt regarding our incorruption."<sup>195</sup> A distinct link exists between grace and salvation. On the one hand, as Athanasius summoned the Church to engage in eucharistic praise, so we are called to rejoice in God's gift of grace as it has been given and revealed in his Son as the incarnate Word of the Father with whom he is of one substance in nature and being. On the other hand, God's gift of salvation has been made possible through that same incarnate Word coming into the world, assuming the humanity of the world and offering himself for the life of the world in redeeming power and love. Inner gratitude and the outward expression of thanksgiving were, for Athanasius, the true response to resurrection grace and salvation. The call to the Church is to "acknowledge the grace as becomes the feast"<sup>196</sup> for we must never "forget the noble acts of God."<sup>197</sup>

Within the context of the grace-salvation axis, Anatolios presents an analysis of the contrast presented by R.C. Gregg and D. Groh<sup>198</sup> based upon their understanding of the Arian concepts of grace and salvation, which they posit against that of Athanasius. The examination relates particularly to the *Life of Antony*, but appears to have a parallel bearing upon the *Festal Letters*. Gregg and Groh characterise the main difference thus, "In contrast to orthodoxy's substantialist concept of grace as something "stored" in and dispensed from divine nature, Arianism attaches connotations of volition and transaction to the term."<sup>199</sup> As

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid. 10. 14.

<sup>196</sup> FL 5.3.

<sup>197</sup> FL. 5.5.

<sup>198</sup> R.C. Gregg & D. Groh, *Early Arianism. A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

<sup>199</sup> Ibid. p. 144.



Anatolios observes, "The Arian version of salvation and grace indicates an *askesis* which 'proceeds from the axiomatic identification of Christ with creatures.'"<sup>200</sup> Anatolios understands this interpretation of the Arian perception to mean that the life of grace should be seen "in terms of the striving of the human will, with the goal of attaining equality with Christ. As a creature, the Arian Christ provides an exemplar who 'is not categorically other, unlike us and like the Father; hence the imitation envisioned is straightforward and strictly possible.'"<sup>201</sup> The reward for this imitation is "a Sonship equal in glory to that of their earthly savior, their fellow pilgrim in *askesis*."<sup>202</sup>

In stark contrast, Gregg and Groh go on to present their interpretation of how Athanasius understood grace and salvation. Here they hold that in spite of God's gift of grace to man, the gap between God and Man appears as wide as ever, for, they hold, Athanasius "insists that no such equality is possible between creatures and the uncreated redeemer."<sup>203</sup> Furthermore, to them it appears that the saving grace of the Cross has not brought about the attainment of divine mercy within the life of Man. "The Christ worshipped by Athanasius does not encourage creatures to attain the very same Sonship he has won through his labors."<sup>204</sup> The general interpretation appears to be highly critical of what is regarded as the Athanasian position which sees grace and salvation not from the side of Man, as Gregg and Groh might have us accept, but from the side of God. For if grace and salvation do not come from the side of God, but emanate from the side of man, then they are empty of divine power and ineffective in their life-giving purpose. As Anatolios suggests, "Moreover, the Athanasian version de-emphasises the element of human striving; it wants to communicate the message that 'advance in perfection comes not through striving for equality with Christ but by participation and intervention from above.'"<sup>205</sup> In his

<sup>200</sup> Anatolios, p. 231. Gregg & Groh, p. 144.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.* Gregg & Groh, p. 151.

<sup>203</sup> Anatolios, op. cit. p. 232. Gregg & Groh, p. 147.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.* p. 232. Gregg & Groh, p. 150

<sup>205</sup> Anatolios op. cit., p. 232. Gregg and Groh, op. cit. p. 147.

analysis of Gregg and Groh's argument, Anatolios commends them "at least for emphasising the importance of the themes of grace and salvation in the Arian controversy."<sup>206</sup> He then proceeds to a criticism of their approach to Arian soteriology "as based on the equality of the Son with the rest of creation." "Gregg and Groh," he states, "overlook the textual evidence that explicitly shows the efforts of Arius to stress the inequality and pre-eminent distinction of the Son. Athanasius' mocking rejection of this effort, whatever its logical force, should not be mistaken for Arius's own position."<sup>207</sup> In a further comparative survey of Gregg and Groh's stand-point, Christopher Stead came to hold that the main concern of Arius was "to uphold the unique dignity of God the Father in the face of attempts to glorify the Logos, as he thought, unduly. This interest is abundantly attested in the surviving fragments. It is allowable, if rather strained, to say that his main interest was Christology. But the idea that he was mainly concerned to propound an exemplarist theory of salvation finds little or no support in his surviving fragments."<sup>208</sup> When he turns to the account Gregg and Groh give of Athanasian soteriology, Anatolios finds this equally unacceptable. In his understanding of creation in relation to redemption, Athanasius insisted that there was no form of equality between the Creator and the creature. Salvation did not come about through man becoming equal with God. But why did Athanasius insist on a form of distinction or "otherness" between God and creation in terms of salvation? We turn to what had become his main concern in the battle against Arianism – his defence of the divinity of the Son. Such a distinction suggest that the Son as divine, was somewhat "other" than man as a creature of God. Man is not by nature divine, while Athanasius held the Son as both divine and human.

Within the *Festal Letters* we come across Athanasius reminding the Church of the true nature of Christ and the union of the divine and human. Without them

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<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.* p.233.

<sup>207</sup> Anatolios, op. cit. p.234.

<sup>208</sup> C. Stead, "Arius in Modern Research," *Journal of Theological Studies* 45:1 (1994) 36.

there would have been no mediation between God and Man and the salvation of the world would have proved impossible. A spirit of thanksgiving on the part of man balances divine initiative and grace. Indeed, such an emphasis on divine grace is not seen as standing alone, but rather calls for a human response to that grace. "Our will," Athanasius emphasises, "ought to keep pace with the grace of God, and not fall short; lest while our will remains idle, the grace given us should begin to depart, and the enemy finding us empty and naked, should enter (into us)."<sup>209</sup> A mutual interchange exists, therefore, whereby divine grace and human response are seen as corresponding forces. To guard against any loss of grace, it is necessary to be "diligent and careful."<sup>210</sup> Yet we must be careful to note that the gift of grace is free and does not depend upon any degree of human goodness and virtue to attain it. Nor, in a sense, does it depend upon the extent of human response in order to receive it. Anatolios makes the comment that "our response to God's grace both is and is not our own." "It is not our own insofar as even this response derives from God's grace and is "received." On the other hand, it is our own precisely because we do actually receive it. Because the gifts of God have become our own through having received them from God, so it is possible for us to give them back through our response. If they had not become ours through his grace, any restorative response would not be possible. "He gives us his grace and requires it back of us; we receive it and offer it back to God."<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> FL 3.3.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Anatolios, *op. cit.* p. 242.

## CHAPTER VI

### RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE BODY AND THE SOUL

#### VI. 1. General Introduction

In examining the centrality of the resurrection within the theological and doxological development of Athanasius' soteriology, any such investigation would be considerably bereft without any reference to the understanding and place of the soul within the compass of Athanasian thought. To this end we shall proceed to observe the way in which Athanasius sought to understand the nature of the human soul in relation to the resurrection of the body within the eschatological economy of man's salvation. At this point, however, we must be careful to make a clear distinction in terms of the way Athanasius understood the concept of the human soul in relation to the human body; and the particular perception which he gives to the human soul in relation to Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Word and Son of God. In the action and giving of the Word made flesh we have what Georges Florovsky describes as "the ultimate joy of the Christian faith. In this is the fulness of Revelation." Furthermore, "The same incarnate Lord is both perfect God and perfect man. The full significance or ultimate purpose of human existence is recalled and realised in and through the Incarnation. He came down from Heaven to redeem the earth, to unite man with God for ever."<sup>1</sup> "The Son of God became the Son of Man," as Irenaeus affirmed, "that man also might become the son of God."<sup>2</sup> Through the Incarnation,

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<sup>1</sup> G. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption, Vol. III, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont, Massachusetts, 1976. p. 95.*

<sup>2</sup> Ad haer. III.10.2. cf *Athanasius, De Incar.* 54. (αὐτός γάρ ἐνανθρώπησεν ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν).

the original fulness of human nature was restored and re-established in communion with God. More so, the Incarnation should be seen as “the new Revelation” whereby human nature was “not merely anointed with a superabundant over-flowing of Grace, but was assumed into an intimate and hypostatical unity with the Divinity itself.”<sup>3</sup>

In that lifting up of human nature into an everlasting communion with the Divine life and through the coming down of the divine nature into the heart of man, the Early Fathers recognised the soteriological nature of salvation in terms of the whole redeeming life and work of Christ. We may cite the language of Gregory of Nazianzus, “That is saved which is united with God.” (ὅ δὲ ἵνῳται τῷ Θεῷ τοῦτο καὶ σώζεται) <sup>4</sup> Athanasius also recognised the importance of this union of the soteriological and the ontological whereby the complete being of man is redeemed into a oneness with God through the atoning love of Christ. So much so that it called for a doxological response. “For the Lord died in those days, that we should no longer do the deeds of death. He gave His life, that we might preserve our own from the snares of the devil. And, what is most wonderful, the Word became flesh, that we should no longer live in the flesh, but in the spirit should worship God, who is Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> The notion of the death of Christ as a vicarious sacrifice is highlighted particularly in the *de Incarnatione*. The thinking in Athanasius’ mind was that only by the Incarnate Logos taking upon himself the physical nature of humanity, that is to say, a bodily form that was already subject to death and corruptibility – only then could the Logos in dying and rising, transform that human body in such a way that it would no longer be overcome by death, but brought into a state of incorruptibility.

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<sup>3</sup> Florovsky, op. cit. p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> Epist. 101, *ad Cledonium*, M.G. XXXVII, c. 118-181.

<sup>5</sup> FL 6. 1.

The Word is he who "took to himself a body which could die, in order that, since this participated in the Word who is above all, it might suffice for death on behalf of all, and because of the Word who was dwelling in it, it might remain incorruptible, and so corruption might cease from all men by the grace of the resurrection."<sup>6</sup> Again, "For by the sacrifice of His own body, He both put an end to the law which lay over us, and renewed for us the origin of life by giving hope of the resurrection. For since by men death had laid hold of men, so for this reason by the incarnation of God the word were effected the overthrow of death and the resurrection of life."<sup>7</sup>

With this soteriological background as guide to our subject-matter, we progress towards an examination of the way body and soul are treated in a general and wide-ranging sense, as well as in Athanasius' theology. In this, a not insignificant number of references to the relationship between the body and the soul feature within the Athanasian *opera*. More specifically, the marked relationship in terms of the resurrection is certainly not lost within the Festal Letters. Indeed, by reflecting upon these epistles with their theological and pastoral content, we would fully expect to find far more than a passing mention of the place of the soul and of the body *vis-à-vis* the resurrection. Time and again, Athanasius expresses to the Church the soteriological reality, based upon Christological foundations, that in and through the eternal Word made flesh, the salvation of the *whole* Man was accomplished finally and completely by means of the resurrection. In this eschatological fulfilment, the resurrection of Jesus Christ involved the resurrection not of the body only, but body as well as soul. There was no separation of the two, for body and soul together were subject to the life-giving reality of Christ's victory

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<sup>6</sup> *De Incar.* 9. 4-7.

<sup>7</sup> *De Incar.* 10. 34 – 39.

over death. But before examining this line of thought in the light of the Festal Letters, we shall continue with an examination of the nature of the soul and the question of immortality.

## VI. 2. The Immortality of the Soul

If we understand the soul as coming from God can we conclude on this basis alone that the soul is endowed with immortality? If, on the other hand, we assert that the soul belongs to the creaturely side of existence, we are in parallel agreement with the Arians when they accredited the aspect of creatureliness to Christ's nature and being. But in placing the soul on the earthly side of creation, does not that conceptualisation in essence tend to reflect the soul's origins purely within man's humanity? Arising from this, does such an understanding not deprive the soul of the prospect of immortality? Logically, therefore, would the soul not remain mortal and subject to the mortal effects of death through corruption and decay? What do we mean when we refer to immortality in relation to the human soul?

The topic of "The Immortality of the Soul",<sup>8</sup> was chosen by Etienne Gilson as the title of one of his Gifford Lectures.<sup>9</sup> Gilson made the incisive comment that, "On the whole, Christianity without an Immortality of the soul is not altogether inconceivable, - the proof is that it has been so conceived. What is, on the contrary, absolutely inconceivable, is Christianity without a Resurrection of Man."

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<sup>8</sup> Appeared initially as "The Resurrection of Life" in the *Bulletin of Harvard Divinity School*, XLIX, No. 8 (April, 1952), 5-26. Quoted by Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, Vol. III in the Collected Works of George Florovsky, Belmont, Mass. 1976.

<sup>9</sup> E. Gilson, *L'Esprit de la Philosophie Médiévale* (2nd Ed., Paris, 1944), p. 179

The definition of Gilson's term "Man", we would suggest, refers to "Man" within the related context of the two elements of body and soul, the physical and the spiritual, both of which have been at the heart of man's search for an understanding of life and death. If we believe that Man is indeed made up of body *and* soul, what happens to the human form after death? Does the death of the body result in the corresponding death of the soul? Does death lead to a lasting separation of body from soul? Does resurrection suggest the raising from the dead of the body only? If that is the case, what happens to the soul? Indeed what happens to the risen body? Was the body subject to total decay (a state which Athanasius described as corruption) while the soul, if we accept the assumption of its immortality, returned to God? And if so, how is Man able to perceive the validity of bodily resurrection?

Referring to the development of the Christian Doctrine of Man, Georges Florovsky reminds us that many of the Apologists of the second century (without, however, naming any) appear "to have emphatically denied the (natural) immortality of the soul."<sup>10</sup> - a view not restricted to a few writers only, but one that was "the common teaching of the age."<sup>11</sup> Even in a later age, as Florovsky points out, we come across Bishop Anders Nygren, for example, applauding the second century upholders of such a doctrine.<sup>12</sup> The true evangelical spirit, according to Nygren, should be centred on the "Resurrection of the *body*" rather than on the "Immortality of the *soul*." Florovsky<sup>13</sup> reminds us that the Christian doctrine of Man was

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<sup>10</sup> G. Florovsky, *supra*. p. 213.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>12</sup> A. Nygren, "Den kristna kärlekstanken genom tiderna." Agape and Eros: The History of the Christian Idea of Love (London, 1938), II. I, pp. 64 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Florovsky's reference to work of Henry Dodwell. (G. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, p.214)



concerned “not with a natural ‘Immortality,’ but rather with the soul’s *supernatural* Communion with God, “Who only hath immortality.” (I. Tim. 6:16). In other words it is to God alone, in accordance with his Nature as being immortal, that the attribute of immortality can be ascribed.

The actual nature of the soul, therefore, comes under scrutiny. Like the Arian disputations regarding the nature and being of the Logos, the nature of the soul became subject to successive argumentation. Was the soul creaturely in nature or did it belong to the divine side of salvation? The story of Justin’s conversion<sup>14</sup> is an interesting one for it provides some pertinent background to the subject. In his search for truth, Justin went firstly to the philosophy of the Platonists and found it intriguing. “The perception of incorporeal things quite overwhelmed me,” Justin wrote, “and the Platonic theory of ideas added wings to my mind.”<sup>15</sup> After the Greek philosophers, Justin met a Christian teacher. Among other topics, discussion began to centre upon the nature of the soul. The soul should not be described as immortal, the Christian teacher argued, “For, if it were, we would certainly have to call it unbegotten also.” But, the argument went, God alone is “unbegotten” and immortal and divine in nature. The soul is not life by itself, but only “partakes” of life, for God alone is life, so that the soul is able to partake of life from God. “For the power to live is not an attribute of the soul, as it is of God.” The aligning of the soul with the possibility of immortality would suggest to the philosophy of Hellenism a link with uncreated being. God gives life to souls, “as he pleases.” All created things “have the nature of decay, and are such as may be blotted out and cease to exist.” Creatures as

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<sup>14</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho*

<sup>15</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho*, 5 and 6.

such are "corruptible."<sup>16</sup> "To the Greek mind," as A.E. Taylor has indicated, "athanasia or aphtharsia regularly signified much the same things as 'divinity' and included the conception of ingenerability as well as of indestructibility."<sup>17</sup> In other words, to acknowledge that the soul was immortal would be the same for Greek philosophy as claiming that the soul was somehow uncreated, that is, eternal and divine. The Greek mind recognised that everything that had a beginning must therefore have been created at some point in time. Therefore, it must also have an end when its created existence reached completion. Conversely, the concept of the soul possessing immortality would suggest that it also possessed eternity and thereby an eternal pre-existence, since eternity is not subject to temporal limitations, as at the beginning of time or at the end. Only that which had no beginning could be subject to eternity.

The argument, which Justin pursued, was polemical in that it disputed the Greek mind and stressed that human existence was contingent upon God. In this assertion, Justin also sought to underline the relationship between the being of man, in terms of life and death, and the place of man within God's Creation. The challenge, as he saw it, lay in the absolute need for the problem of human immortality to be seen in the light of the doctrine of Creation. "Immortality" is not an attribute of the soul, but something that ultimately depends upon man's creaturely dependence upon and relationship with God, His Creator.

In addition to Justin, we find a similar approach in a number of other Church Fathers as they sought to argue for the creaturely and divinely contingent nature of the soul. Theophilus of Antioch spoke of the "neutral" character of man in that "By

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The man and his work*, p. 176.

nature," Man is neither "immortal" nor "mortal." Rather is he "capable of both." "For if God had made him immortal from the beginning, He would have made him God." Furthermore, if at the beginning of his existence Man had chosen to engage in things immortal, that is to say, remain obedient to God's commandments, instead of being disobedient to the divine will, then Man would have received immortality and have become God - what Theophilus refers to as "an adoptive God."<sup>18</sup> Tatian expressed this delicate theological balance in a similar manner. "The soul," he wrote, "is not in itself immortal, O Greeks, but mortal. Yet it is possible for it not to die."<sup>19</sup> Irenaeus, in his struggle against Gnosticism, also emphasised the creaturely nature of the soul. The soul does not come from "another world," exempt from corruption; it belongs precisely to this created world. At the same time, Irenaeus proposed that for the soul to remain in existence, it had to be "unbegotten", for otherwise it would have to die with the body. Nevertheless, he continues, souls "endure as long as God wills them to endure."<sup>20</sup> It is worth remarking on the way in which Irenaeus makes use of almost identical language to that of Justin. For example, the soul is not life by itself; it partakes of life, by the grant of God. God alone is Life and the only Giver of Life.<sup>21</sup> With Clement of Alexandria, too, notwithstanding the influence of his Platonism, we note how he referred to the soul as being not immortal <sup>22</sup> "by nature." We shall come shortly to an examination of Athanasius' particular understanding in the light of his soteriological acceptance that salvation of the whole man came about as the necessary outcome of resurrection on the part of the Logos.

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<sup>18</sup> Theophilus, *Ad Autolycum* II, 24 and 27.

<sup>19</sup> Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, *Ad haer.* II, 34.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Clement, *Adumbrationes in I Petri* I:9.

In contrast to the philosophy of the Platonists, the Christian mind was unable to accept totally the Greek argument concerning the immortality of the soul. While Christian and Greek thinking accepted the premise equating immortality with what is divine and relating the divine with what must be immortal, Greek thought defined what was divine in terms of the rational or what was timelessly and necessarily true. Since the soul was regarded as the rational aspect of man, it concluded that immortality or divine incorruptibility belonged to the human soul. Christian teaching, however, argued that the soul could not possess immortality for the human soul is creaturely in nature and not divine. Furthermore, in describing the soul as rational, this form of rationality must be of a creaturely origin and therefore wholly different from the eternal uncreated rationality of God. In addition, the soul was neither independent nor autonomous in nature. The soul was creaturely in nature having its being from God and therefore contingent upon God and owing its very existence to Him, as Creator of all things visible and invisible. Therefore, God's grace and free will could describe the soul as immortal in respect of its inherent nature, but it is only when we examine the nature of the human soul in the light of the doctrine of creation out of nothing that the notion of the soul's creaturely nature is seen. Nevertheless, we must also add that the concept of immortality in the nature of the soul must also be seen in the light of the incarnation. If we regard the incarnation as the personal embodiment in human form of God's eternal Logos where Logos is understood as divine rationality, we can see just how such a unique proposition destroyed the Greek concept that the divine Logos is immanently embodied in the universe as its necessary rational order. This, of course, led to a radical cosmological disjunction between the uncreated rationality of God and the created rationality of the world. However, while the doctrine of the incarnation, along with the doctrine of creation

out of nothing, on the one hand led indeed to a profound separation between divine and creaturely realities and between uncreated and created rationality, on the other hand, it brought together the sensible and the intelligible, the material and the rational within created realities. So that instead of the soul and the body being understood as separate and opposed to one another, they were now perceived as complementing one another in such a way that in a description of James Denney, man was now understood as "the body of his soul and the soul of his body."<sup>23</sup>

From the Christian point of view, therefore, does this suggest that the question of the immortality of the soul must be answered purely and simply from an acceptance of the soul's inherent creaturely nature? Or should our understanding of the soul be founded upon the manner of its nature and being in relation to Man and to Creation in which both are subject to God's creative power and will and contingent upon Him as Creator? To ascribe immortality to the soul, we would affirm, is to reflect the creative gift of divine grace which stems not from the contingent nature of the soul in man's weak humanity, but from the very nature of God's own recreative Being and Will. Within the soteriological context, this means that if we endorse the Christian point of view that the soul together with the body is essentially mortal, this is not to say that the soul is subject to death. For while the creaturely nature of the soul leaves it completely dependent upon God for its existence and creative being, the soul, like the body, is also contingent upon the saving power of God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ His incarnate Word or Logos. For God alone has immortality and saves both body and soul from corruption.

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<sup>23</sup> James Denney, Drew Lecture, 1910. Cf. T.F. Torrance, *Immortality and Light*, *Religious Studies*, 17, pp.147 – 161.

### VI. 3. The Human Soul in the Understanding of Athanasius

Before proceeding to the Festal Letters for an understanding of Athanasius' perception of the soul in relation to the saving significance of resurrection, it would help to complement the overall discussion by including reference to the way Athanasius treats the subject elsewhere. We return to the *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione*, for it is here, particularly in the first part of this combined early *opus*, that Athanasius found it necessary to defend belief in the actuality of the soul in face of powerful Hellenistic denials. In this theological defence Athanasius went to the heart of the matter by underlining the role mind and soul play in man's search for divine knowledge. The road to knowledge and understanding of God is made epistemologically possible through both the soul and the mind in man. Athanasius poses the question: "If any one were to ask what this road might be, I mean that it is each one's soul and the mind within it."<sup>24</sup>

Curiously, Athanasius does not attempt to explicate the relationship between the soul and the mind at this point, except to emphasise the resultant deterioration when the soul becomes affected through the attractions and pleasures of the body to which man has been drawn and which threaten both body and soul with corruption.<sup>25</sup> Borrowing the language of Plato, Athanasius states that it is the mind, rather than the soul which has been given intellectual powers, more especially in divine matters: the mind or νοῦς enjoys the contemplation of God.<sup>26</sup> The road to understanding God is "each one's soul and the mind within it. Only through this can God be seen and

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<sup>24</sup> *C. Gentes* 30. 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 4. 1. ff.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 30. 19.

apprehended.”<sup>27</sup> Athanasius has already remarked that in depriving their minds of “intelligible reality”, men have turned their thoughts to selfish desires and “preferred their own good to the contemplation of the divine.” In Thomson’s translation, the mind is the “reasoning faculty” of the soul.<sup>28</sup>

Within such an epistemic relationship, Athanasius believed, the soul did indeed possess immortality. To believe otherwise meant not only ascribing the attribute of mortality to the soul, but, in so doing, led to a denial of godly truth. Thus to believe in the immortality of the soul led to a logical extension of belief in the soul’s relationship with God. “That the soul is immortal must also be included in the church’s teaching for the complete refutation of idolatry.”<sup>29</sup> For man to engage in godless belief is surely to deny that man possesses an immortal soul, since immortality can come only of God. But Athanasius perceives that not only immortality is an attribute of the human soul: the soul rejoices in the God-given power of rationality. In *C. Gentes* 32, Athanasius confirms that man has been given “a rational soul”<sup>30</sup> and that “nothing other than a rational soul governs the body.”<sup>31</sup> But this rationality has gone astray for, in acting in a godless manner, man is behaving also in an irrational way contrary to the rationality with which God has endowed him. The opposing aspects of rationality and irrationality in man provide an interesting parallel with two other equally important opposing aspects, namely, reality and unreality, representing, respectively, what is good and what is bad. “Now reality is the good, unreality what is evil.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, what Athanasius is

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27 Ibid.

28 Thomson, *C. Gentes*, 4. Note 1.

29 *C. Gentes*. 33.1.

30 Ibid. 32. 30.

31 Ibid. 32. 23.

32 *C. Gentes* 4. 18.

claiming is that when the mind influences the body (and the soul) by steering them towards whatever is evil and sinful, they are being directed towards the unreality of evil which, of course, is contrary to God and from which God has redeemed man. On the other hand whenever the mind directs the body (and the soul) towards that which is good and acceptable to God, it is to the reality of what is good and virtuous that they are directed. The soul, therefore, has been bestowed with rationality, since rationality is synonymous with goodness and truth. And rationality enables the soul to be restored, along with the body, which it influences, through the resurrection of the Incarnate Word.

The nature of the soul, in respect of immortality, can be understood through the appropriate epistemological tools. We know something about the soul's immortality when we see the soul in relation to the body and "the difference between the latter and the soul."<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note how the argument Athanasius assumes, stems, at this point, from Platonic sources. The soul is that which moves and directs the body, but since "the body is by nature mortal, it follows that the soul is immortal, because it is not like the body."<sup>34</sup> The conclusion Athanasius arrives at is that if the soul is, in fact, different from the body (being mortal), then, logically, the soul must be immortal, for in being different from the body it cannot therefore be the same as the body in respect of its nature.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless the soul is not external to the body, but exercises a central role internal to the body. This is especially important in relation to death. In the actuality of bodily death, does death also affect the soul? If so, is the soul itself subject to decay and corruption in the same way as the body? Athanasius would argue that when the body dies and is buried, the soul

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 33. 4-5.

<sup>34</sup> *C. Gentes*, Ibid.



retains its “self-moving” capacity and “that after the burial of the body in the ground it still moves itself.” “For,” he continues, “it is not the soul which dies, but the body dies because of the soul’s departure from it.”<sup>36</sup>

Athanasius’ indication that it is the soul which directs and influences the body, particularly with regard to knowledge and recognition, is an interesting one, for, as he puts it, “What is to be seen or heard, and what one must touch or taste or smell, is no longer for the senses but for the soul and its intellect to determine.”<sup>37</sup> The basis of this argument seems to be that man has the ability to determine the external workings of his body in respect of sight, hearing, tasting, smelling, but it is for the soul “and its intellect”<sup>38</sup> to understand and interpret what the senses themselves actually disclose. The concept of the soul possessing intellect that decides and determines what comes from the senses appears to defy the traditional understanding that links intellect with the mind, rather than the soul. While the soul is seen as relating to the deeper, spiritual aspects of life, the mind has usually been seen in a more epistemological light in relation to reason, knowledge and understanding. As we have observed, however, with Athanasius, the rationality of the soul provides an epistemic foundation upon which reason and knowledge operate towards an understanding of what is right and true in relation to God. It is, after all, the purity of the soul<sup>39</sup> that ensures divine knowledge and spiritual illumination. Thomson makes the well-supported remark that the Alexandrian interpretation of man made in the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 33.9ff.

<sup>36</sup> *C. Gentes* 33.11 ff. In referring to the phrase (the soul’s) “departure”, Thomson points out that the term ἀναχώρησις “is not used elsewhere by Athanasius.” By contrast, ἀποχώρησις occurs frequently in the pseudo-Athanasian *contra Apollinarius* I and II. But the idea (derived from Plato) is Athanasian.” (Thomson, p. 91, Note 2.)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 31.20f.

<sup>38</sup> *C. Gentes*, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 2. 17 & 33.

image of God refers to the rationality of man.<sup>40</sup> Deprived of the divine gift of rationality man would not have been endowed with intellect or intelligibility, nor, in the words of Athanasius, would they be “capable of knowledge by definition.”<sup>41</sup> Rationality, however, in its Modern English usage is connected with reason and argumentation. It reflects the theory that reason is the foundation of certainty in knowledge. For Athanasius, however, (as with many of the Greek Fathers), to possess rationality was to be λογικοί, that is to say, possessing the capacity of participating in the Λόγος.

The way in which Athanasius perceived the relationship between the soul and the body was founded in the Hebraeo-Christian understanding of creation and the place within the world of man in relationship to God. God had fashioned the human race and had endowed man with rationality and intelligibility. But man rejected the higher aspects of his God-given life. “They turned their minds away from intelligible reality and began to consider themselves.”<sup>42</sup> So man turned to the pleasures of the body and the physical senses. So “they imprisoned in the pleasures of the body their souls which had become disordered and defiled by all kinds of desires.”<sup>43</sup> From this account it is clear that the soul of man suffered as a result of his bodily desires. But so long as man fixed his mind on God, he was strengthened in avoiding contemplation of the body. Body as well as soul, it appears, was sacrificed in favour of man’s godless desires and physical attractions. As a result, the soul itself began to experience the fear of mortality: it came “to fear death and separation from the body.” This Platonic teaching which Athanasius uses speaks of death as “the

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<sup>40</sup> Thomson, p. 7, Note 3. cf. also *De Incar.* 12. 1.

<sup>41</sup> *C. Gentes* 18. 19.

<sup>42</sup> *C. Gentes* 3. 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

separation of the body and its soul.”<sup>44</sup>

In the Introduction to his translation of *C. Gentes-De Incarnatione*, Thomson comments on the over-emphasis given in the Short Recension to the role of the soul as life. “There is little doubt,” Thomson states, “that Athanasius conceived of death as the separation (χωρισμός or ἀναχώρησις) of soul from body.”<sup>45</sup> However, the expression “separated” (διαλύσει) he uses only once in the Short Recension. Generally, when referring to the death of Christ, Athanasius uses the phrase “put off”, as in the Logos “put off” (ἀπέθετο τὸ σῶμα) the body in death, later raising it up again an incorruptible body (ἄφθαρτον τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σῶμα).<sup>46</sup> Athanasius’ understanding of the nature of the soul, we would reiterate, emphasised its immortality, even when we accept the relationship it held with the body which itself was mortal.

Reference has already been made to the self-motivating nature of the soul<sup>47</sup> whereby after the body dies on account of its mortality, the soul retains its “self-moving” feature. As Athanasius put it, “For it is not the soul which dies, but the body dies because of the soul’s departure from it.”<sup>48</sup> The soul is seen, therefore, as the activating force for the body. Without the soul’s life-giving power, the body is deprived of its inner life force. So, Athanasius’ argument concludes, “if it (the soul) moves itself, then it must necessarily live on after the death of the body. For the movement of the soul is nothing other than its life.”<sup>49</sup> The concept of the immortality of the soul, therefore, is extremely important in the mind of Athanasius. The soul

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. also Clement, *Stromateis* vii. 12. Thomson, p. 11, Note 3.1.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *C. Gentes* 3.30; 33.11; *De Incar.* 21. 17; 28. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Thomson, Intro. p. xxvii-xxviii. *De Incar.* 22.7; 22.21.

<sup>47</sup> *C. Gentes* 33.5.

<sup>48</sup> cf. Note 36 supra. (Thomson, p. 91, Note 2).

<sup>49</sup> *C. Gentes*, 33. 17ff.

“contemplates things superterrestrial, often meeting saints and angels no longer in their earthly bodies; and it converses with them, confident in the purity of its mind.”<sup>50</sup>

This reference to the purity of the soul takes us back to an earlier observation that the purity of the soul makes possible the contemplation of divine things. It was, Athanasius says, through the creative power of His Word that God brought both the body and the soul to life, bound to the body, yet also external to the body. This being so, even after the death of the body, the soul will live on “and not cease from living by the grace of God who made it thus through his Word, our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>51</sup> The source of the soul’s immortality, like the resurrection of the body, lies in and through Jesus Christ the incarnate Word. Resurrection of the body and immortality of the soul should not be perceived as being mutually exclusive.

#### **VI. 4. The Human Soul and the Humanity of Jesus Christ**

From an understanding of the human soul in its relationship to the human body and the application of immortality to both, we shall now pursue the question of the human soul with regard to the human being and nature of Christ. The doctrine of the Son which Athanasius postulated was set over against the established Greek dualism which emphasised a division between the invisible world of heavenly realities (κόσμος νοητός) and the visible world of created existence (κόσμος αἰσθητός). This ontological separation brought about a logical division in terms of created being and laid the groundwork for the Arian understanding in relation to the Creator and creation. It was this cosmological form of dualistic understanding which

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<sup>50</sup> C. Gentes, 33. 26.

<sup>51</sup> C. Gentes, 33. 32-33.

Athanasius recognised lay at the very centre of Arian theology and which, if not challenged, was intent on dividing and distorting the fundamental incarnational truth which marked the faith and teaching of the Church. So much so that, emerging out of this ontological gulf between God and creation, Arian teaching emphasised that there must be an epistemological chasm between the eternal and unknowable being of God and the creaturely being of the Son or Logos. To Arius, the Logos, in assuming human form, could belong only to man's side of creation. This had profound significance for his doctrine of creation in which God was deemed to have created the Son or Logos as the pre-existent principle whereby he was able to bring the rest of creation into being. To the Arians, Christ became merely an intermediate cosmological being, a primary concept Athanasius fully rejected. If the Son or Logos was merely of cosmological importance within creation then the Son or Logos must belong to the creaturely side and not to the side of God the Creator. The Son or Logos of God cannot then stand in any direct ontological or epistemological relationship to God and therefore must remain beyond the eternal being of God. In marked contrast Athanasius insisted that far from being separated or divided from God, the Son or Logos was of God and belonged in being and essence to the divine side of the Arian gulf between Creator and creation. The Logos was internal to the being of God and was uncreated and unoriginated, as well as co-essential and co-eternal with God. As the one revelation of the Father, the Son could not be other than the Father: He was of one being with the Father. In affirming the Nicene formula of ὁμοούσιος τῷ Πατρὶ, Athanasius laid the foundation for the Church's credal affirmation that the Father and the Son are nothing less than consubstantial. As Athanasius remarked: "So also the Godhead of the Son is the Father's; whence also it is indivisible; and thus there is one God and none other but He. And so, since they

are one, and the Godhead itself is one, the same things are said of the Son, which are said of the Father, except His being said to be Father.”<sup>52</sup>

In coming into the midst of the world and by assuming human form as the Incarnate Word of the Father, the Son did not simply come *in man*: he came *as man*. This important point of understanding underpins the whole of Athanasian Christology, for whenever Athanasius spoke of the Word ‘becoming flesh’ it was indeed the flesh or physical body of man which the Son assumed; but it was more than mere outward physical form which the Son took. Through the incarnation, the Son, in assuming human form, took upon himself the *whole* human being of man, that is to say body, mind, spirit and soul. In his Letter to the Church at Antioch, Athanasius contends against an internal debate about “the fleshly Economy of the Saviour.” “For they confessed also that the Saviour had not a body without a soul, nor without sense or intelligence; for it was not possible, when the Lord had become man for us, that His body should be without intelligence.”<sup>53</sup>

At the heart of Athanasian soteriology lay his belief in the salvation of the whole man. For the reality of the incarnation to remain true, Athanasius found it necessary to affirm again and again that in and through his incarnate Logos, God sent his Son into the world to redeem from sin and death not simply a part of man, but every aspect of man, so as to save him wholly and entirely from corruption and decay. For this to happen, Jesus Christ had to become man in the completeness and fulness of his humanity. That means that Jesus had to become perfect (τελείος) man. There is no docetic perception involved here, however. The incarnation did not just appear to happen. As Athanasius wrote, “Now this did not come to pass putatively,

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<sup>52</sup> C. Arianos III. 4. also De Synodis 49.

<sup>53</sup> *Ad Antiochenos* 7.

as some have supposed: far be the thought: but the Saviour having in very truth become Man, the salvation of the whole man was brought about.”<sup>54</sup> Needless to say, any docetic understanding as to the nature of the incarnation presents profound implications for any Christological and soteriological understanding of resurrection. “For,” Athanasius continues, “if the Word were in the Body putatively, as they say, and by putative is meant imaginary, it follows that both the salvation and the resurrection of man is apparent only, as the most impious Manichaeus held. But truly our salvation is not merely apparent, nor does it extend to the body only, but the whole man, body and soul alike, has truly obtained salvation in the Word Himself.”<sup>55</sup> It follows, as Athanasius has reminded us, that Jesus must have possessed not only a human body, but also a human soul and a human spirit, (“the Body of the Lord was a true one; but it was this, because it was the same as our body....”)<sup>56</sup>. In every case Christ’s body and soul were not exempt from suffering, but subject just as we are - a fact which the Gospels clearly emphasise. Matthew clearly affirms that Christ came to give his soul a ransom for many.<sup>57</sup> John records that the soul of Jesus was troubled.<sup>58</sup> In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus’ soul was exceeding sorrowful.<sup>59</sup> In the same way the human spirit of Jesus experienced physical pain and affliction. He groaned (or was angry) in spirit.<sup>60</sup> He was troubled in spirit.<sup>61</sup> On the Cross Jesus commended his spirit to God and with these words he yielded up his spirit.<sup>62</sup> The physical nature of Christ’s humanity remained central to Athanasius’ thought as he

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<sup>54</sup> *Ad Epictetum* 7.

<sup>55</sup> *Ad Epictetum* 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Matt.* 20:28.

<sup>58</sup> *John* 12:27.

<sup>59</sup> *Matt.* 26:38.

<sup>60</sup> *John* 11:33.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 13:21.

<sup>62</sup> *Matt.* 27:50; *John* 19:30.

used scriptural evidence in support of his arguments. We may return to his Letter to Epictetus where there is considerable emphasis on the physical nature of Christ's suffering and of the physical evidence of that suffering after he had been raised from the dead, in order that it might not be thought that the Word Himself was changed into these things, but that he might be believed to have them after His resurrection as well as before his death."<sup>63</sup>

From the evidence of scripture it becomes clear that the Apollinarian teaching that Christ did not possess a human soul, but that the Divine Logos took its place, is quite unscriptural. As the Incarnate Word of God, Jesus appeared in human form, human body, human soul, human mind, human spirit. The body and soul, and the mind and spirit of Jesus were subject to human weakness and infirmity, and not least physical pain. That cannot be doubted, otherwise was the Cross simply an object of mythology? To adopt the view that Christ possessed a perfect soul, however, brings with it difficulties in definition. What is meant by a perfect soul? A perfect human soul is personal and cannot be part of another human being. It is unique. If Christ was perfect God and perfect man, it might follow, as Nestorius assumed, that He must have been two persons in respect of his humanity and in respect of his divinity, each person having a perfect soul. One solution was to perceive the human nature of the incarnate Christ to be impersonal. However, the human soul of Christ was prevented from doing so, on account of its hypostatic union with the Logos. The nature of the human hypostasis lay, not in itself, but in the Divine Logos with which it had become united.

The question of whether Athanasius could really accept the combined notion

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<sup>63</sup> *Ad Epictetum* 7. Cf Luke 24. 29 ff. et al.



of Word and soul is pertinent to our analysis. In a powerful denial that Athanasius accepted the possibility that the Word had been endowed with a soul, Andrew Louth makes the valid point that "Athanasius nowhere mentions a human soul in Christ explicitly and clearly."<sup>64</sup> This is not to understate the fact we have sought to elicit that Athanasius placed great store in affirming the centrality of the soul within the life of Man and its internal relationship to the body. Athanasius had much to say about the resurrection of the body, but to what extent did he apply the same amount of emphasis to the soul in relation to the resurrection of Jesus Christ? At the same time, nevertheless, for Athanasius not to associate the possibility of a soul in Christ would be tantamount to denying Christ's very humanity, since by Athanasius' own admission, the humanity of Man - and, therefore, the humanity of Christ - comprised both soul and body. At first glance, at any rate, the absence of any soul in Christ would at the very least tend to question the reality of his humanity. How could the truth be maintained, for example, in the fact that in obtaining the salvation of man, Christ took upon himself the whole man and not simple a part or parts of it. In this case the perceptive *dictum* of Gregory Nazianzus that "The unassumed is the unhealed" (τὸ γὰρ ἀπρόσληπτον, ἀθεράπευτον) <sup>65</sup> would have no validity whatsoever.

The first part of the argument which Andrew Louth puts forward draws attention to the manner in which Athanasius provides an exposition of the Incarnation and the emphasis which he clearly places upon the human nature of

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<sup>64</sup> A. Louth, "Athanasius' Understanding of the Humanity of Christ", *Studia Patristica*, Vol. XVI. Ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone. Papers presented to the Seventh International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 1975. (Akademie - Verlag- Berlin 1985).

<sup>65</sup> Greg. Naz., *Ep.* 101 *ad Cledon.* PG37, 181C-184A.

Christ. The suggestion is made that Athanasius' particular Christological perception seeks to steer clear of "some of the pitfalls of Origenism" - a fact which in itself "may throw some light on his unwillingness to say much about Christ's human soul."<sup>66</sup> Athanasius' understanding of the Incarnation, we would endorse, "relates to and grows out of his understanding of creation." For Athanasius, it was clearly important to recognise the actuality of the incarnation as the self-revelation of God within creation: that such an astounding act did take place; and that God Himself chose to assume human form in and through Jesus Christ the very Word made flesh, thus confirming in Andrew Louth's words, "Athanasius' undoubted insistence on the *reality* of the Incarnation."<sup>67</sup> What remained so profound in the heart and mind of Athanasius was indeed the reality that the Incarnate Word of God had entered the humanity of the world. That being the case, and while remaining in agreement with Athanasius on this central issue to belief, we might ask in what sense did he perceive of the Incarnate Word in his divinity entering the world and becoming one with the human form of man? Put another way, accepting the scriptural fact that Jesus Christ entered the world as the Word Incarnate what is meant by saying that he became man? Was Christ a man in bodily form only or did he possess a human soul? Arguments in support of both positions are provided by a number of scholars. Maurice Wiles, for example, would suggest that Athanasius was somewhat unsure of supporting the theory that a human soul existed in the person of Christ.<sup>68</sup> Wiles analyses the position adopted in the second century by Irenaeus and Tertullian in

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<sup>66</sup> Greg. Naz. *Ibid.* p. 309.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Wiles, "The Nature of the Early Debate about Christ's Human Soul", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 16 (1965), p. 140.

their understanding of the human soul in relation to the humanity of Christ.<sup>69</sup> Faced by the Gnostic challenge which denied the full humanity of Christ, both Irenaeus and Tertullian give strong support to the complete humanity of Christ in which both body and soul were integrally related. Their purpose in taking this stance was twofold: the first was Christological - to ensure a clear and acceptable understanding of Christ's person. The second was soteriological - to affirm unequivocally and Christocentrically the doctrine of salvation. As Irenaeus affirmed in opposition to the heresies, Christ "became what we are in order that he might bring us to be even what he is himself."<sup>70</sup>

The suggestion put forward by Maurice Wiles has a certain amount of attraction in bringing together both Arian and Athanasian points of view within an interesting mixture of what we might call polemical agreement. Wiles recognised the situation which he referred to as a "general unease with the notion that Christ had a human soul" whereby an area of common ground appeared to have been created where both sides were able to set forth their prevailing arguments. When Arius wished to show the creatureliness of the Logos, he did not have first to demolish the belief that Christ possessed a human soul, because the majority of his opponents, as well as his supporters, held no such belief. "For the same reason," Wiles suggests, "no surprise ought to be felt when it is shown that Athanasius did not make use of the concept of Christ's human soul as a way of countering the teaching of Arius. The approach of Athanasius needs to be understood in the light of the immediately preceding teaching of the late third century, not in the light of the subsequent

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69 Cf. Trevor Hart, "Irenaeus, Recapitulation and Physical Redemption", *Christ In Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World*, ed. T.A. Hart and D.P. Thimell (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1989), pp. 152-181.

70 *Adversus Haereses*, V. I. 1.

teaching of Apollinarius.”<sup>71</sup> In promoting the idea of a shared understanding that Christ did not possess a human soul, Wiles belongs to a school of thought whose origins can be traced to over a hundred years ago. In 1899, K. Hoss and A. Stulcken in support of F.C. Baur put forward the suggestion that in the Christology of Athanasius there is no prominent place for the human soul of Christ. In 1900 G. Voisin argued against this view, but in more recent times it has attracted increased support from M. Richard (1947), Johannes Quasten (1960),<sup>72</sup> Aloys Grillmeier (1965) and R.P.C. Hanson (1988). While Richard argued that Athanasius shared the Arian notion that Christ’s humanity was somehow other than ours, Grillmeier saw the possibility of an evolution in Athanasius’ thought by which he came to acknowledge a human soul in Christ but never found any theological function for it. The essential argument put forward by this school of thought, then, is that the human soul in Christ, for Athanasius, is either non-existent or of negligible significance. The opposing line of thought is represented by T.F. Torrance, who argues that it is of crucial significance for Athanasius, especially in relation to his development of the Irenaean (and even Origenist) understanding of salvation as the redemption of “the whole man.”<sup>73</sup>

In his argument, Wiles promotes the idea that Irenaeus and Tertullian placed emphasis upon the flesh, rather than the soul, for, although the soul was no less important than the body, the docetic teaching of Gnosticism placed greater stress upon the body. “The salvation of the soul I believe needs no discussion” (wrote

<sup>71</sup> *Adversus Haereses*, V. I, 1. Cited by Maurice Wiles, “The Nature of the Early Debate about Christ’s Human Soul”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 16 (1965), p. 145.

<sup>72</sup> Quasten, J., *Patrology*, Vol. III: The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicaea to the Council of Chalcedon (Antwerp: Spectrum Publishers: 1960), pp. 72-76.

<sup>73</sup> *Theology in Reconciliation*, p. 225.

Tertullian) “for almost all heretics, in whatever way they accept it, at least do not deny it.”<sup>74</sup>

The teachings of Origen appear to give support to the soteriological position of Tertullian. If the salvation of man was to be totally effective every aspect of man’s humanity must be involved, for “the whole man would not have been saved unless he had taken upon himself the whole man.”<sup>75</sup> Origen also held to the Platonic belief in the pre-existence of the human soul and, in this sense, was able to associate a pre-existent soul to Christ. Nevertheless he was able also to accept not only the existence of Christ’s soul, but its wholeness and complete perfection. As such Origen regarded Christ’s soul within a mediating capacity, providing a Christological link between the divine Logos and the life of man. It is important to realise that Origen sought to counter any thoughts of Hellenistic dualism and insisted that the soul of Christ acted in an important role through the incarnation by spanning the ontological chasm which hitherto stood between God and the world. Andrew Louth draws our attention to the approach of Aloys Grillmeier. Taking his cue from the *De Incarnatione*, Grillmeier notes that Athanasius makes use of the “analogy of Stoicism”<sup>76</sup> in this way he interprets the relationship of the Divine Word to the humanity in Christ. Thus, “the Logos is present in the Universe as the soul of a man is present in his body. So the Logos is the soul of the Universe, the Κόσμος is the σῶμα of the Logos.”<sup>77</sup> By ‘humanity’ Athanasius is referring to the body or flesh of man (σῶμα, σάρξ), in contradistinction to the wider usage of humankind. In this respect, Andrew Louth’s observation is worthy of note, that the term σῶμα, certainly

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<sup>74</sup> *De res. carn.*, ii, cf. Wiles op. cit. p. 141.

<sup>75</sup> *Dialogue with Heracleides*, cf. Wiles, op. cit., p. 141.

<sup>76</sup> Louth, *supra*. p. 309.

when used in the *De Incarnatione*, is "Athanasius' favourite word for the human nature of Christ."<sup>78</sup> Human nature as assumed by Christ is to be understood, then, as bodily form or the physical body with which God has creatively endowed Man. But the further question arises. If the creative purpose of God was to bring Man into existence as a human being, complete and whole in every respect, would Man have been bestowed with a body only (thus making him incomplete in the absence of the soul) or was Man created with both body and soul (thus ensuring his completeness in being and nature)? If the latter is the case we might have expected Athanasius to argue in favour of the soul being central to the being of Man. But does Athanasius put forward such an argument? It appears not. Hence, we believe, much of the criticism has arisen because of this apparent absence in Athanasius' understanding. And thereby Athanasius is accused of denying the existence of a human soul in Christ. Grillmeier himself contends that "It is probably undeniable that in his picture of Christ the soul of Christ retreats well into the background, even if it does not disappear completely."<sup>79</sup> For Grillmeier the question at stake was really bound up in the language of Hellenistic dualism and its insistence upon separating body from soul, Word from flesh. "Did Athanasius advocate a merely *verbal* Logos-sarx framework or a *real* one?"<sup>80</sup> Grillmeier offers a two-part answer to his question: "While the former framework would indeed ignore the soul of Christ it would tacitly assume its presence. The latter, on the other hand, would regard the soul as non-existent."<sup>81</sup> What Grillmeier apparently fails to take into account is the Athanasian

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, p. 194. London: Mowbray & Co., 1964.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* p. 194.

understanding of the total redemption of man in and through Jesus Christ. For Man in all his creaturely humanity to be fully healed, Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Word of God, through the chosen will and purposes of God entered this world and took upon himself the very humanity of man. As the Incarnate Word, had Jesus not assumed the whole of Man's humanity in every aspect, body and soul, mind and spirit, then Man could not be said to have been redeemed wholly and completely. Grillmeier makes use of the two philosophical concepts of Logos-sarx and Logos-anthropos, which enable him to distinguish the different Patristic Christological standpoints. The Logos-sarx concept is perhaps more important for our purpose since he links it to the teachings of Arius, as well as of Athanasius, Apollinaris and the Alexandrian School. It is upon this latter dualist notion that Grillmeier bases his assertion that Athanasius' understanding of the Logos was founded in the traditions of Alexandrian-Stoicism where the Logos was understood to be "the force from which all life and all movement comes. The world is created in the Logos; the Logos is its pattern, its support, its ordering and its life."<sup>82</sup> In pressing his argument further, Grillmeier accuses Athanasius of having "taken over the Stoic concept of the world as a body, as σῶμα, and has admitted the Logos.....as it were in place of the soul."<sup>83</sup> The human soul is a microcosmic form of the Logos. "It fulfils towards the body the function which the Logos has in the cosmos."<sup>84</sup> In Grillmeier's opinion, Athanasius replaced the concept of the human soul in Christ with the concept of the Logos and in so doing, "assigned to the human soul as such a substance of its own and maintained its immortality."<sup>85</sup> But does Athanasius really understand the nature of

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<sup>82</sup> Grillmeier op. cit. p. 197.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Grillmeier op. cit. p. 198.

the human soul in relation to Christ in the way Grillmeier interprets it? Were Athanasius to understand the human soul simply as a smaller reflection of the Logos, serious flaws would appear in the Athanasian Christology. For example, does this suggest that in the Incarnation, instead of the Word becoming incarnate, body and soul, the Logos overpowered the human soul in Christ and possibly even replaced it? In Grillmeier's view: Yes. This in turn leads Grillmeier to suggest that the human soul in Christ must be subordinated to the Logos. In fact, the human soul is reduced to such a degree that it virtually disappears from Athanasius' mind. In Grillmeier's words, Athanasius "so often speaks of the life-giving functions of the Logos towards the flesh that he completely forgets the human soul in Christ."<sup>86</sup> According to Grillmeier's analysis of Athanasian thought, it would appear that the divine Logos, rather than the human soul, acted as the "sole motivating principle" and as the true vitalising power within the life of Christ.

Reference has already been made to the human nature of Christ in relation to his physical pain and sufferings. We recall that if the incarnation was to be fully and completely accomplished in that the Word really did become man – "bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh" – then that "becoming man" had to include the physical pain of the body and of necessity was compelled to express the depth of sufferings which made Christ's humanity what it was. This was no docetic Christ who simply appeared to be the Word incarnate but lacked complete reality. This was the incarnate Lord who, being also divine in nature, assumed the whole nature of man's humanity, including the physicality of suffering. Contrast such a perception with the notion of Grillmeier in which the divine Logos has replaced the human soul within man. Does Grillmeier then assent to the conclusion that the divine Logos, with its

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<sup>86</sup> Grillmeier, *op. cit.* p. 199.



impassable and immutable nature, somehow was able to experience the same physical and mental sufferings as those which man has to endure? Man, we recall, consists of body as well as soul. Grillmeier's response points to what he regards as hesitancy on the part of Athanasius to condemn the Arians in their approach to Christ's human pain and suffering. Central to the Arian argument that Christ possessed only a human nature was the purely creaturely aspect, they saw it, of his person. The Arians searched the scriptures for evidence of Christ's creatureliness and human mortality, such as hunger, thirst, suffering and pain. These, they professed, reflected fully and clearly, that Christ belonged to the human as opposed to the divine side of creation. However, by placing such store upon these expressions of creaturely nature, the Arians became subject to a double accusation. For in their eagerness to prove that Christ was a creature only and, therefore, was subject to human weakness, they suddenly opened themselves to the charge that such evidence underlined the completeness of his human nature and, therefore, the Logos or Word, not being subject to human weakness, must belong to the divine side of creation – the very point which Athanasius supported. Grillmeier, nevertheless, finds fault with Athanasius in failing to make an issue of this Arian position. What Grillmeier does is to adopt a dualist perception in his analysis of Athanasius' reluctance to engage in the matter. He sees the Logos-sarx framework as a suitable epistemological vehicle for approaching Athanasius' understanding. This he applies to both the incarnation and the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. "The weaknesses and the heretical presuppositions of these Arian arguments are obvious," Grillmeier points out. "It was Athanasius' task to show that these 'human characteristics' of the Redeemer did not prejudice his transcendence and immutability. He therefore had to find the subject of all suffering in the manhood of Christ, so as to put as a protective shield before the

inviolable Godhead.”<sup>87</sup> Grillmeier admits that if Athanasius had bothered to attack the Arian argument, “a defence of the inviolability and immutability of the Logos could have followed naturally and without any particular difficulty.”<sup>88</sup> The resultant conclusion for Grillmeier is that Athanasius reveals “a general tendency to weaken the character of certain of Christ’s inner experiences which might be attributed to a human soul so as to dissociate the Logos from them from the start.....Not only does such a qualification relieve the pressure on the Logos itself, but it also raises the possibility of representing the human *sarx* of Christ as the subject of such affections as we should properly ascribe to the soul. As a result, we have Athanasius’ remarkable procedure of making the ‘flesh’ of Christ the physical subject of experiences which normally have their place in the soul.”<sup>89</sup>

But how far is Grillmeier’s interpretation correct regarding the apparent reluctance on the part of Athanasius to declaim the Arian emphasis upon the humanity of Christ? Did Athanasius consider, perhaps, that he would weaken his own position if he did so? Or did he consider that his defence of the divinity of Christ was in no way a counter-condemnation of Christ’s humanity? In support of Christ’s undivided nature, Athanasius could affirm the divinity and the humanity of the Son. “For this is His glory, this the miracle of His divinity, that he changed our sufferings for His happiness. For, being life, He died that he might make us alive, being the Word, he became flesh, that he might instruct the flesh in the Word, and being the fountain of life, he thirsted our thirst, that thereby he might urge us to the feast.”<sup>90</sup> It is this constant emphasis within the mind of Athanasius upon the hypostatic union in

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<sup>87</sup> Grillmeier, op. cit. p. 201-202.

<sup>88</sup> Grillmeier, op. cit. p. 202.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> FL 14.4.

Christ which stands out as doubly important for an understanding both of the incarnation of Christ the Logos or living Word and the redeeming work of the incarnate Word. The hypostatic union, in short, was the epistemological key by which man was able to know God. It stood also as the soteriological bridge by which God's saving power was made possible for the redemption of mankind.

The hypostatic union in Christ is also important in Athanasius' perception of the Logos. Grillmeier makes use of *Contra Gentes* 44 for his submission that the Athanasian understanding of the Logos stems out of the Stoic-Alexandrian tradition. Thus the Logos is (again in Grillmeier's words) "the force from which all life and movement comes" or the Logos "acts as life-giving principle towards the world" and is "the sole motivating principle in Christ."<sup>91</sup> It is clear that Grillmeier allows his approach to Athanasian soteriology to be clouded by dualistic concepts which result in a divided notion of the Logos of God from the world in which the incarnate Logos entered and an equally divided perception of the Logos-sarx philosophy. For Grillmeier the Logos remained a cosmological principle. For Athanasius the Logos was the incarnate Word of God. As the supreme revelation of God, the whole Person of Jesus Christ as that incarnate Word expressed a union of both divine and human natures hypostatically united in saving grace. In Jesus Christ there existed both physical body and rational soul, without which the complete humanity of Christ would have been impossible and the complete salvation of Man would have been denied.

The temptation to expound the teachings of Athanasius from a dualist and docetic point of view brings about profound consequences for an understanding of incarnation and redemption. For in the final analysis, in separating the two natures of

through a denial of the hypostatic union, the divine Logos is perceived as having no relationship with the life of man. Consequently, the Logos as Logos *per se* is regarded merely as some kind of impersonal form or principle unaffected by Christ's human suffering and passion. Whereas it is in the human form of the Logos *incarnate* that Christ has entered the world to assume every aspect of human suffering and to make man whole once again. To paraphrase the words of Alvyn Pettersen: for Athanasius, while the Logos as some kind of self-contained entity would not have experienced these things, the *Incarnate Logos* most certainly did.<sup>92</sup> The whole purpose of the incarnation and the atonement was that the Logos did not, in fact, simply become man in appearance only, but become fully and truly human and, in actuality, was made man for us men and for our salvation.

If, as seems to be the case, Grillmeier regards the thought and teaching of Athanasius as being grounded in the Alexandrian-Stoic tradition, he would also include Athanasius within the Clementine – Origenist pattern which itself had to contend with the divisive influences of Gnostic and Docetic philosophies. On the other hand, when we consider the evidence that the Christological thought of Athanasius was influenced not so much by Alexandrian tradition, but essentially through the incarnational theology of Irenaeus, then it is surely difficult to accept Grillmeier's suggestion that Athanasius' concept of the human nature of Christ's soul "stems from the 'Alexandrianism' of the *Logos-sarx* Christology",<sup>93</sup> In a comment in support of the theology of Irenaeus over against the philosophies of Hellenism, Trevor Hart comments aptly, that in "stark contrast to some of the apologetic theologies of the early Alexandrian tradition in which the adoption of dualistic

<sup>91</sup> Grillmeier.op. cit. p. 199.

<sup>92</sup> *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 39, pp. 327-340.

structures of thought made it difficult to do proper justice to the idea of an incarnation of the Son of God, Irenaeus insists upon maintaining the integrity of both the humanity and the deity of the Saviour in the history and person of Christ, for he realises that it is precisely the *becoming* of God within this history that saves mankind. God *becomes* a (- so it risks Nestorianism) man. This is what the Greek mind cannot tolerate, and what Irenaeus knows must be proclaimed, for it is in this *becoming* that the redemption is wrought.”<sup>94</sup>

In support of the rejection of dualistic ideas by Athanasius, T.F. Torrance affirms that “Athanasius’ consistent rejection of cosmological and epistemological dualism in his doctrine of Christ as well as in his doctrine of God enabled him to develop the Irenaean (and even Origenist) understanding of salvation as the redemption of the whole man, which rather makes irrelevant the distorting disjunction between a *Logos-sarx* and a *Logos-anthropos* approach which some scholars have employed as a framework for the interpretation of Patristic Christology.”<sup>95</sup> In promoting a holistic understanding to the soteriological implications of Athanasian thought, Torrance makes the charge that Grillmeier and other advocates of dualistic concepts, do a disservice to Athanasius’ Christology and often misinterpret his line of thinking. Torrance proposes a quite different line of approach where, rather than seeking to rationalise the external meaning of the text, the attempt should be made to search beneath the actual surface in order to get at the essential theological connections. Taking, for example, the term ‘flesh’, Torrance

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<sup>93</sup> Cf. *Tomus ad Antiochenos*.

<sup>94</sup> T.A. Hart, *Irenaeus, Recapitulation, and Physical Redemption*, op. cit. 178.

<sup>95</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), pp. 225-226.

understands Athanasius to mean both body and soul. But beneath the actual word lies the internal theological reference which points to the actual hypostatic union which lies in Christ and within which the saving acts of God in incarnation and atonement are being fulfilled. These deeper truths are what Grillmeier passes over as he centres his own perceptiveness upon the sole problem of the human soul in Christ. For Athanasius, we believe, the problem simply did not exist. As the Word incarnate, Christ possessed both body and soul and he assumed the form and person of man, body and soul. He was the one who was both fully God and fully man, the one who ministered the things of God to man and the things of man to God, the One Mediator with the Father.

Within this complex body-soul argumentation, Graham Redding<sup>96</sup> provides a reminder that it was in opposition to the Apollinarian contention that Christ did not possess a human soul that Athanasius sought to reaffirm the hypostatic union in Christ. In much the same way as Athanasius centred his incarnational-redemptive theology upon the Johannine prologue, so Apollinaris recognised the central import of its proclamation to the Christian Faith. Both accepted the statement that in the beginning was the Word and that the Word, in order to be incarnate, assumed human form and became "flesh." Here we come to the nub of the argument which differentiated Athanasius' position from that of Apollinaris. "By 'flesh'," Prestige reminds us, "the Bible repeatedly designates human nature in its fulness, and the Fathers followed the same usage. It occurred to none of them that their hearers could be brought to imagine thereby that Christ was lacking in a genuine human mind and

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<sup>96</sup> Graham Redding, *Praying in, through and with Christ: Prayer and the priesthood of Christ in the reformed tradition*. (1999 Doctoral Thesis).

soul.”<sup>97</sup> As far as Athanasius was concerned it was clear that the word ‘flesh’ was simply another way of referring to ‘man’. The Word “became man, and did not come into man.”<sup>98</sup> This fact is sufficiently unambiguous for Athanasius “to attribute to the “flesh” of Christ not only physical but mental activities.”<sup>99</sup> The overall acceptance that Christ as Word incarnate had assumed the complete nature and being of man found support with Marcellus, one of Athanasius’ contemporaries. Thus, “He became man without sin by assumption of the whole nature of man, that is, of rational and intelligent soul and of human flesh.”<sup>100</sup> Sometimes we come across an interchange of terms in Athanasius. For example in *De Incarnatione*, “the merciful and universal Saviour, the Word of God, took to himself a body and lived as man among men, and took the senses of all men.”<sup>101</sup> Again Athanasius emphasised that Christ’s body possessed both mind and soul and intelligence. In his Synodal Letter to the Church of Antioch, Athanasius argued against those who could not accept that the human nature of Christ included body and soul together. “For they confessed also that the Saviour had not a body without a soul, nor without sense or intelligence; for it was not possible, when the Lord had become man for us, that His body should be without intelligence: nor was the salvation effected in the Word Himself a salvation of body only, but of soul also.”<sup>102</sup> Clearly, the same meaning is applied to both body and flesh and in both is assumed the soteriological necessity of including body with mind and soul to ensure the complete redemption of man.

Apollinaris advanced the notion that the aspects of Christ’s divinity and

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97 G.L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics*, London: S.P.C.K., 1954. p. 105.

98 C. Arianos, III. 30.

99 Prestige, *supra*, pp. 105-106. C. Arianos, III. 34, 53.

100 Ap. Epiph. Haer. 72, 12, 2. Prestige, p. 106.

101 De Incar. 15.

102 Ad Antioch. 7.

humanity were to be understood in the light of the incarnation, not of the Word, as Athanasius would prefer, but of the Logos in which the human mind was substituted by a divine mind or soul which was itself peculiar to the nature of the Logos as Divine being.<sup>103</sup> The following extract, for example, occurs among a collection of fragmentary writings assembled by H. Lietzmann and regarded as composed by Apollinaris. "In place of the inward man within us there is a heavenly mind in Christ, for he used the outward form which enveloped him as an instrument, for it was not possible that he should become complete man. For where there is complete man, there is also sin, and two complete entities cannot become one. Otherwise there would be in Christ also the conflict of sin which is in us, and Christ would need the cleansing which we receive, if in becoming man Christ exhibited in himself that element which in us thinks and directs the flesh. On the contrary, they say, he took that which is without mind that he might himself be mind in it, and be altogether without a taste of sin both in respect of what was divine and in respect of what was mindless in the flesh. Flesh would not sin if the thinking element which directs the flesh did not conceive the act of sin beforehand, and then operating through the body bring that act of sin to its fulfilment. Hence Christ exhibited newness of flesh through assimilating it in likeness to himself, but each man exhibits in himself the newness of that mind through imitation and assimilation and absence of sin. And so Christ is conceived to be without sin."<sup>104</sup> The difficulty Apollinaris faced lay partly in the notion he propounded that Christ possessed only a creaturely body (as with Arian

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<sup>103</sup> Redding, op. cit.

<sup>104</sup> cf. H. Lietzmann, in *Apollinaris von Laodicea und seiner Schule, Texte und Untersuchungen*. Tübingen, 1904. Cf also T.F. Torrance, who points out that these fragments "are culled mostly from Gregory of Nyssa, *Antirrheticus*, and Pseudo-Athanasius, *De sancta Trinitate*. *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (London, 1975). p. 143 ff.



teaching) and an animal or non-rational soul which the Logos brought together into a unity with himself. Thus: "Christ, together with soul and body, has God for spirit, that is to say, mind."<sup>105</sup> But Apollinaris also ran into a further problem: the relationship between Christ and the saving of humanity from sin. He recognised that the mind was the governing force through which the body is controlled, since the body is unable to direct itself. But the human mind, by its very nature as human, is sinful and can be threatened by sinful notions. Therefore, for the salvation of man to take place, the human mind, being prone to sin, had to be replaced by a new kind of mind grafted into humanity and which could not be prone to change or to sinfulness. "The human mind," in the words of T. F. Torrance, "had to be set aside if only because there could not be two governing principles in Christ, a human mind and a divine mind."<sup>106</sup> In this theological bifurcation we notice once more something of the way contemporary Greek philosophy left its dualistic mark. Not only did Hellenistic thought reveal a deep disjunction between the divine and the creaturely worlds: it posited a similar *chorismos* between the body and the soul. The body belonged to the side of creaturely reality, while the soul had its being within the realm of divine existence.

Graham Redding maintains that "Arianism took this dualistic world-view for granted too. But whereas it served the dualism by denying the deity of Christ altogether, Apollinarianism projected the dualism into the being of Christ, denying his deity only in part by arguing that in him there was a fusion between the creaturely body and a divine Logos or mind. Christ was not fully human but only *like* a human being, insofar as he was not *homoousios* with humankind in the supreme governing

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<sup>105</sup> Lietzmann, *supra*, p. 210. Torrance, *supra*, p. 146.

<sup>106</sup> Torrance, *op. cit.*

principle of human existence.”<sup>107</sup> In this way Apollinaris was able to consent to the doctrine of the incarnation, “but only in part, and in a distorted form.”<sup>108</sup> Over against Apollinaris’ teaching, T.F. Torrance emphatically draws the conclusion that in speaking of the fullness of Christ’s humanity we speak also of the fact that his humanity did in fact include a human mind, “for otherwise the soteriological work of Christ ‘for our sakes’, ‘on our behalf’ and ‘in our place’ was meaningless.”<sup>109</sup> We reiterate that central to the theology of Athanasius’ lay his understanding of salvation in which both body and soul are redeemed by means of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that in and through Christ the Incarnate Word, the divine and the human are hypostatically united in such a way that the whole of man, body and mind, soul and spirit, is healed and restored. As Torrance has it, “whereas this led Apollinaris to put forward a notion of incarnation in which the human mind was not assumed, Athanasius found it all the more important to stress that it is in our very mind that we need to be redeemed, otherwise redemption would be empty of saving significance or relevance for us.”<sup>110</sup>

In his exposition devoted to *The Trinity*, Hilary emphasises on a number of occasions the essential unity of the soul with the body in Christ, for without that unity the whole man would not have been saved and redeemed. Our basis for referring to this “western” theologian is that Hilary had lived in the east and had become familiar with Nicene theology and not least that of Athanasius. Hilary, therefore, provides clear evidence in support of our hermeneutical approach to the “eastern” theology, which Athanasius thought through. Thus Hilary could ponder,

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<sup>107</sup> Redding, op. cit. p. 21.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Redding, op. cit. p. 22.

<sup>110</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), p. 165.

“For how was the Son of God born Son of Man, how did He receive the form of a servant, still remaining in the form of God, unless (God the Word being able of Himself to take flesh from the Virgin and to give that flesh a soul, for the redemption of our soul and body), the Man Christ Jesus was born perfect, and made in the form of a servant by the assumption of the body, which the Virgin conceived?”<sup>111</sup> Again, “Being, then, Man with this body, Jesus Christ is both the Son of God and Son of Man, Who emptied Himself of the form of God, and received the form of a servant. There is not one Son of Man and another Son of God; nor one in the form of God, and another born perfect man in the form of a servant: so that, as by the nature determined for us by God, the Author of our being, man is born with body and soul, so likewise Jesus Christ, by His own power, is God and Man with flesh and soul, possessing in Himself whole and perfect manhood, and whole and perfect Godhead.”<sup>112</sup> Hilary also points out that while Christ was indeed endowed with both body and soul, he makes the distinction that in receiving both through the Virgin Mary, the soul of Christ came from God. “As if in receiving so much from the Virgin, He received from her his soul also; whereas though flesh is always born of flesh, every soul is the direct work of God.”<sup>113</sup> “But as He by His own act assumed a body from the Virgin, so He assumed from Himself a soul; though even in ordinary human birth the soul is never derived from the parents. If, then, the Virgin received from God alone the flesh which she conceived, far more certain is it that the soul of that body can have come from God alone.”<sup>114</sup> In Hilary’s view, we must be careful to avoid the error made by those who argued that “as the body and soul of Adam

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<sup>111</sup> *De Trinitate*, X. 15.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* X. 19.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* X. 20.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* X. 22.

both sinned, so the Lord must have taken the soul and body of Adam from the Virgin, and that it was not the whole Man that she conceived from the Holy Ghost.”

<sup>115</sup> Hilary draws a comparison with Apollinaris who argued that if Christ were perfect God and perfect man, there would be two Christs, the Son of God by nature and the Son of God by adoption. Hence he taught that Christ was partly God and partly man; that He received from the Virgin His body and the lower, irrational soul, which is the condition of bodily life; while His rational Spirit was Divine. On this theory the ‘whole man,’ as Hilary says, was not born of the Virgin. Hilary denies this dualistic conclusion. The soul in every case, Christ’s included, is, he says, the immediate work of God.”<sup>116</sup>

#### **VI. 5. Resurrection and the Human Soul in the Festal Letters**

Before Athanasius begins to introduce his perception of the soul in the more particular eschatological sense, which he associated with the resurrection, his first reference to the soul is introduced in FL1, using the form of a doxological imperative. The soul, Athanasius insists, participates centrally within the worship of God and especially within the context of festal commemoration. His summons to the Church that it should observe the festal period “seasonably” is followed by a call to fulfil the practice of fasting. Supported by scriptural evidence, he quotes from the Book of Leviticus with regard to the holy nature of the feast and the response of the true worshipper. Fasting of the body should be accompanied by a humbling of the soul. “....there shall be a day of atonement; a convocation, and a holy day shall it be

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* X. 20.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* X. 20. Cf. Note 5.

to you; and ye shall humble your souls, and offer whole burnt-offerings unto the Lord.”<sup>117</sup>

We notice straightaway the importance in the Athanasian mind of the inward spiritual part which the soul plays in the worship and contemplation of divine things which seek after humility within the proper observance of liturgical practices. To engage in fasting is also an important aspect of spiritual preparation for the saving feast of Easter, but to fast in the fullest sense is to include not only the external physical observance, but, equally important, the inward spiritual element: fasting involves both body and soul. “It is required that not only with the body should we fast, but with the soul.”<sup>118</sup> Already we can observe the ontological emphasis, which Athanasius places, on both body and soul in direct relation to one another within the doxological context. Here it is noteworthy that Athanasius has not allowed his thinking to be influenced by dualist notions, which would insist on separating body from soul. As far as the practice of fasting is concerned, body and soul must be understood within a unity of doxological response. But in being related to the body, the danger lies in the soul becoming tainted by worldly influences and by “feeding” on unwelcome vices. The soul must undergo a process of humbling before God. We find that this act of humbling proves itself when the soul is not tempted to “follow wicked opinions, but feeds on becoming virtues.” Athanasius’ understanding of the soul immediately reveals a moralistic concern that the soul’s main attribute should reflect the pursuit of virtue. For what is proper to the inner spirit of man is reflected through the soul and its association with virtuous conduct. The soul is presented with a simple choice: either it bends towards the vices of the world or it is attracted

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<sup>117</sup> FL 1.4. cf. Leviticus 23:26.

<sup>118</sup> FL 1.5.

towards the virtues. The result of that choice appears obvious. Drawn towards virtue, the soul will be nourished by virtues and other Christ-like qualities - "by righteousness, by temperance, by meekness, by fortitude."<sup>119</sup> By contrast, if the soul disregards the life of virtue and, in Athanasius' expression, "it inclines downwards": "it is then nourished by nothing but sin."<sup>120</sup> Through the moral quality which Athanasius regarded as inherent within the soul, the soul itself is able to direct the mind, the will and the body of man in the choice of virtuous conduct or otherwise. The soul, through its own will, is bestowed with the gift of choice. As we discovered in the *C. Gentes*, Athanasius rightly regarded the soul as rational and, as such, was able to direct the body and mind of man not from an external position, but through internal influence to what was righteous in the sight of God. Nevertheless even though the soul was to be understood as the directing influence for good in the life of man, the soul was also subject to sin. As such the soul required a pardon. To observe the fast, Athanasius claims, will bring about "pardon for souls."<sup>121</sup>

As we have noted, the unity of body and soul, rather than their separation, remained theologically crucial within the thinking of Athanasius. Not only that, but within the festal context, the Church's doxological fullness underlined its endorsement of the unity of both body and soul. The sacramental food of bread and wine were seen as inward nourishment not only to the body but to the soul also. So Athanasius could extol, "We eat, as it were, the food of life, and constantly thirsting we delight our souls at all times, as from a fountain, in His precious blood."<sup>122</sup> Although nourishment of the body is not specifically referred to here, we may

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<sup>119</sup> FL1.5.

<sup>120</sup> FL1. 5.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> FL 5. 1.

carefully assume that Athanasius wishes us not to overlook it through his reference to the food of life. Athanasius, however, goes one step further. He agrees, as we have seen, that festal nourishment through bread and wine are necessary for body and soul in the understanding of the Christian when partaking of the holy sacrament. He then utilises the expression of festal unity in a clever contrasting refutation of Jewish and Gentile sacramental practices and their approach to the feast. We may analyse the direction of Athanasius' thinking. Neither Jew nor "heathen" fulfilled fully and completely the commemoration of the feast. The Jew continued to understand the nature of the "holy fasts" (as Athanasius refers to them) "erring" in relation to the type or shadow of the Old Testament Passover. While "the heathen" - loosely described as "heretics and schismatics" - appear to understand the nature of the sacrament purely in terms of external forms - "in the abundance of food."<sup>123</sup> By contrast, Athanasius calls the Church to "be superior to the heathen, in keeping the feast with sincerity of soul, and purity of body."<sup>124</sup> Again, Athanasius' emphatic requirement points to an insistence on unity of body and soul in which each displays the necessary Christ-like attributes within the festal observance. We come across another case in point where Athanasius underlines the contrast between the benefits bestowed as the reward for the saints who will receive "the joy which is in heaven" and the retribution of the wicked who will be "deprived of the blessedness arising from it." Athanasius insists that with the wicked the inner man undergoes death at the hands of sin and the godly nature of the soul becomes smothered by sinfulness." But it is the soul which they bury in sins and follies, drawing near to the dead, and

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<sup>123</sup> FL 5, 4.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

satisfying it with dead nourishment.”<sup>125</sup> Moreover, in respect of the nature of the feast, the Jews also had become “weak in perception, and had not exercised the senses of the soul in virtue, and did not comprehend this discourse about bread.....”<sup>126</sup>

Clearly, for Athanasius, the festal nourishment of bread and wine satisfied both body and soul. On the other hand, whenever the nature of the feast was abused, no proper nourishment was possible. “Now wicked men hunger for bread like this (i.e. heavenly bread), for effeminate souls will hunger; but the righteous alone, being prepared, shall be satisfied.”<sup>127</sup> The healthy soul, furthermore, reaps the benefits of “being nurtured in faith and knowledge, and the observance of divine precepts.”<sup>128</sup> Once more we note the analogy of sacramental food and inner nourishment. Perhaps it is simply coincidental that the final reference Athanasius makes in the Festal Letters to the soul occurs towards the end of FL 7 where the call is to “consider the whole course of our life as a feast” in which the soul receives festal nourishment in anticipation of that moment when “we shall partake with angels at that heavenly and spiritual table.”<sup>129</sup>

## VI. 6. The Rational Soul in the Economy of Man’s Salvation

In a discussion paper on Athanasius’ concept of the soul,<sup>130</sup> Andrew Louth sets out a comparative study of the problem with reference to the *Contra Gentes* – de

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*Ibid.*

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FL 5.4.

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FL 7. 6.

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FL 7. 8.

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FL 7. 10.

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“The Concept of the Soul in Athanasius’ *Contra Gentes* – *De Incarnatione*” in *Studia Patristica*, Vol. XIII, Ed. By Elizabeth A. Livingstone, Akademie – Verlag, Berlin, 1975.



*Incarnatione*. The question posed centres not simply on the actual conceptualisation of the soul in Athanasius' understanding, but the value and importance which is attributed to the soul within his entire theological approach. To illustrate this hypothesis, Andrew Louth pinpoints what he sees as a sharp contrast between the *Contra Gentes* and the *de Incarnatione*. On the one hand the *de Incarnatione* offers "a very pessimistic view of man." For, "even at its first creation human nature is weak and unstable,<sup>131</sup> needs divine pity, is subject not only to corruption but to total destruction, the "second death".<sup>132</sup> This catalogue of human disaster continues. "...man who was rational and who had been made in the image [of God] was being obliterated." (ὁ δὲ λογικὸς καὶ κατ' εἰκόνα γενόμενος ἄνθρωπος ἠφανίζετο). Even "the work created by God was perishing."<sup>133</sup> Because man has disobeyed God and fallen from grace it appears that the only possible result lies in death, destruction and final corruption. "For these reasons," Athanasius admits, "death held greater sway and corruption stood firm against men."<sup>134</sup> That is the picture of human decay, which is presented as a result of the Fall. Such a portrayal is certainly in the mind of Athanasius, for his wish is never to deny the fact of man's rejection of God and the consequences of that decision. But what we have here is not the whole picture. For in contrast to such a scene of decay and corruption in which man can never save himself, Athanasius proceeds to paint a further canvas – one of soteriological content – in which it is not the pessimistic state of man to which our attention is directed, but the optimistic, life-restoring grace of God which now takes centre stage. The Incarnation of the Word, for Athanasius, now takes precedence over his previous

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<sup>131</sup> *De Incar.* 3. 3-4. The translation is from Thomson's edition.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* 3.5.

<sup>133</sup> *De Incar.* 6.3f.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* 6. 1.

introductory concept of humankind. The act of God in incarnational love and saving power has become the focus of attention.

In turning to the *Contra Gentes*, a somewhat different picture is presented. Athanasius denotes the soul of man as being rational ("each man's soul and the mind within it"<sup>135</sup>) and through it "God can be seen and apprehended."<sup>136</sup> It is the rational soul which provides man with the ability to reason and think of what is above himself.<sup>137</sup> The soul, even that of fallen man, is subject to divine grace. The rational soul governs the body,<sup>138</sup> for this was its divinely created purpose. For Athanasius, the soul, like the body, has been created by God and, like the body is the recipient of God's saving power. The soul is therefore immortal and, with the body, receives and shares in the redemptive purposes of God.

Andrew Louth makes the comment that "redemption is, apparently, within the power of every man."<sup>139</sup> Does this suggest that the redemption of man is somehow possible through man's own power to redeem himself from death and destruction? Does man possess within his being something akin to the divine power, sufficiently capable of raising man from the power of death and resurrecting him to newness of life? Or do we interpret the statement that "redemption is, apparently, within the power of every man" in the soteriological sense whereby the possibility of redemption has been ontologically fulfilled not through any power in man, but through the power of God made incarnationally manifest in man. The soul is not external to the body, nor is the body alone subject to the grace of God, as Athanasius affirms. "For if it lived a life outside the body (συνδεθεῖσα σώματι τὴν ἔκτος τοῦ

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<sup>135</sup> *Contra Gentes*, 30. 23ff.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *C. Gentes*, 31. 45.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* 32. 30.

σώματος ζῶν ἔζη) even when bound to that body, all the more will it live on after the death of the body and not cease from living by the grace of God who made it thus through his Word, our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>140</sup>

In his comparative study, Andrew Louth reminds us that in the *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius turns our attention to the manner in which man contemplates God and his disobedience towards God by shifting his thoughts, not towards spiritual truths, but towards physical pleasures and bodily sensations. “So they turned their minds away from intelligible reality and began to consider themselves. And by considering themselves and cleaving to the body and the other senses, deceived as it were in their own interests, they fell into selfish desires and preferred their own good to the contemplation of the divine.”<sup>141</sup> In this way, we observe something of the dualistic nature in man’s understanding in which the heavenly world of intelligible realities is separated from the physical world of the senses. The contemplation of man becomes preferable to the contemplation of God, for man finds that he is able to contemplate what is visible and observable in himself, in contrast to what is invisible and beyond physical observation.

We find then that in the *Contra Gentes* Athanasius concentrates on the fallen condition of man and the inner transformation from the contemplation of spiritual realities to that of physical sense and pleasure. Within the *de Incarnatione* Athanasius presents an analysis of the fallen nature and being of man stated in its historical actuality, rather than described through any contemplative processes. We come face to face with the results of man’s disobedience through the reality of death and corruption. Corresponding to the sinfulness of man, the redemptive nature of

<sup>139</sup>

A. Louth, op. cit. p. 227.

<sup>140</sup>

*Contra Gentes*, 33. 30ff.

God is understood in a contrasting manner. We find that in the *Contra Gentes* for man to have his nature and inner contemplation restored depends upon purification. Whereas in the *De Incarnatione* the redemption of man is made possible through the coming of God's incarnate Word in assuming human form, body, soul and spirit. But how necessary was the coming of God's Word in order to effect the redemption of man? Could man have brought about his own salvation? Clearly not, for it was within the power of man as creature to activate the redemptive role of Creator. It was, however, within the power of God as Creator to enter his creation and in incarnate form, assume the nature of man's creaturely being. The substantive discussion which Athanasius gives in the seventh chapter of the *De Incarnatione* to the possibility of man's redemption through his own repentance provides a critical contrast in the way redemption is treated in both works. Could God simply have demanded repentance from man in order to effect redemption? No, replies Athanasius. Repentance would not have saved God's honour, nor would it have rescued man from the consequences of sin. "Repentance gives no exemption from the consequences of nature, but merely cessation from sins." In other words repentance would prove a temporary respite and sin would resume and man would not be restored from corruption. Who was needed to restore the image of God in man - Athanasius asks - except the Word of God? "For it was his task both to bring what was corruptible back again to incorruption, and to save what was above all fitting for the Father."<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> *C. Gentes*, 3. 5ff.

<sup>142</sup> *Contra Gentes*, 7.6ff.

## CONCLUSION

The central purpose behind the festivals of Lent and Easter reflected the desire of the Early Church to commemorate the soteriological purposes within the life of Jesus Christ from birth to resurrection. In so doing, the Church was able to conjoin her life and faith, doctrine and worship in response to God's mighty act of incarnational atonement through Christ's whole life of sacrifice fulfilled on the Cross and in resurrection power. Thus it was out of a profoundly Christological and theo-centric understanding in relation to the incarnate Word or Logos of God and through the actuality of the resurrection that the Church formulated the theological foundations for her faith and sought to express the doxological affirmations of her faith through worship. Thus Athanasius expressed the main purposes behind the Council of Nicaea, faced by the threat of ecclesiastical and doctrinal division: "For the former council was summoned because of the Arian heresy, and because of Easter, in that they of Syria, Cilicia and Mesopotamia differed from us, and kept the feast at the same season as the Jews. But thanks to the Lord, harmony has resulted not only as to the Faith, but also as to the Sacred Feast. And that was the reason of the synod at Nicaea."<sup>1</sup>

The central import of this thesis has been based upon an investigation of the *Festal Letters of St. Athanasius*, the Fourth Century Bishop of Alexandria. We have sought to examine both of the aspects referred to above and understand their inter-relationship through the theological and doxological understanding of resurrection. Particular attention bears upon the

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<sup>1</sup> *Ad Afros 2.*

significance that Athanasius placed upon the centrality of the Resurrection and the import of its incarnational and soteriological truths. We have drawn attention to the prime place of the *homoousion* in substantiating the relationship between the Father and the Son; to underlining the hypostatic union within the nature and being of the Son and to emphasising the importance of Christ's vicarious humanity within the divine economy of Man's salvation. In essence, Athanasius sought to substantiate and preserve the very form and content of Christian doctrine and belief that we encounter throughout most of his writings and which apply no less to the *Festal Letters*, namely, "the very tradition, teaching, and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers kept."<sup>2</sup>

We have discovered that the theological, scriptural and doxological content of the *Festal Letters* provide a firm base for plotting a course through the salient points relating to the Arian controversy as it affected the development of Christian thought and knowledge during the fourth century A.D. In this doctrinal area we have examined the epistemological approach which Athanasius adopted as he sought to re-establish the Church's understanding of the Divinity of the Son within the Unity of the Godhead; along with the nature and doxological expression of the Trinitarian Faith as the corner-stone of the Church's belief, worship and life. We have shown the extent to which theological truth is inter-related with doxological expression. In a pertinent reminder of T.F. Torrance, "True knowledge of God and worship go inseparably together. To know God in accordance with His nature

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<sup>2</sup>

Ad Serap. 1. 28.

as God, to know God truly, we must know him not only with the top of our minds but with the bottom of our hearts. In other words, if we are to be rightly related to God in our knowledge of Him, intellectual activity and worship have to go hand in hand, *Theologia* and *Theosebeia* belong inseparably together. We know God truly and rightly only if we know him in accordance with His divine nature, and that means in a godly way. Our minds need to partake of divine sanctification: sanctity and godliness need to pervade all our thinking and knowing and understanding. That is possible only in and through worship of God in the Spirit and growth in the inner sanctity of the mind, as we assimilate through the *koinonia* of the Spirit the mind of Christ. Indeed *theologia* in the full and proper sense, in which it is not divorced from *theosebeia*, means a knowing of God in the inner relations of His own Being, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and a participation through the Spirit in God Himself, in the nature of His Triune Being.”<sup>3</sup>

Athanasius demonstrated a profound and intimate knowledge of the Scriptures. For this Bishop of Alexandria and supporter of orthodoxy, such knowledge provided a firm basis for his own faith through times of personal trial, pain and persecution. The scriptures expressed in their totality the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of the Father; the Word made flesh, the Incarnate and eternal Logos. As such the scriptures provided the right and proper base upon which the Church should formulate her doctrine and express her worship. Was not the Church the Body of

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<sup>3</sup>

“The Contribution of the Greek Community in Alexandria to the Intelligent Understanding of the Christian Gospel, and its Communication in the World of Culture and Science”. A Paper given to the Greek Schools of Addis Ababa and reproduced in ABBA SLAMA (A Review of the Association of Ethio-Hellenic Studies Vol. V Athens, 1974.)]

Christ? And was she not called through the workings of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel of God's saving love for the world, not least in the face of hostility and faithless heresies?

For Athanasius, the supreme visible proof of the divine work of salvation was to be seen in Jesus Christ the Word made flesh – “the ultimate joy of the Christian faith”, as Georges Florovsky has expressed it<sup>4</sup>, “In this is the fulness of Revelation. The same Incarnate Lord is both perfect God and perfect man. The full significance and the ultimate purpose of human existence is revealed and realised in and through the Incarnation. He came down from Heaven to redeem the earth, to unite man with God for ever.”

For the faithful believers of this incarnational truth within the Church on earth, seeking to prepare themselves inwardly for the season of the Easter festival, there came the call to fasting and to feasting. Each in its own way, separately and collectively, expressed the festal practices whereby the Church recollected and shared in the extremes of the whole season - the sadness linked to Christ's death, as well as the gladness that effused from his resurrection. By commemorating both in Holy Sacrament, with worship founded upon apostolic tradition, the Church of the Fourth Century was led to recover that necessary richness in her theological doctrine and doxological patterns which the heresy of Arius threatened to destroy.

Once the Fathers of Orthodoxy, led by Athanasius, had proved victorious at Nicaea, the scene was set for the Church to redouble the call directed to all her scattered members towards a renewed and reaffirmed unity

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<sup>4</sup>

G. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, Volume III Collected Works (Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont, Mass. 1976). p. 95.



of faith, doctrine and worship. By tradition and by general consensus of the Council at Nicaea, the Church at Alexandria was confirmed in the task of reminding her various bishoprics of the specific importance regarding the centrality of Easter in relation to the divine economy of salvation for mankind. It was Athanasius, perhaps more than any other Bishop of Alexandria, who, through such a commission, set himself a double task:

- (1) of fulfilling the terms of the Nicene decree relating to the encyclical practice and the annual custom of calculating and announcing the date when the great Feast of the Resurrection would be celebrated.
- (2) of strengthening the classical beliefs of the Church through reminding his "beloved brethren"<sup>5</sup> of their scriptural and theological foundation in the face of unorthodox teachings.

The Introduction to this thesis referred to the 1947 encyclical of Pope Pius XII entitled *Mediator Dei*. Just as the Council of Nicaea was the first Great Ecumenical Assembly of the Church, so here we find a Twentieth Century ecumenical call for the Church to return to the commemorative sources of her faith and teaching - to "the significance of feast-days, and of the meaning of the texts and sacred ceremonies employed on their occasion."<sup>6</sup>

J.H. Newman expressed this desire within the Church for understanding the past in relation to the present and of regarding current doxological tendencies as being necessarily expressive of theological truths. For it is in all their Christological truth that they have come down to the Church through the Word of God within Scripture and, more pertinently, through the Self-Revelation of that Word in Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase is a favourite of Athanasius throughout the Festal Letters.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, Nov 20<sup>th</sup>, 1947. Vatican Library translation N.C.W.C. pamphlet), par. 62.

Vide. Josef A. Jungmann, S.J. *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great*: Translated by Francis A. Brunner, C.S.S.R.. *Liturgical Studies*: University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1977.

of the Father, as well as within the One eternal, indivisible Godhead of the Holy Trinity.

"...the history of the past," Newman proposed, "ends in the present; and the present is our scene of trial; and to behave ourselves towards its various phenomena duly and religiously, we must understand them; and to understand them, we must have recourse to those past events which led to them. Thus the present is a text and the past its interpretation."<sup>7</sup>

In much the same way as modern contemporary encyclical letters have as their content and purpose the necessity of recalling the faithful, of reminding those within the Church of her teaching, doctrine and tradition and of endeavouring to reaffirm the fundamentals of the faith into which the Church was brought into being, so the Early Church, particularly of the Fourth Century, was faced with the task of reaffirming her faith, as well as consolidating her apostolic teaching and biblical doctrine in the confrontation which arose through the influences of Arianism and other heresies.

The battle to re-establish the credal essentials of true faith went hand in hand with the readily observed need for a reformulation of the theological structure and doxological content that supported the truth and expression of that faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The epistemological and hermeneutical battle-line lay between those in the Church who were dedicated to the classical traditions of Orthodoxy and those who supported the heretical tendencies of Arius and which posed such a potential, if not actual, threat to the unity of the Church as a whole.

The ontological purpose of the Church is tied to its soteriological Nature as integrally related to the truth of the resurrection. Furthermore, as Athanasius endeavoured to underline in the *Festal Letters*, the resurrection was made possible only through the self-revelation of God in accordance with

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<sup>7</sup> "Reformation of the XIth Century," in *Essays Critical and Historical*, 10th Edition Vol.II (London,1890), p. 250.

his Fatherly nature, creative love and redemptive power. These He has revealed in and through His Incarnate Word of Truth and Life Jesus Christ His Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit who is the very Being of God.

Thus the Nature of the Holy Trinity expresses the fulness of God as he has come to us in Incarnate Love and through the Inhomination of His Son Jesus Christ, the eternal Word who is ever *homoousios* with the Father.

In their theological and doxological content, *The Festal Letters* of Saint Athanasius continue to remind the Church of her celebratory role in pointing to the Easter joy of resurrection in this life and in the life to come. There, in the Kingdom of the Father, the faithful will partake, with the saints of old, in that eternal Feast which shall have no end.

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#### A FESTAL HYMN OF INVOCATION

1.     So let us keep the festival  
        Where to the Lord invites us;  
        Christ is himself the joy of all,  
        The sun that warms and lights us;  
        By his grace he doth impart  
        Eternal sunshine to the heart  
        The night of sin is ended.
2.     Then let us feast this Easter day  
        On the true Bread of heaven.  
        The word of grace hath purged away  
        The old and wicked leaven;  
        Christ alone our soul will feed,  
        He is our meat and drink indeed,  
        Faith lives upon no other.

(Martin Luther, 1483-1546.)

Trans. Richard Massie, 1800-1887)

**Let us at all times worship the Father in Christ, through Whom to Him  
and with Him be glory for ever and ever. AMEN.**

*Festal Letter 7. 11.*

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### Μεγας Αθανασιος (Μερος Δ)

Τόμος Τριακοστός Τρίτος Βιβλιοθήκη Ἑλληνῶν Πατέρων Καί Ἐκκλησιαστικῶν Συγγραφῶν Ἑκδοσις Τῆς Ἀποστολικῆς Διακονίας Τῆς Ἐκκλησίας Τῆς Ἑλλάδος, 75 – 79.

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PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE FESTAL LETTERS OF  
ST. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA**

**WORD COUNT**

**WITH FOOTNOTES**

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>270</b>	<b>270</b>
<b>CHAPTER I</b>	<b>18,017</b>	<b>19,981</b>
<b>CHAPTER II</b>	<b>12,338</b>	<b>12,958</b>
<b>CHAPTER III</b>	<b>13,510</b>	<b>14,242</b>
<b>CHAPTER IV</b>	<b>12,284</b>	<b>12,944</b>
<b>CHAPTER V</b>	<b>21,207</b>	<b>22,724</b>
<b>CHAPTER VI</b>	<b>14,527</b>	<b>15,521</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>1,942</b>	<b>2,096</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>93,825</b>	<b>100,466</b>

**KENNETH D.F. WALKER**

**AUGUST 2000**

