Circular Letter

Athanasius of Alexandria (c. AD 296–373)

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To his fellow-ministers in every place, beloved lords, Athanasius sends health in the Lord.

§1. The Whole Church Affected by What Has Occurred.
Our sufferings have been dreadful beyond endurance, and it is impossible to describe them in suitable terms; but in order that the dreadful nature of the events which have taken place may be more readily apprehended, I have thought it good to remind you of a history out of the Scriptures. It happened that a certain Levite was injured in the person of his wife; and, when he considered the exceeding greatness of the pollution (for the woman was a Hebrew, and of the tribe of Judah), being astounded at the outrage which had been committed against him, he divided his wife's body, as the Holy Scripture relates in the Book of Judges, and sent a part of it to every tribe in Israel, in order that it might be understood that an injury like this pertained not to himself only, but extended to all alike; and that, if the people sympathised with him in his sufferings, they might avenge him; or if they neglected to do so, might bear the disgrace of being considered thenceforth as themselves guilty of the wrong. The messengers whom he sent related what had happened; and they that heard and saw it, declared that such things had never been done from the day that the children of Israel came up out of Egypt. So every tribe of Israel was moved, and all came together against the offenders, as though they had themselves been the sufferers;

and at last the perpetrators of this iniquity were destroyed in war, and became a curse in the mouths of all: for the assembled people considered not their kindred blood, but regarded only the crime they had committed. You know the history, brethren, and the particular account of the circumstances given in Scripture. I will not therefore describe them more in detail, since I write to persons acquainted with them, and as I am anxious to represent to your piety our present circumstances, which are even worse than those to which I have referred. For my object in reminding you of this history is this, that you may compare those ancient transactions with what has happened to us now, and perceiving how much these last exceed the other in cruelty, may be filled with greater indignation on account of them, than were the people of old against those offenders. For the treatment we have undergone surpasses the bitterness of any persecution; and the calamity of the Levite was but small, when compared with the enormities which have now been committed against the Church; or rather such deeds as these were never before heard of in the whole world, or the like

experienced by any one. For in that case it was but a single woman that was injured, and one Levite who suffered wrong; Now the whole Church is injured, the priesthood insulted, and worst of all, piety is persecuted by impiety.

On that occasion the tribes were astounded, each at the sight of part of the body of one woman; but now the members of the whole Church are seen divided from one another, and are sent abroad some to you, and some to others, bringing word of the insults and injustice which they have suffered. Be ye therefore also moved, I beseech you, considering that these wrongs are done unto you no less than unto us; and let every one lend his aid, as feeling that he is himself a sufferer, lest shortly ecclesiastical Canons, and the faith of the Church be corrupted. For both are in danger, unless God shall speedily by your hands amend what has been done amiss, and the Church be avenged on her enemies. For our Canons and our forms were not given to the Churches at the present day, but were wisely and safely transmitted to us from our forefathers. Neither had our faith its beginning at this time, but it came down to us from the Lord through His disciples . That therefore the ordinances which have been preserved in the Churches from old time until now, may not be lost in our days, and the trust which has been committed to us required at our hands; rouse yourselves, brethren, as being stewards of the mysteries of God , and seeing them now seized upon by others. Further particulars of our condition you will learn from the bearers of our letters;

but I was anxious myself to write you a brief account thereof, that you may know for certain, that such things have never before been committed against the Church, from the day that our Saviour when He was taken up, gave command to His disciples, saying, 'Go ye and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost .'

§2. Violent and Uncanonical Intrusion of Gregory.

Now the outrages which have been committed against us and against the Church are these. While we were holding our assemblies in peace, as usual, and while the people were rejoicing in them, and advancing in godly conversation, and while our fellow-ministers in Egypt, and the Thebais, and Libya, were in love and peace both with one another and with us; on a sudden the Prefect of Egypt puts forth a public letter, bearing the form of an edict, and declaring that one Gregory from Cappadocia was coming to be my successor from the court. This announcement confounded every one, for such a proceeding was entirely novel, and now heard of for the first time. The people however assembled still more constantly in the churches , for they very well knew that neither they themselves, nor any Bishop or Presbyter, nor in short any one had ever complained against me; and they saw that Arians only were on his side, and were aware also that he was himself an Arian, and was sent by Eusebius and his fellows to the Arian party. For you know, brethren, that Eusebius and his fellows have always been the supporters and associates of the impious heresy of the Arian madmen , by whose means they have ever carded on their designs against me, and were the authors of my banishment into Gaul.

The people, therefore, were justly indignant and exclaimed against the proceeding, calling the rest of the magistrates and the whole city to witness, that this novel and iniquitous attempt was now made against the Church, not on the ground of any charge brought against me by ecclesiastical persons, but through the wanton assault of the Arian heretics. For even if there had been any complaint generally prevailing against me, it was not an Arian, or one professing Arian doctrines, that ought to have been chosen to supersede me; but according to the ecclesiastical Canons, and the direction of Paul, when the people were 'gathered together, and the spirit' of them that ordain, 'with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ ' all things ought to have been enquired into and transacted canonically, in the presence of those among the laity and clergy who demanded the change; and not that a person brought from a distance by Arians, as if making a traffic of the title of Bishop, should with the patronage and strong arm of heathen magistrates, thrust himself upon those who neither asked for nor desired his presence, nor indeed knew anything of what had been done. Such proceedings tend to the dissolution of all the ecclesiastical Canons, and compel the heathen to blaspheme, and to suspect that our appointments are not made according to a divine rule, but as a result of traffic and patronage .

§3. Outrages Which Took Place at the Time of Gregory's Arrival.

Thus was this notable appointment of Gregory brought about by the Arians, and such was the beginning of it. And what outrages he committed on his entry into Alexandria, and of what great evils that event has been the cause, you may learn both from our letters, and by enquiry of those who are sojourning among you. While the people were offended at such an unusual proceeding, and in consequence assembled in the churches, in order to prevent the impiety of the Arians from mingling itself with the faith of the Church, Philagrius, who has long been a persecutor of the Church and her virgins, and is now Prefect of Egypt, an apostate already, and a fellow-countryman of Gregory, a man too of no respectable character, and moreover supported by Eusebius and his fellows, and therefore full of zeal against the Church; this person, by means of promises which he afterwards fulfilled, succeeded in gaining over the heathen multitude, with the Jews and disorderly persons, and having excited their passions, sent them in a body with swords and clubs into the churches to attack the people.

What followed upon this it is by no means easy to describe: indeed it is not possible to set before you a just representation of the circumstances, nor even could one recount a small part of them without tears and lamentations. Have such deeds as these ever been made the subjects of tragedy among the ancients? or has the like ever happened before in time of persecution or of war? The church and the holy Baptistery were set on fire, and straightway groans, shrieks, and lamentations, were heard through the city; while the citizens in their indignation at these enormities, cried shame upon the governor, and protested against the violence used to them. For holy and undefiled virgins were being stripped naked, and suffering treatment which is not to be named and if they resisted, they were in danger of their lives. Monks were being trampled under foot and perishing; some were being hurled headlong; others were being destroyed with swords and clubs; others were being wounded

and beaten. And oh! what deeds of impiety and iniquity have been committed upon the Holy Table! They were offering birds and pine cones in sacrifice, singing the praises of their idols, and blaspheming even in the very churches our Lord and Saviour Jesus-Christ, the Son of the living God. They were burning the books of Holy Scripture which they found in the church; and the Jews, the murderers of our Lord, and the godless heathen entering irreverently (O strange boldness!

the holy Baptistery, were stripping themselves naked, and acting such a disgraceful part, both by word and deed, as one is ashamed even to relate. Certain impious men also, following the examples set them in the bitterest persecutions, were seizing upon the virgins and ascetics by the hands and dragging them along, and as they were haling them, endeavoured to make them blaspheme and deny the Lord; and when they refused to do so, were beating them violently and trampling them under foot.

§4. Outrages on Good Friday and Easter Day, 339.

In addition to all this, after such a notable and illustrious entry into the city, the Arian Gregory, taking pleasure in these calamities, and as if desirous to secure to the heathens and Jews, and those who had wrought these evils upon us, a prize and price of their iniquitous success, gave up the church to be plundered by them. Upon this license of iniquity and disorder, their deeds were worse than in time of war, and more cruel than those of robbers. Some of them were plundering whatever fell in their way; others dividing among themselves the sums which some had laid up there ; the wine, of which there was a large quantity, they either drank or emptied out or carried away; they plundered the store of oil, and every one took as his spoil the doors and chancel rails; the candlesticks they forthwith laid aside in the wall , and lighted the candies of the Church before their idols: in a word, rapine and death pervaded the Church. And the impious Arians, so far from feeling shame that such things should be done, added yet further outrages and cruelty. Presbyters and laymen had their flesh torn, virgins were stript of their veils , and led away to the tribunal of the governor, and then cast into prison; others had their goods confiscated, and were scourged; the bread of the ministers and virgins was intercepted. And these things were done even during the holy season of Lent , about the time of Easter;

a time when the brethren were keeping fast, while this notable Gregory exhibited the disposition of a Caiaphas, and, together with Pilate the Governor, furiously raged against the pious worshippers of Christ. Going into one of the churches on the Preparation , in company with the Governor and the heathen multitude, when he saw that the people regarded with abhorrence his forcible entry among them, he caused that most cruel person, the Governor, publicly to scourge in one hour, four and thirty virgins and married women, and men of rank, and to cast them into prison. Among them there was one virgin, who, being fond of study, had the Psalter in her hands, at the time when be caused her to be publicly scourged: the book was torn in pieces by the officers, and the virgin herself shut up in prison.

§5. Retirement of Athanasius, and Tyranny of Gregory and Philagrius.

When all this was done, they did not stop even here; but consulted how they might act the

same part in the other church , where I was mostly living during those clays; and they were eager to extend their fury to this church also, in order that they might hunt out and dispatch me. And this would have been my fate, had not the grace of Christ assisted me, if it were only that I might escape to relate these few particulars concerning their conduct. For seeing that they were exceedingly mad against me, and being anxious that the church should not be injured, nor the virgins that were in it suffer, nor additional murders be committed, nor the people again outraged, I withdrew myself from among them, remembering the words of our Saviour, 'If they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another .' For I knew, from the evil they had done against the first-named church, that they would for-hear no outrage against the other also. And there in fact they reverenced not even the Lord's day of the holy Feast, but in that church also they imprisoned the persons who belonged to it, at a time when the Lord delivered all from the bonds of death, whereas Gregory and his associates, as if fighting against our Saviour, and depending upon the patronage of the Governor, have turned into mourning this day of liberty to the servants of Christ. The heathens were rejoicing to do this, for they abhor that day; and Gregory perhaps did but fulfil the commands of Eusebius and his fellows in forcing the Christians to mourn under the infliction of bonds.

With these acts of violence has the Governor seized upon the churches, and has given them up to Gregory and the Arian madmen. Thus, those persons who were excommunicated by us for their impiety, now glory in the plunder of our churches; while the people of God, and the Clergy of the Catholic Church are compelled either to have communion with the impiety of the Arian heretics, or else to forbear entering into them. Moreover, by means of the Governor, Gregory has exercised no small violence towards the captains of ships and others who pass over sea, torturing and scourging some, putting others in bonds, and casting them into prison, in order to oblige them not to resist his iniquities, and to take letters from him. And not satisfied with all this, that he may glut himself with our blood, he has caused his savage associate, the Governor, to prefer an indictment against me, as in the name of the people, before the most religious Emperor Constantius, which contains odious charges, from which one may expect not only to be banished, but even ten thousand deaths. The person who drew it up is an apostate from Christianity, and a shameless worshipper of idols, and they who subscribed it are heathens, and keepers of idol temples, and others of them Arians. In short, not to make my letter tedious to you, a persecution rages here, and such a persecution as was never before raised against the Church.

For in former instances a man at least might pray while he fled from his persecutors, and be baptized while he lay in concealment. But now their extreme cruelty has imitated the godless conduct of the Babylonians. For as they falsely accused Daniel , so does the notable Gregory now accuse before the Governor those who pray in their houses, and watches every opportunity to insult their ministers, so that through his violent conduct, many are endangered from missing baptism, and many who are in sickness and sorrow have no one to visit them, a calamity which they bitterly lament, accounting it worse than their sickness. For while the ministers of the Church are under persecution, the people who condemn the impi-

ety of the Arian heretics choose rather thus to be sick and to run the risk, than that a hand of the Arians should come upon their heads.

§6. All the Above Illegalities Were Carried or in the Interest of Arianism.

Gregory then is an Arian, and has been sent to the Arian party; for none demanded him, but they only; and accordingly as a hireling and a stranger, he makes use of the Governor to inflict these dreadful and cruel deeds upon the people of the Catholic Churches, as not being his own. For since Pistus, whom Eusebius and his fellows formerly appointed over the Arians, was justly anathematized and excommunicated for his impiety by you the Bishops of the Catholic Church, as you all know, on our writing to you concerning him, they have now, therefore, in like manner sent this Gregory to them; and lest they should a second time be put to shame, by our again writing against them, they have employed extraneous force against me, in order that, having obtained possession of the Churches, they may seem to have escaped all suspicion of being Arians. But in this too they have been mistaken, for none of the people of the Church are with them, except the heretics only, and those who have been excommunicated on divers charges, and such as have been compelled by the Governor to dissemble. This then is the drama of Eusebius and his fellows, which they have long been rehearsing and composing; and now have succeeded in performing through the false charges which they have made against me before the Emperor . Notwithstanding, they are not yet content to be quiet, but even now seek to kill me;

and they make themselves so formidable to our friends, that they are all driven into banishment, and expect death at their hands. But you must not for this stand in awe of their iniquity, but on the contrary avenge: and shew your indignation at this their unprecedented conduct against us. For if when one member suffers all the members suffer with it, and, according to the blessed Apostle, we ought to weep with them that weep , let every one, now that so great a Church as this is suffering, avenge its wrongs, as though he were himself a sufferer. For we have a common Saviour, who is blasphemed by them, and Canons belonging to us all, which they are transgressing. If while any of you bad been sitting in your Church, and while the people were assembled with you, without any blame, some one had suddenly come under plea of an edict as successor of one of you, and had acted the same part towards you, would you not have been indignant? would I you not have demanded to be righted? If so,then it is right that you should be indignant now, lest if these things be passed over unnoticed, the same mischief shall by degrees extend itself to every Church, and so our schools of religion be turned into a market-house and an exchange.

§7. Appeal to the Bishops of the Whole Church to Unite Against Gregory.

You are acquainted with the history of the Arian madmen, beloved, for you have often, both individually and in a body, condemned their impiety; and you know also that Eusebius and his fellows, as I said before, are engaged in the same heresy; for the sake of which they have long been carrying on a conspiracy against me. And I have represented to you, what has now been done, both for them and by them, with greater cruelty than is usual even in time of war, in order that after the example set before you in the history which I related at the

beginning, you may entertain a zealous hatred of their wickedness, and reject those who have committed such enormities against the Church. If the brethren at Rome [last year], before these things had happened, and on account of their former misdeeds, wrote letters to call a Council, that these evils might be set right (fearing which, Eusebius and his fellows took care previously to throw the Church into confusion, and desired to destroy me, in order that they might thenceforth be able to act as they pleased without fear, and might have no one to call them to account), how much more ought you now to be indignant at these outrages, and to condemn them, seeing they have added this to their former misconduct.

I beseech you, overlook not such proceedings, nor suffer the famous Church of the Alexandrians to be trodden down by heretics. In consequence of these things the people and their ministers are separated from one another, as one might expect, silenced by the violence of the Prefect, yet abhorring the impiety of the Arian madmen. If therefore Gregory shall write unto you, or any other in his behalf, receive not his letters, brethren, but tear them in pieces and put the bearers of them to shame, as the ministers of impiety and wickedness. And even if he presume to write to you after a friendly fashion, nevertheless receive them not. Those who bring his letters convey them only from fear of the Governor, and on account of his frequent acts of violence. And since it is probable that Eusebius and his fellows will write to you concerning him, I was anxious to admonish you beforehand, so that you may herein imitate God, Who is no respecter of persons, and may drive out from before you those that come from them; because for the sake of the Arian madmen they caused persecutions, rape of virgins, murders, plunder of the Church's property, burnings, and blasphemies in the Churches, to be committed by the heathens and Jews at such a season. The impious and mad Gregory cannot deny that he is an Arian, being proved to be so by the person who writes his letters. This is his secretary Ammon, who was cast out of the Church long ago by my predecessor the blessed Alexander for many misdeeds and for impiety.

For all these reasons, therefore, vouchsafe to send me a reply, and condemn these impious men; so that even now the ministers and people of this place, seeing your orthodoxy and hatred of wickedness, may rejoice in your concord in the Christian faith, and that those who have been guilty of these lawless deeds against the Church may be reformed by your letters, and brought at last, though late, to repentance. Salute the brotherhood that is among you. All the brethren that are with me salute you. Fare ye well, and remember me, and the Lord preserve you continually, most truly beloved lords.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.