To the Bishops of Africa

Athanasius of Alexandria (c. AD 296–373)

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Letter of Ninety Bishops of Egypt and Libya Including Athanasius — 1. Pre-Eminence of the Council of Nicaea. Efforts to Exalt that of Ariminum at Its Expense.

The letters are sufficient which were written by our beloved fellow-minister Damasus, bishop of the Great Rome, and the large number of bishops who assembled along with him; and equally so are those of the other synods which were held, both in Gaul and in Italy, concerning the sound Faith which Christ gave us, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers, who met at Nicaea from all this world of ours, have handed down. For so great a stir was made at that time about the Arian heresy, in order that they who had fallen into it might be reclaimed, while its inventors might be made manifest. To that council, accordingly, the whole world has long ago agreed, and now, many synods having been held, all men have been put in mind, both in Dalmatia and Dardania, Macedonia, Epirus and Greece, Crete, and the other islands, Sicily, Cyprus, Pamphylia, Lycia, and Isauria, all Egypt and the Libyas, and most of the Arabians have come to know it, and marvelled at those who signed it, inasmuch as even if there were left among them any bitterness springing up from the root of the Arians; we mean Auxentius, Ursacius, Valens and their fellows, by these letters they have been cut off and isolated. The confession arrived at at Nicaea was, we say once more, sufficient and enough by itself, for the subversion of all irreligious heresy, and for the security and furtherance of the doctrine of the Church.

But since we have heard that certain wishing to oppose it are attempting to cite a synod supposed to have been held at Ariminum, and are eagerly striving that it should prevail rather than the other, we think it right to write and put you in mind, not to endure anything of the sort: for this is nothing else but a second growth of the Arian heresy. For what else do they wish for who reject the synod held against it, namely the Nicene, if not that the cause of Arius should prevail? What then do such men deserve, but to be called Arians, and to share the punishment of the Arians? For they were not afraid of God, who says, 'Remove not the eternal boundaries which thy fathers placed ,' and 'He that speaketh against father or mother, let him die the death :' they were not in awe of their fathers, who enjoined that they who hold the opposite of their confession should be anathema.

2. The Synod of Nicaea Contrasted with the Local Synods Held Since.

For this was why an ecumenical synod has been held at Nicaea, 318 bishops assembling to discuss the faith on account of the Arian heresy, namely, in order that local synods should no more be held on the subject of the Faith, but that, even if held, they should not hold good. For what does that Council lack, that any one should seek to innovate? It is full of piety, beloved; and has filled the whole world with it. Indians have acknowledged it, and all Christians of other barbarous nations. Vain then is the labour of those who have often made attempts against it. For already the men we refer to have held ten or more synods, changing their ground at each, and while taking away some things from earlier decisions, in later ones make changes and additions. And so far they have gained nothing by writing, erasing, and using force, not knowing that 'every plant that the Heavenly Father hath not planted shall be plucked up .' But the word of the Lord which came through the ecumenical Synod at Nicaea, abides for ever . For if one compare number with number, these who met at Nicaea are more than those at local synods, inasmuch as the whole is greater than the part.

But if a man wishes to discern the reason of the Synod at Nicaea, and that of the large number subsequently held by these men, he will find that while there was a reasonable cause for the former, the others were got together by force, by reason of hatred and contention. 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. But the subsequent ones were without number, all however planned in opposition to the ecumenical.

3. The True Nature of the Proceedings at Ariminium.

This being pointed out, who will accept those who cite the synod of Ariminum, or any other, against the Nicene? or who could help hating men who set at nought their fathers' decisions, and put above them the newer ones, drawn up at Ariminum with contention and violence? or who would wish to agree with these men, who do not accept even their own? For in their own ten or more synods, as I said above, they wrote now one thing, now another, and so came out clearly as themselves the accusers of each one. Their case is not unlike that of the Jewish traitors in old times. For just as they left the one well of the living water, and hewed for themselves broken cisterns, which cannot hold water, as the prophet Jeremiah has it , so these men, fighting against the one ecumenical synod, 'hewed for themselves' many synods, and all appeared empty, like 'a sheaf without strength .' Let us not then tolerate those who cite the Ariminian or any other synod against that of Nicaea. For even they who cite that of Ariminum appear not to know what was done there, for else they would have said nothing about it. For ye know, beloved, from those who went from you to Ariminum, how Ursacius and Valens, Eudoxius and Auxentius (and there Demophilus also was with them), were deposed, after wishing to write something to supersede the Nicene decisions.

For on being requested to anathematise the Arian heresy, they refused, and preferred to be its ringleaders.

So the bishops, like genuine servants of the Lord and orthodox believers (and there were nearly 200), wrote that they were satisfied with the Nicene alone, and desired and held nothing more or less than that. This they also reported to Constantius, who had ordered the assembling of the synod. But the men who had been deposed at Ariminum went off to Constantius, and caused those who had reported against them to be insulted, and threatened with not being allowed to return to their dioceses, and to be treated with violence in Thrace that very winter, to compel them to tolerate their innovations.

4. The Nicene Formula in Accordance with Scripture.

If then any cite the synod of Ariminum, firstly let them point out the deposition of the above persons, and what the bishops wrote, namely that none should seek anything beyond what had been agreed upon by the fathers at Nicaea, nor cite any synod save that one. But this they suppress, but make much of what was done by violence in Thrace ; thus shewing that they are dissemblers of the Arian heresy, and aliens from the sound Faith. And again, if a man were to examine and compare the great synod itself, and those held by these people, he would discover the piety of the one and the folly of the others. They who assembled at Nicaea did so not after being deposed: and secondly, they confessed that the Son was of the Essence of the Father. But the others, after being deposed again and again, and once more at Ariminum itself, ventured to write that it ought not to be said that the Son had Essence or Subsistence. This enables us to see, brethren, that they of Nicaea breathe the spirit of Scripture, in that God says in Exodus , 'I am that I am,' and through Jeremiah, 'Who is in His substance and hath seen His word;' and just below, 'if they had stood in My subsistence and heard My words:' now subsistence is essence, and means nothing else but very being, which Jeremiah calls existence, in the words, 'and they heard not the voice of existence .' For subsistence, and essence, is existence:

for it is, or in other words exists. This Paul also perceiving wrote to the Hebrews, 'who being the brightness of his glory, and the express Image of his subsistence .' But the others, who think they know the Scriptures and call themselves wise, and do not choose to speak of subsistence in God (for thus they wrote at Ariminum and at other synods of theirs), were surely with justice deposed, saying as they did, like the fool did in his heart , 'God is not.' And again the fathers taught at Nicaea that the Son and Word is not a creature, nor made, having read 'all things were made through Him ,' and 'in Him were all things created, and consist ;' while these men, Arians rather than Christians, in their other synods have ventured to call Him a creature, and one of the things that are made, things of which He Himself is the Artificer and Maker. For if 'through Him all things were made' and He too is a creature, He would be the creator of Himself. And how can what is being created create? or He that is creating be created?

5. How the Test 'Coessential' Came to Be Adopted at Nicaea.

But not even thus are they ashamed, although they say such things as cause them to be

hated by all; citing the Synod of Ariminum, only to shew that there also they were deposed. And as to the actual definition of Nicaea, that the Son is coessential with the Father, on account of which they ostensibly oppose the synod, and buzz around everywhere like gnats about the phrase, either they stumble at it from ignorance, like those who stumble at the stone of stumbling that was laid in Sion ; or else they know, but for that very reason are constantly opposing and murmuring, because it is an accurate declaration and full in the face of their heresy. For it is not the phrases that vex them, but the condemnation of themselves which the definition contains. And of this, once again, they are themselves the cause, even if they wish to conceal the fact of which they are perfectly aware,-But we must now mention it, in order that hence also the accuracy of the great synod may be shewn.

For the assembled bishops wished to put away the impious phrases devised by the Arians, namely 'made of nothing,' and that the Son was 'a thing made,' and a 'creature,' and that 'there was a time when He was not,' and that 'He is of mutable nature.' And they wished to set down in writing the acknowledged language of Scripture, namely that the Word is of God by nature Only-begotten, Power, Wisdom of the Father, Very God, as John says, and as Paul wrote, brightness of the Father's glory and express image of His person . But Eusebius and his fellows, drawn on by their own error, kept conferring together as follows: 'Let us assent. For we also are of God: for "there is one God of whom are all things ," and "old things are passed away, behold all things are made new, but all things are of God ."' And they considered what is written in the Shepherd , 'Before all things believe that God is one, who created and set all things in order, and made them to exist out of nothing.' But the Bishops, beholding their craftiness, and the cunning of their impiety, expressed more plainly the sense of the words 'of God,' by writing that the Son is of the Essence of God, so that whereas the Creatures, since they do not exist of themselves without a cause, but have a beginning of their existence, are said to be 'of God,' the Son alone might be deemed proper to the Essence of the Father.

For this is peculiar to one who is Only-begotten and true Word in relation to a Father, and this was the reason why the words 'of the essence' were adopted. Again , upon the bishops asking the dissembling minority if they agreed that the Son was not a Creature, but the Power and only Wisdom of the Father, and the Eternal Image, in all respects exact, of the Father, and true God, Eusebius and his fellows were observed exchanging nods with one another, as much as to say 'this applies to us men also, for we too are called "the image and glory of God ," and of us it is said, "For we which live are alway ," and there are many Powers, and "all the power of the Lord went out of the land of Egypt," while the caterpillar and the locust are called His "great power . And "the Lord of powers is with us, the God of Jacob is our help. For we hold that we are proper to God, and not merely so, but insomuch that He has even called us brethren. Nor does it vex us, even if they call the Son Very God. For when made He exists in verity.'

6. The Nicene Test Not Unscriptural in Sense, Nor a Novelty.

Such was the corrupt mind of the Arians. But here too the Bishops, beholding their crafti-

ness, collected from the Scriptures the figures of brightness, of the river and the well, and of the relation of the express Image to the Subsistence, and the texts, 'in thy light shall we see light ,' and 'I and the Father are one .' And lastly they wrote more plainly, and concisely, that the Son was coessential with the Father; for all the above passages signify this. And their murmuring, that the phrases are unscriptural, is exposed as vain by themselves, for they have uttered their impieties in unscriptural terms: (for such are 'of nothing' and 'there was a time when He was not'), while yet they find fault because they were condemned by unscriptural terms pious in meaning. While they, like men sprung from a dunghill, verily 'spoke of the earth ,' the Bishops, not having invented their phrases for themselves, but having testimony from their Fathers, wrote as they did. For ancient bishops, of the Great Rome and of our city, some 130 years ago, wrote and censured those who said that the Son was a creature and not coessential with the Father. And Eusebius knew this, who was bishop of Caesarea, and at first an accomplice of the Arian heresy; but afterwards, having signed at the Council of Nicaea, wrote to his own people affirming as follows: 'we know that certain eloquent and distinguished bishops and writers even of ancient date used the word "coessential" with reference to the Godhead of the Father and the Son.'

7. The Position that the Son is a Creature Inconsistent and Untenable.

Why then do they go on citing the Synod of Ariminum, at which they were deposed? Why do they reject that of Nicaea, at which their Fathers signed the confession that the Son is of the Father's Essence and coessential with Him? Why do they run about? For now they are at war not only with the bishops who met at Nicaea, but with their own great bishops and their own friends. Whose heirs or successors then are they? How can they call men fathers, whose confession, well and apostolically drawn up, they will not accept? For if they think they can object to it, let them speak, or rather answer, that they may be convicted of falling foul of themselves, whether they believe the Son when He says, 'I and my Father are one,' and 'he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father .' 'Yes,' they must answer, 'since it is written we believe it.' But if they are asked how they are one, and how he that hath seen the Son hath seen the Father, of course, we suppose they will say, 'by reason of resemblance,' unless they have quite come to agree with those who hold the brother-opinion to theirs, and are called Anomoeans.

But if once more they are asked, 'how is He like?' they brasen it out and say, 'by perfect virtue and harmony, by having the same will with the Father, by not willing what the Father wills not.' But let them understand that one assimilated to God by virtue and will is liable also to the purpose of changing; but the Word is not thus, unless He is 'like' in part, and as we are, because He is not like [God] in essence also. But these characteristics belong to us, who are originate, and of a created nature. For we too, albeit we cannot become like God in essence, yet by progress in virtue imitate God, the Lord granting us this grace, in the words, 'Be ye merciful as your Father is merciful:' 'be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect .' But that originate things are changeable, no one can deny, seeing that angels transgressed, Adam disobeyed, and all stand in need of the grace of the Word. But a mutable thing cannot be like God who is truly unchangeable, any more than what is created can be like its creator.

This is why, with regard to us, the holy man said, 'Lord, who shall be likened unto thee ,' and 'who among the gods is like unto thee, Lord ;' meaning by gods those who, while created, had yet become partakers of the Word, as He Himself said, 'If he called them gods to whom the word of God came .' But things which partake cannot be identical with or similar to that whereof they partake. For example, He said of Himself, 'I and the Father are one ,' implying that things originate are not so. For we would ask those who allege the Ariminian Synod, whether a created essence can say, 'what things I see my Father make, those I make also .' For things originate are made and do not make; or else they made even themselves. Why, if, as they say, the Son is a Creature and the Father is His Maker, surely the Son would be His own maker, as He is able to make what the Father makes, as He said. But such a supposition is absurd and utterly untenable, for none can make himself.

8. The Son's Relation to the Father Essential, Not Merely Ethical.

Once more, let them say whether things originate could say , 'all things whatsoever the Father hath are Mine.' Now, He has the prerogative of creating and making, of Eternity, of omnipotence, of immutability. But things originate cannot have the power of making, for they are creatures; nor eternity, for their existence has a beginning; nor of omnipotence and immutability, for they are under sway, and of changeable nature, as the Scriptures say. Well then, if these prerogatives belong to the Son, they clearly do so, not on account of His virtue, as said above, but essentially, even as the synod said, 'He is of no other essence' but of the Father's, to whom these prerogatives are proper. But what can that be which is proper to the Father's essence, and an offspring from it, or what name can we give it, save 'coessential?' For that which a man sees in the Father, that sees he also in the Son; and that not by participation, but essentially. And this is [the meaning of] 'I and the Father are one,' and 'he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.' Here especially once more it is easy to shew their folly. If it is from virtue, the antecedent of willing and not willing, and of moral progress, that you hold the Son to be like the Father; while these things fall under the category of quality; clearly you call God compound of quality and essence. But who will tolerate you when you say this?

For God, who compounded all things to give them being, is not compound, nor of similar nature to the things made by Him through the Word. Far be the thought. For He is simple essence, in which quality is not, nor, as James says, 'any variableness or shadow of turning .' Accordingly, if it is shewn that it is not from virtue (for in God there is no quality, neither is there in the Son), then He must be proper to God's essence. And this you will certainly admit if mental apprehension is not utterly destroyed in you. But what is that which is proper to and identical with the essence of God, and an Offspring from it by nature, if not by this very fact coessential with Him that begat it? For this is the distinctive relation of a Son to a Father, and he who denies this, does not hold that the Word is Son in nature and in truth.

9. The Honest Repudiation of Arianism Involves the Acceptance of the Nicene Test.

This then the Fathers perceived when they wrote that the Son was coessential with the Father, and anathematised those who say that the Son is of a different Subsistence : not inventing phrases for themselves, but learning in their turn, as we said, from the Fathers who had been before them. But after the above proof, their Ariminian Synod is superfluous, as well as any other synod cited by them as touching the Faith. For that of Nicaea is sufficient, agreeing as it does with the ancient bishops also, in which too their fathers signed, whom they ought to respect, on pain of being thought anything but Christians. But if even after such proofs, and after the testimony of the ancient bishops, and the signature of their own Fathers, they pretend as if in ignorance to be alarmed at the phrase 'coessential,' then let them say and hold, in simpler terms and truly, that the Son is Son by nature, and anathematise as the synod enjoined those who say that the Son of God is a Creature or a thing made, or of nothing, or that there was once a time when He was not, and that He is mutable and liable to change, and of another Subsistence. And so let them escape the Arian heresy. And we are confident that in sincerely anathematising these views, they ipso facto confess that the Son is of the Father's Essence, and coessential with Him.

For this is why the Fathers, having said that the Son was coessential, straightway added, 'but those who say that He is a creature, or made, or of nothing, or that there was once a time when He was not,' the Catholic Church anathematises: namely in order that by this means they might make it known that these things are meant by the word 'coessential.' And the meaning 'Coessential' is known from the Son not beinga Creature or thing made: and because he that says 'coessential' does not hold that the Word is a Creature: and he that anathematises the above views, at the same time holds that the Son is coessential with the Father; and he that calls Him 'coessential,' calls the Son of God genuinely and truly so; and he that calls Him genuinely Son understands the texts, 'I and the Father are one,' and 'he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father .'

10. Purpose of This Letter; Warning Against Auxentius of Milan.

Now it would be proper to write this at greater length. But since we write to you who know, we have dictated it concisely, praying that among all the bond of peace might be preserved, and that all in the Catholic Church should say and hold the same thing. And we are not meaning to teach, but to put you in mind. Nor is it only ourselves that write, but all the bishops of Egypt and the Libyas, some ninety in number. For we all are of one mind in this, and we always sign for one another if any chance not to be present. Such being our state of mind, since we happened to be assembled, we wrote, both to our beloved Damasus, bishop of the Great Rome, giving an account of Auxentius who has intruded upon the church at Milan; namely that he not only shares the Arian heresy, but is also accused of many offences, which he committed with Gregory , the sharer of his impiety; and while expressing our surprise that so far he has not been deposed and expelled from the Church, we thanked [Damasus] for his piety and that of those who assembled at the Great Rome, in that by expelling Ursacius and Valens, and those who hold with them, they preserved the harmony of the Catholic Church.

Which we pray may be preserved also among you, and therefore entreat you not to tolerate, as we said above, those who put forward a host of synods held concerning the Faith, at Ariminum, at Sirmium, in Isauria, in Thrace, those in Constantinople, and the many irregular ones in Antioch. But let the Faith confessed by the Fathers at Nicaea alone hold good among you, at which all the fathers, including those of the men who now are fighting against it, were present, as we said above, and signed: in order that of us too the Apostle may say, 'Now I praise you that ye remember me in all things, and as I handed the traditions to you, so ye hold them fast .'

11. Godhead of the Spirit Also Involved in the Nicene Creed.

For this Synod of Nicaea is in truth a proscription of every heresy. It also upsets those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit, and call Him a Creature. For the Fathers, after speaking of the faith in the Son, straightway added, 'And we believe in the Holy Ghost,' in order that by confessing perfectly and fully the faith in the Holy Trinity they might make known the exact form of the Faith of Christ, and the teaching of the Catholic Church. For it is made clear both among you and among all, and no Christian can have a doubtful mind on the point, that our faith is not in the Creature, but in one God, Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible: and in one Lord Jesus Christ His Only-begotten Son, and in one Holy Ghost; one God, known in the holy and perfect Trinity, baptized into which, and in it united to the Deity, we believe that we have also inherited the kingdom of the heavens, in Christ Jesus our Lord, through whom to the Father be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

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.