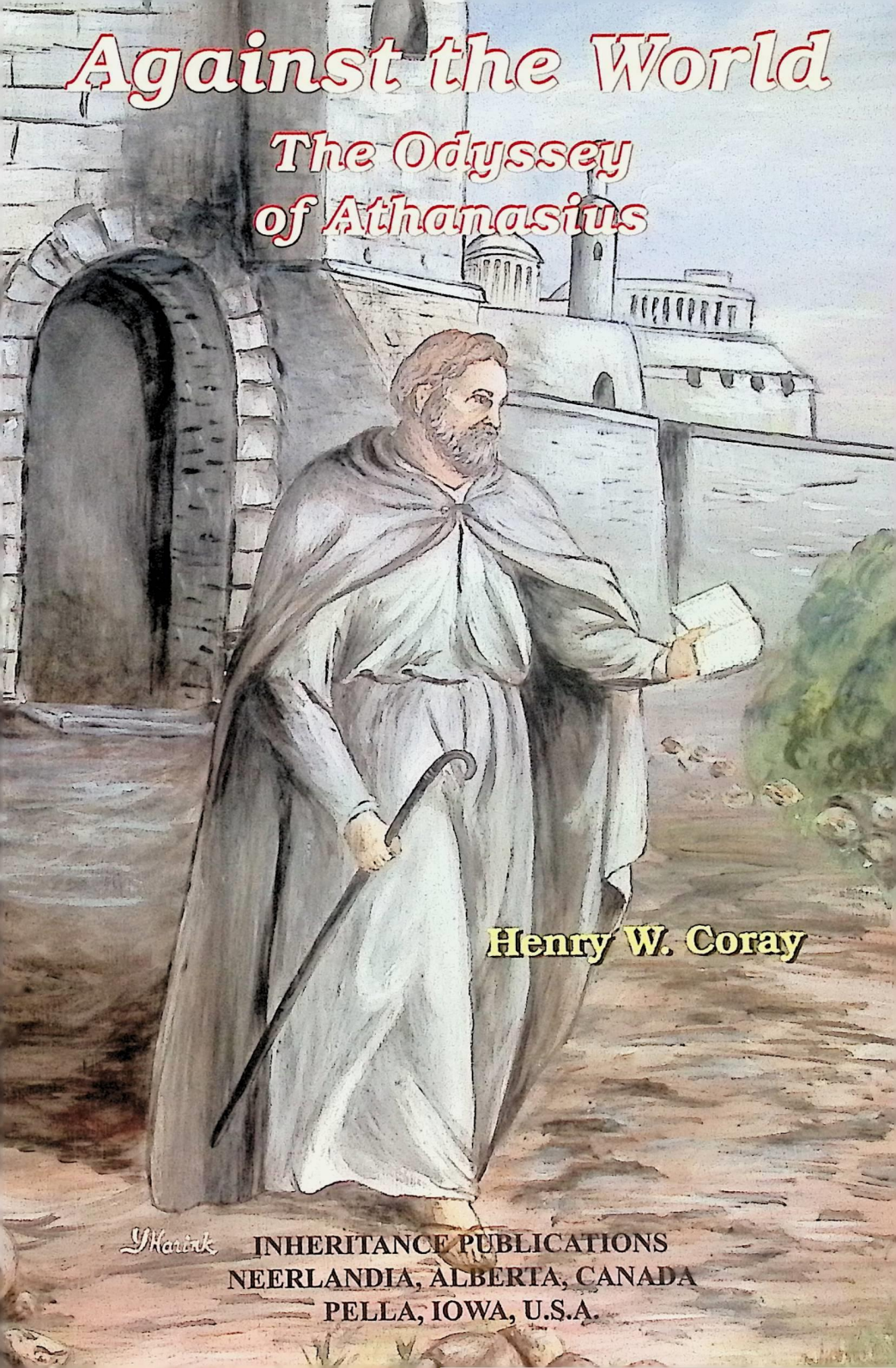
Against the World

The Odyssey of Athanasius



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FOREWORD

We have seldom an opportunity of observing, either in active or speculative life, what effect may be produced, or what obstacles may be surmounted by the force of a single mind, when it is inflexibly applied to the pursuit of a single object. The immortal name of Athanasius will never be separated from the catholic doctrine of the Trinity, to whose defense he consecrated every moment and every faculty of his being.

Edward Gibbon

This tribute, coming from the pen of an historian who entertained very little sympathy for the Christian faith, was in fact the very paragraph that sparked my desire to set forth the story of Athanasius.

Against the World is a fictionalized profile of the subject. Much of the material is culled from the writings of reliable church historians. Various segments, however, are the products of human imagination. For example, there are, in the record, few details given us of the business proceedings and vigorous debates that took place in the momentous Council of Nicea. I, nevertheless, have tried to set forth honestly the spirit and temper of that and other councils as well as the character and personality of the man who occupies the centerpiece, certainly one of the most redoubtable nobleman in the pantheon of Christian statesmen.

It is with this in mind that I hope that the odyssey of the Father of Orthodoxy might be delineated in a way that will challenge all readers to a stronger commitment to the God-Man for whom Athanasius sacrificed and suffered.

Henry W. Coray

Chapter 1

In 331 B.C., Alexander the Great founded the city named in his honor. At the time, the Ptolemies were in control of Egypt. Two centuries later, Cleopatra, the last ruler of the Ptolemy dynasty, passed away. The Roman emperor Octavius promptly took over Egypt with its rich lands and thriving communities, including Alexandria, often referred to as the Golden City.

Alexander had directed his architect, Dinocrates, to design a center that would endure as a lasting memorial to him. The result: Alexandria was fashioned into a perfect rectangle five miles long and a mile wide. Two broad boulevards lined with snowy colonnades intersected at right angles. The longer one stretched from the Hippodrome on the east to the Necropolis on the west. The shorter of the two connected the southern Gate of the Sun to the northern Gate of the Moon. Granite quays studded the shoreline, which overlooked flotillas of grain ships lolling on the surface of the Mediterranean.

Seven miles out at sea on the island of Phares, a wall of chalk cliffs climbed four hundred feet into the air. It was here that the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, was completed by seventy scholars. At one end of the seven wonders of the ancient world, a cone of pure marble had been built to guide mariners through the treacherous limestone shoals.

If Alexandria received praise for its physical beauty, conversely, it had earned the reputation of being a caldron of licentiousness. Internal corruption contaminated much of its social life. Homosexuality and incest flourished unashamed. Almost with pride, Strabo reported that he had made overtures to a boy who sold flowers and berries on the street. Emperor Hadrian, no paragon on virtue himself, professed shock at the sights and sounds he took in when he first entered the port.

Like Gaul, Alexandria was divided into three parts: the Egyptian, the Greek, and the Jewish quarters. Seafaring folk occupied the Egyptian sector. Here stood the Serapeium, the temple of Serapis, god of the underworld. The shrine represented a blend of the deities Osiris and Apis with the adoration of the Greek gods

Zeus and Pluto. Also to be seen in this district was the less imposing of two internationally famous libraries: Alexandrines called the Daughter.

The Greek section, wedged between the Egyptian and the Jewish areas, was the largest of the three districts. Here sprawled the Museion (Museum), declared to be the greatest of intellectual achievements of the age. It fostered the Mother, the more ornate of the two libraries. Over 500,000 books lined its shelves. The Museion also included a number of lecture halls, laboratories, observatories, a dining hall, a park, and even a zoo.

Other features in the Hellenistic section were the Soma, a mausoleum containing the body of Alexander the Great, the Dicasterium, the Senate chamber, the Exchange (or Emporium), a gymnasium, a stadium, a theater, a race course.

The Jewish quarter incorporated the northeastern slice of the city. Jews enjoyed equal rights with other citizens and were governed by their own provincial ruler. They had their laws, their Sanhedrin, their synagogue. Unfortunately, between them and the Hellenistic Alexandrines severe internecine tensions sometimes mounted. Then it was that tempers flared, riots erupted, and the streets of this part of the Golden City flowed with crimson.

Philosophically, the ideas of Plato permeated the thinking of Alexandria's intelligentsia. At Athens, the philosopher had projected the notion that the present world is a copy of the ideal world. In Egypt, this seed took the form of "the white mystic rose of Neoplatonism." The Neoplatonist school came to full fruition under the tutelage of a scholar, one Plotinus. Plotinus mixed portions of Scripture with the formulations of Plato, stirred in a sprinkling of Hindu doctrine, and tried to relate feeble humanity in a succession of semigods, demons, animals, plants, stones, and eventually the human soul. We are all parts of God, he said. People were invited to experiment with the Mystic Vision, which, when seen, would prove to the receiver that the vision of God and the vision of self were the same — this simply because each individual is in fact God!

One cannot but wonder how it was that Athanasius, destined to become the Father of Orthodoxy, coming so close to this odd milieu, escaped being drawn into the mix of pantheistic brew.

Several factors contributed to his deliverance.

The most important was the genuinely pious climate of the home, the creation of loving parents who reared their one child in the nurture and discipline of the Lord. The boy's plastic mind was regularly subjected to lessons from the Bible, together with the earnest prayers of his father. Quickly he formed the habit of writing out and memorizing long passages from the Scriptures.

Again, he was fortunate enough to come under the tutelage of Alexander, the wise and godly archbishop of Alexandria. The aging prelate, aware that his years of service were numbered, began searching the horizon with a view to selecting a successor to his office. Alexander enjoyed a position of high authority throughout Egypt. Carefully he studied the characters, personalities, and gifts of devout young men under his rule. After prolonged consideration, he became convinced that Athanasius, with his brilliant mind, would be one who should stand on his shoulders.

Alexander enrolled his ward in a catechetical school. He checked Athanasius's progress regularly. Also, he spent as much time as possible in private with him, instructing, counseling, questioning, encouraging. Secretly he rejoiced to see the way Athanasius absorbed every scrap of knowledge as a thirsty traveler takes great drafts of cold water. The archbishop confidently looked forward to the day when the student would become a polished shaft in the quiver of God — his mouth, like the mouth of Isaiah, a sharp sword, qualified to do battle for Jehovah boldly and courageously.

Athanasius implemented his formal education by investing long hours in the great library, the Mother. He loved few pursuits as much as immersing himself in the Greek and Roman classics. Then it was that for him time became nonexistent as he pored over the Categories of Aristotle, the subtle propositions of Plato, the orations of Cicero and Demosthenes, the poetry of Homer and Horace. He all but hallucinated while digesting the treatises of the church fathers: Ignatius of Antioch, the fiery Tertullian, gentle Origen, and Clement of Rome. He wept over the accounts of the martyrdoms of Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Origen, and many other heroic believers executed by order of emperors Decius and Diocletian.

The day arrived when Alexander decided that Athanasius, approaching twenty, was ready to assume his first assignment. He said, "Son, I need someone to help me with my duties. Are you prepared to go to work for me?"

Athanasius had to restrain himself from leaping for joy. "If you think I am, Sir," he said.

"I think you are. We must ask your parents if they will permit you to move into my home."

"Oh, I am sure they will, Sir. I am sure they will."

And so it was arranged.

Chapter 2

In the Roman Empire of the fourth century A.D., theology had become an enormously popular theme for discussion. Marketplaces, barber shops, hotels, parks, restaurants, and farms functioned as forums for debates; some controlled, others heated. The physician, the lawyer, the teacher, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker, the student, the housewife, the street-cleaner, the beggar on the corner — all discussed religion as though they were theologians of vast perceptiveness. Frequently, disputes went on far into the night.

Particularly in Alexandria, Egypt, prominent in the Roman world, it was not uncommon for fistfights to break out. The participants would then creep into bed, nursing bruised limbs, battered heads, injured jaws or noses, or missing teeth. The distinguished colors of that metropolis were black and blue.

A priest, Arius, stood out as the storm center of controversy. He served a church known as the Baukalis. Alexandrians boasted that the edifice was built over the tomb of John Mark. Mark, people said, has first brought the Christian faith to their fair city.

Arius had received his philosophical and theological training in Antioch, Syria. There, two outstanding scholars, Paulus and Lucian, had been instrumental in shaping his thinking.

Paulus, a bishop, was later deposed by order of a council of fellow bishops. There were two reasons for the action: his godless life-style and his adherence to strange, unscriptural teaching. He was accused of espousing a curious crossbreed of Platonism and Judaistic legalism, mixed with a dash of Biblical material palatable to him. Also, the Syrians knew him to be a clever sophist: he had mastered the art of double-talk.

Lucian, unlike his colleague, was a man of high moral character. But he did, with Paulus, reject the doctrine that Jesus was God incarnate. It was Lucian who coined the catch phrase, "There was a time when Jesus was not," words eventually picked up and popularized by Arius.

In personal appearance, Arius was tall, slender, and erect as obelisk. The asceticism of his manner of life showed in the lines of his face, notable for its deadly pallor. He allowed his tangled hair

to fall shoulder length. He wore a mask of perpetual melancholy and dressed simply, arraying himself in a long black cloak with short sleeves, with a red scarf around his throat.

Women adored him.

Boldly he orchestrated his tenets. His syllogism was disarmingly simple: Jesus is a true Son of God. And since a father must exist before a son, temporally, it follows that the Divine Father must have existed prior to the Divine Son. Hence there was a time frame when Jesus was not. Conclusion: Jesus must be reckoned to be a created being, made of nothing. Any other definition, Arius insisted, inevitably confounds the persons of the Godhead and thus leads to serious error.

To his enthralled congregation he was nothing if not convincing.

"My system is the one safeguard against paganism," he declared from the pulpit. "In a city of learning like Alexandria, is it not the magnet destined to draw Greek and Jewish thinkers into the bosom of the church? Has it not the merit of solving the deepest mysteries of the faith? Does it not appeal to intellectuals by summoning them to the tribunal of the mind in their quest for final truth?"

Arius had begun his message in a quiet, conversational tone. But now, whipping himself into an emotional frenzy, he exchanged the normal sweetness of his voice for a harsh screaming. His eyes bulged. He pounded the pulpit. His veins throbbed and swelled. His body quivered like a frame afflicted with palsy.

"Does not my theology correct that foolish, irrational proposition that one God lives in three centers of personality?" he thundered. "Tell me, what relation has that abstract mathematical monstrosity to the basic problems facing our society, now in great ferment? No relation whatever. The truth is, it raises more questions than it purports to answer and does irreparable damage to the mind. Those who loudly proclaim the trinitarian error are sowing the wind, and I promise you they will reap the whirlwind. Mark my words."

Not content with expressing his precepts from the pulpit, he wrote a book, *Thalia* (*Happy Thoughts*), in the idiom and meter of heathen poetry. He spiced the writing with tasteless vulgarities.

The introduction is a commentary on the man's estimation of himself:

> *According to the faith of God's elect, who know God, sound in their creed, gifted with the Holy Spirit of God, I have received those things from partakers of wisdom, accomplished, taught of God and altogether wise. I have pursued my course with like opinions — I, the famous among men, the much-suffering for God's glory, and taught of God, I have gained wisdom and strength.*

Not only locally, but also nationally, the Arian movement was beginning to take deep root. The powerful bishop of Nicodemia, Eusebius, later to become Archbishop of Constantinople, cast his lot with Arius. According to the testimony of the Goths, almost the entire Gothic nation accepted Arianism. Alaric, king of the Visigoths, and Genseric, ruler of the Vandals, embraced the doctrines and shepherded their subjects into the expanding Arian fold.

Meanwhile, Christians in Egypt waited to see if Alexander would institute disciplinary action against the cultist. They waited in vain. Alexander, although strenuously opposed to the position of Arius, did nothing.

It is ironic that the first person to come forward and brand Arius as a heretic had at one time been a professing disciple. He was Colluthus, an Alexandrian archpriest. (The office of the archpriest was a cut above the office of the priest; hence, Colluthus was superior to Arius in authority.)

There was much speculation in Egypt as to why Colluthus turned against his fellow officer. Some thought that he grew disillusioned with the rationalism of the system. Others felt that as he watched the star of Arius ascend higher and higher in the galaxy of popularity, he was stung with jealousy. Jealousy, therefore, was the lever that moved the archpriest from the camp of Arius to the more orthodox ground defended by Alexander.

Colluthus published a tract charging Arius with subverting the gospel of Christ. As evidence, he indicated that Arius was proclaiming the same heresy heralded by Paulus of Antioch. Since

the Syrian church had deposed Paulus, Colluthus said, and since Arius shared the same untruths held by Paulus, Arius consequently stood condemned as a heretic.

The tract stunned Alexandrian society. It also smoked Alexander out of his shelter of silence. Now he had no choice but to reprimand the maverick priest. He sent word to Arius to meet him in private. Arius refused to confer.

Alexander then challenged Arius to a public debate. Again, Arius said no. Later, however, he entertained second thoughts. He decided that a public confrontation would provide an opportunity for him to amplify his convictions. He agreed to accept the challenge.

They came together in one of the larger lecture halls in the renowned Museion. The hall was a spacious chamber patterned in the form of an amphitheater and lined with stone benches that faced the stage.

That evening the room was filled to capacity. The citizens of the city could hardly wait to take in the debate.

Alexander opened the skirmish by reading a statement condemning the Christology of Arius. He quoted passages from printed sermons and from *Thalia* and called on the priest of Baukalis to renounce his formulations that denied the essential deity of Jesus Christ.

Arius was cunning enough to realize that assuming the offensive always gave the debater a certain psychological advantage over his opponent. He promptly counterattacked. The accused took on the role of the accuser. Arius charged his accuser with defining and defending erroneous statements concerning the person of Jesus.

Alexander was at the time approaching his seventy-fifth birthday. Conscious of his waning strength, he did not attempt to stand but seated himself on a wooden chair. He spoke slowly and with some difficulty. His eyes, however, were still as bright as beads. His features radiated a luminous glow, silent tribute to his walk with God over many decades. Neither had his mind lost any of its former acumen.

Arius remained standing during the debate.

Alexander refused to allow his adversary to take the offensive. He ignored the countercharges. In order to draw out the radical

character of the teachings of Arius, he plied him with pointed questions.

"You believe, do you not, that there was a time when Jesus did not exist?" he asked.

Without the slightest hesitation, Arius replied, "I believe there was a time when Jesus did not exist."

"And do you believe that there is no true identity between the Father and the Son?" Alexander asked.

"I believe there is no true identity between the Father and the Son," Arius said firmly.

"Do you believe that there is a mere resemblance of nature in the two persons of the Godhead, Father and Son?"

Arius squirmed. Finally he said, "That, Sir, is a false question. I will not say there is a 'mere resemblance.' " I prefer to say that there is true resemblance between Father and Son."

"Do you deny that the Father and the Son coexisted from all eternity?"

Arius's eyes flashed. He replied in a rasping voice, "I have already told you that is my creed. I deny the eternal coexistence of the Father and the Son."

"And do you believe that the Son cannot know the Father and the Father's will perfectly?"

"I do so believe."

At this, a gasp went up from the audience.

Arius, aware of the shock caused by his confession, stared defiantly at the sea of faces before him.

"And do you believe," Alexander continued, "that not only does the Son *not* know the Father perfectly, but that in fact he *cannot* know the Father perfectly?"

"That I believe," Arius said.

"Then I must ask you another pivotal question," Alexander said. "You must accept the proposition that Jesus Christ, since according to you He is less than God, must, therefore, be less than a Savior. Am I right?"

Arius bit his lip. Shaking his head, he retorted, "You are putting words in my mouth. I do believe, as the Bible declares, that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world."

"But you must believe, not that Jesus Christ is a complete and all-sufficient Savior who finished his redemptive work when He died on the cross for sinners and rose again for our salvation, but that he merely helps to save. Is that right?"

"I do believe that man must contribute to his salvation."

On that note the debate ended.

All through the session, absorbing every word with the utmost interest, there hovered in one of the wings of the stage a young man. He was so fascinated with the battle of words that when the conflict was over, he was grieved in spirit.

The young man was Athanasius.

Chapter 3

But for his confidence in the God of providence and the providence of God, Athanasius would have resented the construction of his body. He never grew taller than five feet and two inches. His enemies often sneered at him, calling him a dwarf. Emperor Julian was to label him "hardly a man, only a mannequin." Although diminutive of stature, he was blessed with a sturdy constitution. He would outlive twelve Roman emperors.

He had an unusually high forehead, a parrot like nose, deep-set, penetrating eyes. His complexion was swarthy, his hair copper colored and quite unruly. He sat and walked with a slight stoop, the result of bending over innumerable books and parchments. Except when in controversy — which was often — his expression was serene, composed.

Athanasius began his internship as personal secretary to Archbishop Alexander. He handled his master's correspondence, carried messages here and there as the situation dictated, took down sermon notes when Alexander was preparing his sermons, and generally made himself useful in the episcopal palace. He was blissfully happy, always maintaining a cheerful spirit.

He was delighted when the archbishop discussed with him certain problems that surfaced in connection with the distribution of funds to the needy members of local churches. Alexander once remarked to a friend, "I am impressed with the young man's piety and justice, candor, courtesy and kindness, and charity to the poor."

A year after Athanasius moved into the palace in A.D.320, Alexander ordained him to the office of deacon. This involved him not only in the agency of attending to the needs of unfortunate sufferers but also in activities as associate in the pulpit. On Sundays, he frequently read the Scriptures and led in prayer. He also taught catechetical classes during the week.

While functioning as a deacon, Athanasius began his career as a writer. He first produced a book, *Treatise against the Gentiles*. In a sense, the title was somewhat misleading, the contents provided a positive exposition of monotheism rather than a refutation of heathenism.

His second literary effort, *On the Incarnation*, was a masterful piece of writing and a vast improvement on his initial work. It focused on the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ. Some of his contemporaries hailed the book as the first attempt in history to present Christian truth in a philosophic-theological framework.

It was a lengthy dissertation. Actually, it consisted of fifty-six chapters. The literary style, although rambling, is marked by undertones of great moral earnestness. Moreover, it is laced with an abundance of Biblical text: 169 in all. The author dwells on such basic subjects as Jesus's virgin birth, the providence of God, the full deity of Christ (His major development), the vicarious atonement, and the resurrection of the Son.

His most stirring passage comes toward the end of the book. There he describes the triumphant advance of the kingdom of God — this in spite of the opposition of idolaters and the rising tide of Arianism:

> *Behold how the Savior's doctrine is everywhere increasing, while all idolatry and everything opposed to the faith of Christ is daily dwindling and losing power and falling. And thus beholding, worship the Savior, who is "above all," and mighty, even God the Word; and condemn those who are being worsted and done away by him. For as, when the sun is come, darkness no longer prevails, but if any is still left anywhere it is driven away; so now the divine appearing of the Word of God is come, the darkness of the idols prevails no more, and all parts of the world are illuminated by His teaching.*

The release of the two studies projected the writer into the spotlight. No longer would people, discussing scholars and pseudoscholars, ask, "Athan — who?"

Chapter 4

The outcome of the debate between Alexander and Arius had placed the archbishop in an embarrassing position. The Baukalis priest's open rejection of the authority of the Bible demanded radical surgery. Alexander knew that some form of discipline must be applied. He was also sure that extreme punishment, excommunication, would so upset the influential Baukalis congregation that such action would rock the foundations of Alexandrian society, an explosion he dreaded.

After much deliberation, he opted to steer a middle course. He informed Arius that he would be granted the privilege of administering the sacraments, but he was not to teach or preach from the pulpit until the whole matter could be brought before a synod of bishops.

In the crisis, Alexander felt the need to consult someone to help him decide what course of action to follow. He decided to go into conference with Athanasius.

The apprentice revealed a wisdom beyond his years. "Why do you not alert the churches in Egypt and Syria of the state of things?" he suggested. "You might send out a circular letter warning all true Christians to break fellowship with Christ's enemies — specifically, to be on guard against the impious doctrines of Arius."

"Excellent advice," Alexander said buoyantly. "I shall do it."

"Also, you might add a note of warning against the erroneous teachings of Eusebius of Nicodemia."

"That too," Alexander said. "I thank you, dear Athanasius. You have been a great help to me."

The archbishop secured the signatures of thirty priests and forty deacons for his encyclical letter and dispatched it to both Eastern and Western churches.

Not satisfied with verbal communications only, he overcame his fears and convened a provincial counsel made up of one hundred bishops. They came from Libya, Tripolitanica, and Pentapolis for the express purpose of trying Arius for heresy. They met in the Church of St. Theonis in the Egyptian quarter of Alexandria. It was the summer of 323. Alexander presided. The first step he

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Henry W. Coray is a graduate of Wheaton College and Westminster Theological Seminary. He has been a missionary in China prior to the outbreak of World War II. After that he served the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Sunnydale, California and has been active as a Home Missionary near Philadelphia, PA., before retiring in 1971. He is the father of four children and has written the following books: *The Coach at West Mackenzie; The Deep Thunder; Son of Tears* (A novel of the life of Augustine); *The Rebel Prince; Who Upset the Coach?; J. Gresham Machen — A Silhouette;* and an essay on John Witherspoon in the book *Heroic Colonial Christians*.

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