

From the December 3, 2007 Issue

St. Athanasius on the Incarnation

We are sometimes asked “are you sure that the adoption of humanity is the gospel? I’ve never heard it before!” In light of this objection it is helpful to read the following quotes from St. Athanasius, who lived in the 4th Century. Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria. In 367 he compiled a list of authoritative biblical books. That list is the oldest one we have that names all of the same books of the bible that we recognize today. He was also one of the main architects of the Nicene Creed.

In his book *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius discusses the necessity of the Son becoming flesh and what it accomplished for humanity.

Here, then, we have excerpted some key passages, all emphases are ours:

. . . what, then, was God to do? Was He to demand repentance from men for their transgression? . . . Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What—or rather *Who* was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing? His part it was, and His alone, both to bring again the corruptible to incorruption and to maintain for the Father His consistency of character with all. For He alone, being Word of the Father and above all, was in consequence both *able to recreate all*, and worthy *to suffer on behalf of all* and to be an *ambassador for all* with the Father. For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world. In one sense, indeed, He was not far from it before, for *no part of creation had ever been without Him Who, while ever abiding in union with the Father, yet fills all things that are*. But now He entered the world in a new way, stooping to our level in His love and Self-revealing to us. (*On the Incarnation*, Chapter 2, paragraphs 7 and 8.)

Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, *all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection*. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; *He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled* and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death. (*On the Incarnation*, Chapter 2, paragraph 9.)

Thus by His own power *He restored the whole nature of man*. The Savior's own inspired disciples

assure us of this. We read in one place: “For the love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge that, if One died on behalf of all, then all died, and He died for all that we should no longer live unto ourselves, but unto Him who died and rose again from the dead, even our Lord Jesus Christ.” [2 Cor. 5:14] And again another says: “But we behold Him Who hath been made a little lower than the angels, even Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He should taste of death on behalf of every man.” [Heb. 2:9] The same writer goes on to point out why it was necessary for God the Word and none other to become Man: “For it became Him, for Whom are all things and through Whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Author of their salvation perfect through suffering.” [Heb. 2:10] He means that the rescue of mankind from corruption was the proper part only of Him Who made them in the beginning. (*On the Incarnation*, Chapter 2, paragraph 10.)