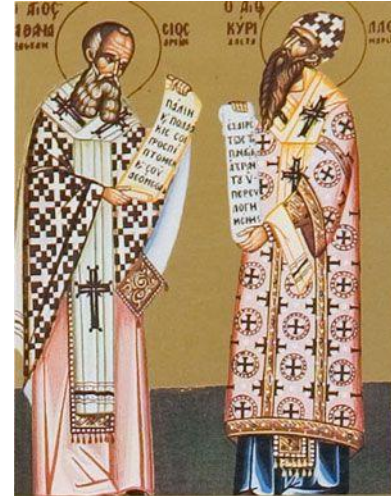


## Our Holy Fathers Athanasius and Cyril, Archbishops of Alexandria

These men shone as two great lights of the great city of Alexandria in Egypt. They strove mightily to uphold the orthodox doctrine of Christ, with standing the heresies of their day so that the truth might be preserved for the ages to come.

Though these two men were vilified by many in their generation, the Church has ever glorified them as great defenders of the Faith, standards of orthodox teaching, and true Fathers of the Church. Though separated by years in this life (for they ruled Alexandria in different centuries), yet they are united in the same love for Christ and share the same reward as faithful stewards of the truth.



### *St. Athanasius of Alexandria*

Athanasius was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 297. He was ordained deacon in the year 319. His brilliance was shown in his sermons *Against the Arians*, written to answer the widely spreading heresy of Arianism which had been condemned in 318 by a local synod. According to Arius, an elderly priest of Alexandria, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were three separate essences or substances, which is contrary to orthodox teaching. The spread of Arianism prompted Emperor Constantine to convene the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in the year 325. It was as a deacon that Athanasius accompanied Patriarch Alexander to the First Council at Nicaea. At the Council, Athanasius brilliantly opposed the false teaching of Arius. Unfortunately, the controversy would last for another two centuries.

After the death of Patriarch Alexander, Athanasius was unanimously chosen as his successor and was consecrated at the age of twenty-eight, and installed as the Archbishop of Alexandria. Athanasius guided the Church of Alexandria for forty-seven years, and during this time he endured persecution and grief from his antagonists. Several times he was expelled from Alexandria and hid himself from the Arians in desolate places, since they repeatedly tried to kill him. Athanasius spent more than twenty years in exile, returned to his flock, and then was banished again.

There was a time when Athanasius remained as the only orthodox bishop in the area, at a moment when all the other bishops had fallen into heresy. At a false council of Arian bishops, Athanasius was deposed as Archbishop. Despite being persecuted for many years, the saint continued to defend orthodox teaching, writing countless letters and tracts against the Arian heresy.

When Julian the Apostate (361-363) began a persecution against Christians, his wrath first fell upon St. Athanasius, whom he considered a great pillar of orthodoxy. Julian intended to kill the saint in order to strike Christianity a grievous blow, but he soon perished himself. Mortally wounded by an arrow during a battle, he cried out with despair: "You have conquered, O Galilean." After Julian's death, St. Athanasius guided the Alexandrian Church for seven more years and died on May 2, 373, at the age of seventy-six.

Numerous works of St. Athanasius have been preserved: a treatise on the Incarnation of the Word of God; four orations against the Arian heresy; an epistle to Epictetus, bishop of the Church in Corinth, on the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ; four epistles to Serapion, Bishop of Thmuis, about the Holy Spirit and His equality with the Father and the Son, directed against the heresy of Macedonius.

Other apologetic works of the Saint in defense of the orthodox faith have been preserved, among which is the letter to Emperor Constantius. St. Athanasius wrote commentaries on Holy Scripture, books of moral and didactic character, as well as a biography of Saint Anthony the Great (January 17), with whom Saint Athanasius was very close.

### *St. Cyril of Alexandria*

Cyril was born about 378 in the small town of Theodosios, in Egypt. His mother's brother, Theophilus, was a priest, who eventually was consecrated as the Archbishop of Alexandria. Cyril's mother remained close to her brother, Theophilus, and under his guidance Cyril was well educated.

In his youth Cyril entered the monastery of Macarius in the Nitreia hills, where he stayed for six years. His uncle, Archbishop Theophilus (385-412), ordained him as a deacon.

Upon the death of Archbishop Theophilus, Cyril was unanimously chosen to the patriarchal throne of the Alexandrian Church. He led the struggle against the spread of the Novatian heresy in Alexandria, which taught that any Christian who had fallen away from the Church during a time of persecution, could not be received back into it.

A more difficult struggle awaited the saint with the emergence of the Nestorian heresy. Nestorius, a priest of the Antiochian Church, became the Archbishop of Constantinople in the year 428. From that position, he was able to spread his heretical teaching that Jesus was not one Person, both God and man, but the union of two persons and two natures, God and man. And so, Nestorius referred to the Blessed Virgin Mary not as the *Theotokos* (which means God-bearer, or Mother of God) but rather *Christotokos* (which means *Christ-bearer*), implying that she gave birth not to God, but only to a man, the human person of Christ. Archbishop Cyril repeatedly wrote to Nestorius and pointed out his error, but Nestorius continued to persevere in it. Then the saint sent out epistles against Nestorianism to the clergy of Constantinople and to the holy emperor Theodosius the Younger (408-450), denouncing the heresy. Cyril wrote also to other Churches, to Pope Celestine and to the other Patriarchs, and even to monks of several monasteries, warning of the emergence of a dangerous heresy.

Nestorius started an open persecution against those who opposed him. One of his supporters, Bishop Dorotheus, pronounced an anathema against anyone who would call the Most Holy Virgin Mary the *Theotokos*.

Nestorius hated Cyril and brought out against him every kind of slander and fabrication, calling him a heretic. Nevertheless, Cyril continued to defend orthodox teaching with all his strength. To resolve the controversy, an Ecumenical Council was convened in the city of Ephesus in the year 431. This Council was attended by 200 bishops, who arrived from various Churches. The Fathers of the Council began their sessions with Archbishop Cyril presiding. Having examined the teaching of Nestorius, the Council condemned him as a heretic. Nestorius did not submit to the Council, and Bishop John of Antioch opened a "robber council", which decreed Cyril a

heretic. The unrest increased. By order of the emperor, Archbishop Cyril of Alexandria and Archbishop Memnon of Ephesus were locked in prison, and Archbishop Nestorius was deposed.

Soon Saints Cyril and Memnon were freed, and the sessions of the Council continued. Nestorius, not submitting himself to the determinations of the Council, was deprived of priestly rank. By order of the emperor, he was sent to a faraway place in the Libyan wilderness, where he died in grievous torments. Eventually, even Bishop John of Antioch and the remaining Syrian bishops signed the decrees of the Council of Ephesus.

Cyril guided the Alexandrian Church for 32 years. He died in the year AD 444, leaving behind many works. In particular, the following ought to be mentioned: *Commentaries on the Gospel of Luke; On the Gospel of John; On the Epistles of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians and to the Hebrews*; also, *an Apologia in Defense of Christianity* against the Emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363). Of vast significance are his *Five Books* against Nestorius; a work on the Most Holy Trinity under the title *Thesaurus*, written against Arius and Eunomios. Also, two dogmatic compositions on the Most Holy Trinity, distinguished by a precise exposition of orthodox teaching on the Procession of the Holy Spirit. Cyril wrote *Against Anthropomorphism* for several Egyptians, who through ignorance depicted God in human form. Among Cyril's works are also *The Discussions*, which include a moving and edifying *Discourse on the Exodus of the Soul*.