



KATHOLISCHE HOCHSCHULE ITI
ITI CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

ESSAY ON ST. ATHANASIUS
De Incarnatione (On the Incarnation, 54-end)¹
for BA/STM/STL/STD Applicants

In writing your essay please pay particular attention to:

- (1) the structure of St. Athanasius's argument;
- (2) his teaching on the nature of theological reasoning;
- (3) his teaching on the relation between theology and the Christian life.

54. So just as if someone wishes to see God, who is invisible in nature and in no way visible, he understands and knows him from his works, so he who does not see Christ with his mind, let him learn of him from the works of his body, and let him test whether they be human or of God. And if they be human, let him mock; but if they are recognized to be not human but of God, let him not laugh at what are not to be mocked, but rather wonder that through such simple means these divine things have been revealed to us, and that through death immortality has come to all, and through the incarnation of the Word the universal providence and its leader and creator the Word of God himself have been made known. For he became man that we might become divine; and he revealed himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and he endured insults from men that we might inherit incorruption. He himself was harmed in no respect, as he is impassible and incorruptible and the very Word and God, but he cared for and saved suffering men, for whom he endured these things, by his impassability. And, in short, the achievements of the Saviour effected through his incarnation are of such a kind and so great, that if anyone wished to expound them he would be like those who gaze at the vast expanse of the sea and wish to count the number of its waves. For as one cannot grasp all the waves with his eyes, since the successive waves elude the perception of him who tries to count them; so also he who tries to comprehend all the accomplishments of Christ in the body is unable to grasp them all in his reckoning, for those that pass before his mind are more than he thinks he has grasped. So it is better not to view or speak of all of which one cannot even express a part, but to recall one part, leaving you to wonder at the whole. For they are all equally amazing, and wherever anyone looks, there to his exceeding wonder he sees the divinity of the Word.
55. So after what has been said above, this you must learn and consider as the principle of what remains unmentioned, and marvel at greatly; that when the Saviour came, idolatry no more increased, but even that which existed is diminishing and gradually ceasing. No longer does the wisdom of the Greeks prosper, but even that which does exist is now disappearing. And the demons no longer deceive with fantasies and oracles and magic, but as soon as they dare and try they are put to shame by the sign of the cross. To sum up, see how the teaching of the Saviour
56. increases everywhere, while all idolatry and all opposition to the faith of Christ day by day diminish and weaken and fall. And seeing this, worship the Saviour "who is over all" (Rom 9:5) and the powerful God the Word, but condemn those whom he causes to diminish and disappear. For just as when the sun is present darkness no longer has any strength, but even if there is some darkness left anywhere it

¹ Translated by R.W. Thomson (Oxford, 1971)

is put to flight, even so, since the divine manifestation of God the Word has occurred, the darkness of idols has no more strength, but all parts of the world everywhere are illuminated by his teaching. And just as if someone is king and is not seen anywhere but remains inside his palace, frequently seditious men, taking advantage of his absence, proclaim themselves, and each one of them deceives the simple by pretending to be king; and thus men are led astray by a name, for they hear that there is a king but do not see him, because they cannot possibly enter the palace. But when the real king comes forth and is revealed, then the deceitful revolutionaries are refuted by his presence, while the citizens, seeing the real king, abandon those who formerly deceived them. In like fashion, demons and men previously exercised deceit and paid to themselves the honour due to God. But after the Word of God was revealed in the body and made known to us his Father, then the deceit of the demons disappears and vanishes, while men, looking to the true divine Word of the Father, abandon idols and henceforth recognize the true God. This is a proof that Christ is God the Word and the Power of God. For since these human things cease yet the word of Christ remains, it is clear to all that the things which cease are temporal, but he who remains is God and the true Son and only-begotten Word of God.

57. These remarks, O lover of Christ, we briefly offer you as the rudiments and paradigm of the faith of Christ and his divine manifestation to us. But if you take the opportunity they present and read the words of the Scriptures and really apply your mind to them, you will learn from them more completely and more clearly the accuracy of what has been said. For the Scriptures were spoken and written by God through men versed in theology; and we have learned from the teachers of theology who are found therein, who were also witnesses of the divinity of Christ, and we pass on our knowledge to your own love of learning. You will learn also of his second glorious and truly divine manifestation to us, when he will come no more with simplicity but in his own glory, no more with humility but in his own greatness, no more to suffer but thenceforth to bestow the fruit of his own cross on all—I mean the resurrection and incorruption—no more judged but judging all according to the works each one has done in the body, whether good or evil; wherefrom for the good is reserved the kingdom of heaven, but for those who have done evil, eternal fire and outer darkness. For so the Lord himself says: “I say to you that hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven in the glory of the Father.” (Matt. 26:64) For this reason the saying is salutary which prepares us for that day and says: “Be ready and keep watch, for he will come in an hour that you do not know.” (Matt. 24:42) For according to the blessed Paul: “We must all stand before the tribunal of Christ, that each may receive according to what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” (2 Cor. 5:10) But in addition to the study and true knowledge of the Scriptures are needed a good life and pure soul and virtue in Christ, so that the mind, journeying in this path, may be able to obtain and apprehend what it desires, in so far as human nature is able to learn about God the Word. For without a pure mind and a life modeled on the saints, no one can apprehend the words of the saints. For just as if someone wishes to see the light of the sun he cleanses and clears his eye, and purifies it until it is similar to what he desires, so that as the eye thus becomes light it may see the light of the sun; or as when someone wishes to see a city or a country he goes to that place for the sight; so he who wishes to grasp the thought of the theologians must first cleanse and wash his soul by his conduct and approach the saints in the imitation of their deeds, so that, being included in their company through the manner of his life, he may understand those things which have been revealed to them by God, and thenceforth, as if joined to them, may escape the danger which threatens sinners and the fire which consumes them on the day of judgement, and that he may receive what has been reserved for the saints in the kingdom of heaven, “which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have they ascended into the heart of man”, (1 Cor. 2:9) all the things which have been prepared for those who live in virtue and love God and the Father, in Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom and with whom, to the Father with the Son himself in the holy Spirit, be honor and power, and glory, for ever and ever, Amen.