



3rd Week of Easter and the Memorial of St Athanasius 2 and 4 May 2025 **Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh**

“Ready to suffer for the truth”

“And (the Apostles) left the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name (Acts 5:41)”

One of the notable happenings at the funeral of Pope Francis was the presence of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, the acknowledged spiritual Leader of the Orthodox Churches. Bartholomew was in primary position at the Requiem Mass, so highlighting the importance of the Patriarch to the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Francis had hoped to go to Nicaea (in present day Turkey) this May alongside Bartholomew to mark 1700 years of the great Council of Nicaea. Fr Gerald O’Collins, S.J. and Fr Edward G. Farrugia, S.J. in their ‘A Concise Dictionary of Theology’ describe the Council as *“the first ecumenical council, which was convoked by Emperor Constantine the Great (d 337) and met at Nicaea (now Iznik in Turkey) to deal with the Arian heresy....Arius, an Alexandrian priest, had been claiming that Christ, far from being fully and truly divine, was merely the first among God’s creatures. In answer the Council taught that Christ was the “only begotten” Son of the Father....A rising star at the Council was St Athanasius, later bishop of Alexandria.”* The memorial of St Athanasius is kept by the Church on Friday this week 2 May. Our diocesan “ordo” says *“He suffered persecution and was exiled for seventeen years for resisting compromise in essentials of the Faith.”*

In these days when we are reading not only of the Resurrection appearances of Jesus but also of the witness of Apostles to His Resurrection, we are conscious that their witness to the truth led to persecution and martyrdom. Times hadn’t changed in terms of the persecution of Athanasius, who stood by the Faith of Peter. You will remember his words recorded in St Matthew’s Gospel Chapter 16 when Jesus asked his disciples, *“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”*.....Simon Peter replied, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* And Jesus answered him, *“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father, who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”* Francis would have gone to Nicaea to proclaim this same Faith, on which Peter’s role as Chief Shepherd was based.

Pope Francis was very conscious of his role in teaching that same Faith: one of the acts that many of us recall quite recently was his bringing the Chair of Peter (symbolising his role as teacher) from its position in a sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, to the floor of the Basilica when he made a pronouncement for the close of the Synod on Synodality (October 2024). Francis was also, as were his predecessors, conscious that the growing communion with the Church was very important in witnessing to the truth of Jesus the

Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese



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only begotten Son of God. At the Funeral of Pope Francis we noted a special place in the Liturgy for Eastern Catholic Churches already in communion with the Pope and strengthening our communal witness in these challenging times. Many of those Churches have come from environments where there is persecution too.

The Cardinals gathering for the Conclave to choose a new Pope starting 7 May are very aware of the need for the whole Church to pray for guidance of the Holy Spirit in this task. They look to a Pope who will be ready to suffer for the truth of the Gospel handed on in the Teaching of the Church, and to a shepherd who will care for the whole flock.

Underpinning the special Mission of the successor to Peter is love as we see in the Gospel for the 3rd Sunday of Easter: the Lord asks Peter three times *"Do you love me?"* Let us pray with the whole Church in the company of the Blessed Virgin Mary in these days for the successor to Peter to be such a man, a man who can say *"Lord you know everything; you know that I love you."*

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