

Lesson 4: The Church as Acts 29

As we discussed, the Book of Acts is a testament of the early days of the church focusing on the acts of the apostles and the spread of the Gospel. In Acts 28, St. Luke ends the book very abruptly as we see St. Paul preparing for a trial before Caesar, but without being told what comes next. Instead, he writes that Paul was “preaching the kingdom of God.”

“Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him” (Acts 28: 30-31)

Obviously, if St. Luke’s mission was to record the historic facts on St. Paul, he would most definitely record how he died. Instead, it is clear that the goal is not to chronicle the historic facts of a character, but to bring to light the spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem all the way to Rome.

“But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have **testified** for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also **bear witness** at Rome.’” (Acts 23:11)

The open-end is intentional in order to portray the spread of the Word of God which no obstacle, no shipwreck, no beating with rods, no roman authorities could hinder from reaching the heart of every human. The end of the book confirms that there were no restraints on St. Paul’s preaching. This abrupt yet victorious ending compels the reader to ask about their own role in the narrative.

In Lesson 4, we will step into the uncharted territory of Acts 29. In this new imagined chapter, we the Christians, are called to be living witnesses for Christ. By exploring the lives of various saints from different times, we can learn how we too can have unwavering devotion to Christ and faithfully proclaim His message even amidst adversity.

“But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” (James 2:18)

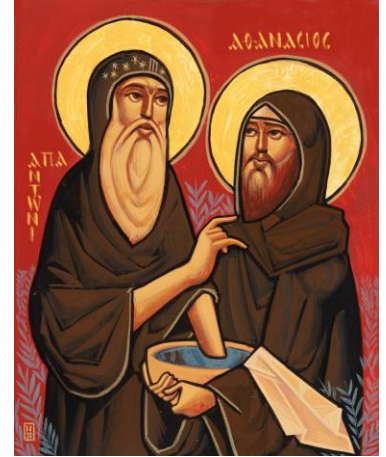
“For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.” (James 1: 23)

Character Study: St. Athanasius

Feast day: 7 Pachons

Early life

- In light of the theme of being a witness, we present to you one of the most influential witnesses for truth in the history of the church, that is St. Athanasius the Apostolic.
- St. Athanasius, born to pagan parents around **296-298 A.D.** in **Alexandria, Egypt**. He longed to be Christian after he had been touched by the kind actions of those who practiced the faith.
- Under the guidance of Pope Alexandros, Athanasius was baptized, ordained as a deacon and appointed as a personal secretary to Pope Alexandros.
- He was discipled as a monk by St. Antony the father of all monks.
- As a result of being surrounded by many great teachers, he was immersed in the Apostolic teachings even at a young age which aided him on his mission to witness for the faith.



His witness against heresies

- St. Athanasius stood only for the truth to the extent that he was labelled Athanasius **Contra Mundum**, that is to say Athanasius Against the World.
- When heresies arose, St. Athanasius emerged as a prominent figure in the Church, particularly known for his defense of Orthodox Christian beliefs, Christ's nature, and the Incarnation.
 - He vigorously opposed the **Arian heresy**, which **denied the full divinity of Christ**, asserting instead that Christ was of a **different** substance than the Father, making the Son unequal with the Father.
 - His unwavering commitment to Orthodox doctrine led him into conflict with powerful figures such as Emperors and Bishops who supported Arianism.
 - Despite facing exile **five times** and persecution, Athanasius remained steadfast in his defense of the true faith handed down from the apostles.
 - His eloquence and fearlessness in articulating the essence of Christ's divinity, and in the documentation of the Creed, solidified his reputation as a **defender of the faith** and reflected his unwavering commitment to truth amidst adversity.

“None of us judges by what he does not know, and no one is called a Saint by his learning and knowledge; but each one will be called to Judgment on these points: whether one kept the Faith and observed the commandments.” (St. Athanasius)

“If the world is against the Truth, then I am against the world.” (St. Athanasius)

Teachings

- St. Athanasius and his disciples wrote a massive wealth of commentaries, teachings, and biographies (ex: life of Antony) but one piece that has captured interest across centuries is **“On the Incarnation”**.
 - St Athanasius explains how and why the Word of God became flesh to redeem humanity from sin and restore the fallen creation, and how God’s mercy and justice necessitated the incarnation.
- St. Athanasius also believed that the **power of the resurrection** is essential to any Christian witness.

“Human beings before believing in Christ view death as fearsome and are terrified at it. But when they come to faith in Him and to His teaching, they so despise death that they eagerly rush to it **and become witnesses to the resurrection over it affected by the savior.**” (St Athanasius)

- Without the resurrection, Christians would be preaching a message of defeat and despair.
- Christ raised humanity and restored us in His image.
- **This is the message of victory and freedom that we proclaim when we witness.**



“And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (1 Corinthians 15:17)

“You descended into Hades, and brought up, those who were captives, in that place. And granted us again, the freedom, as a good God, for You have risen and saved us.” (Midnight Praises Sunday Theotokia Part 16)

Applications from the Life of St. Athanasius

- Although St. Athanasius lived in a different time and place, we can relate to him in the trials we face everyday when we witness for Christ in our schools, work, and in an increasingly secularized society. Let us stand steadfast in our lives, and profess that Christ is God, through our words, actions and ultimately our lives.
- Whenever we feel we are alone in our faith, let us remember that St. Athanasius stood against the world, was exiled and alienated for his faith. Let us profess His resurrection every day of our life by partaking in His Mysteries and be witnesses through the sacramental life of our Orthodox Church.
- St. Athanasius also shows us that our **Bible** is not just to be memorized; it is to be **understood, lived, and experienced**. We are a walking Gospel in any environment we are placed in. Let us not separate our duty as Christian witnesses from our roles in society (as a son/daughter, sibling, student, worker). Rather, actively seek a relationship with Christ at all times, and you will assuredly find Him.

“The self-revealing of the Word is in every dimension — above, in creation; below, in the Incarnation; in the depth, in Hades; in the breadth, throughout the world. All things have been filled with the knowledge of God.” (St. Athanasius)

Character Study of St. Antony the Great

Feast Day: 22 Tuba

Early life

- St. Antony the Great, known as the **Father of Monasticism**, was a native Egyptian born around the **year 251 AD**.
- He was born in Qamn Al Arous, Egypt, in the Bani Suif governorate to a very pious and God-fearing household.
- He used to attend the Lord’s house as a child and was obedient and attentive to what was read, keeping in heart what was profitable in what he heard.
- His parents passed away when he was between the ages of 18 and 20. About six months later, he started reflecting on how the Apostles left all and followed our savior and how in the book of Acts, the Christians sold all their possession and laid it at the Apostle’s feet. Pondering over these things, he received his call to be a monk and slowly started to respond to the calling.

Preparation to the call

- Before heading out to live in seclusion, Antony went to the outskirts of the village and spent time with people who were practicing piety and they accepted him in their homes.
- Antony spent that time learning virtues from each person he stayed with in preparation for his mission. These virtues later on aided him when he entered the dessert.
- Upon acquiring these virtues, Antony entered a ruined fort across the Nile river and trained himself in solitude for twenty years. Very little is known about what happened during this time since his acquaintances who came were not permitted to enter.

Emerging from the Fort

- Throughout St Antony’s period of seclusion, many were waiting outside the fort eager and wishful to learn from him and imitate his discipline.

“Then for the first time [in twenty years] he was seen outside the fort by those who came to see him...he was not troubled when he beheld the crowd, nor overjoyed at being saluted by so many... Through him the Lord healed the bodily ailments of many present, and cleansed others from evil spirits. And He gave grace to Antony in speaking, so that he consoled many that were sorrowful...exhorting all to prefer the love of Christ before all that is in the world.”
(Life of Antony by St. Athanasius)

From this passage we can learn a few things:

1. Although he hid himself for twenty years, he was not forgotten about by those who witnessed his faith. By imitating God and living a virtuous life, Antony witnessed to God. In the same way, when others see our love for God, they will subsequently be drawn to Him.
2. He was not troubled by the crowd nor overjoyed because he understood that the people came to see God and witness His work. In the same way we can proclaim: “not I, but the grace of God which was with me.” (1 Corinthians 15:10)
3. The Lord visited His people through Antony. Likewise, the Lord sends us to console one another and bring everyone back to His divine Love.

Teachings

The words of Antony served to encourage and edify everyone that is around him. His followers were able to witness God in his words and actions which stimulated the love of God in their hearts. Here are a few teachings of St. Antony that can prepare us for our mission to witness:

Do not let the desire of the World take hold of you:

“Therefore, let the desire of possession take hold of no one, for what gain is it to acquire these things which we cannot take with us? Why not rather get those things which we can take away with us: wit, prudence, justice, temperance, courage, understanding, love, kindness to the poor, faith in Christ, freedom from wrath, hospitality?” (Life of Antony by St. Athanasius)

- When Jesus sent the twelve on their mission to witness to Him, “He sent them to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. And He said to them, ‘Take nothing for the journey, neither staffs nor bag nor bread nor money; and do not have two tunics apiece.’” (Luke 9:2-3)
- Christ wished for His disciples to be free of all worldly desires, love of riches and gains. In the same way, as we embark on our mission, we are called to set our eyes and hearts on the heavenly kingdom by acquiring Godly virtues.

Be strong and courageous:

“Let us be courageous and rejoice always, believing that we are safe. Let us consider in our soul that the Lord is with us, who put the evil spirits to flight and broke their power. Let us consider and lay to heart that while the Lord is with us, our foes can do us no hurt.” (Life of Antony by St. Athanasius)

- As we proceed with our mission, we will most certainly face difficulties in sharing the message. These challenges can vary greatly depending on the environment we are in. However, St. Antony encourages us to be steadfast and to place our hope in God, knowing that He is by our side.

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us.”
(Romans 8:31)

Character Study: The 21 Martyrs of Libya

Feast day: 8 Amshir

Facts

- They included **20 men from Egypt and 1 from Ghana** who refused to deny Christ even in the face of martyrdom.
- They were martyred on **February 15, 2015**.
- His Holiness Pope Tawadros II announced the inclusion of the 21 Coptic new martyrs of Libya in the Synaxarium of the Coptic church.
- They were canonized on **February 21, 2015**.
- Their feast corresponds to **15 February** in the Gregorian Calendar.
- These 21 men were ordinary workers who moved to Libya to work and provide for their families.

Application

- The 21 Martyrs of Libya exemplify the timeless call to witness for Christ in the modern world, demonstrating that the call is not just confined to the early period of the church. They truly bore their cross with peace, pride and joy, which can only be achieved through Christ.
- This serves as a reminder that we too can witness for Christ in our daily interactions, our jobs, and our schools. As we reflect on their martyrdom, we should seek inspiration to bear witness to the truth even in the most difficult circumstances.
- On their mission, they did not ask for exemption from danger and fear, understanding that the more trials increased, the more grace increased as well. Believing in Christ, these 21 Martyrs did not fear death; instead they became witnesses to the power of the resurrection.



“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” (2 Corinthians 12: 9)

- These Martyrs offered themselves for the glory of God. As mentioned in lesson 1, the Greek word for witness is *mártyras*. The Lord has defined that the fullness of love is when we offer ourselves for the other. Since God is love, He offered Himself for us. He then calls us to offer ourselves to Him through the church. The more we offer to God, the more we bear witness to Him.

“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.” (John 15:12-13)

Curriculum Summary

- The first lesson we discussed the definition of Christian witnessing as established by Jesus Christ through His teachings in the sermon on the mount and exploring His final message in each of the four Gospels.
- In the second lesson we discover how the apostles applied those teachings in establishing the early church with Christ as its chief cornerstone.
- In the third lesson we took a deeper dive into the spread of the Word through the witnessing of St. Paul.
- In this lesson, we studied how St. Athanasius witnessed in the world as a deacon and a pope, St. Antony who witnessed in the dessert and the martyrs of Libya.
- The only part missing is how each one of us will witness to Him.

The Epilogue: Our Role in the Story

- Many of us believe that to witness to God, an opportunity will present itself where a stranger asks us about the cross on our necks (or tattoo on our hands) and through conversing with them they will be brought to the faith. We often think that this is the only way to witness to God.
- Although this can be a form of witnessing, there is a lot more we can do. Instead of passively hoping for opportunities to present themselves, we have an active role to play every day of our lives of bringing the Gospel to everyone.
- Witnessing to God begins with saying no to a Big Mac on a Friday night since you are fasting. It happens when we start and end our day with God and not limit Him to a specific place and time (e.g. Sunday morning Liturgy).
- In examining the teachings of Jesus, the witnessing of St. Peter, St. John, St. James, St. Stephen, St. Philip, St. Paul, Apollos, Aquila, Priscilla, St. Athanasius, St. Antony, and the 21 martyrs of Libya, we are reminded that Christian Orthodoxy is not a religion, but a life in Christ.
- We are also reminded that there is more than one way to come to Christ. He reveals Himself to each one of us in a way that would touch us according to our personalities and gifts.
- Interestingly enough, the book of Acts is the only book of the Bible that doesn’t end with the word “Amen”. From a poetic perspective, we can sense that the Acts, or the work of the Holy Spirit lives on, through each one of us.

“Let everything that has breath praise the name of the Lord.” (Psalms 150:6)