

The Legends of Bishop Nicholas of Myra



St. Nicholas is revered by many faiths and traditions and is honored and loved world wide. The man behind "Santa Claus" was a Christian Bishop in Myra, a seaside town in what is now Western Turkey in the early Fourth Century A.D. Upon this known fact have grown many legends. Legends are stories about a historical figure which often embellish and expand far beyond the actual facts, though they may contain some elements of truth. Bishop Nicholas is mentioned by Methodius (d. 311) and John Chrysostom (d. 407) in his Liturgy, and a Sixth Century abbot, Nicholas of Sion, is believed to have written his biography and about his miracles, many of which involved saving children from tragedy.

Perhaps no other saint has been as widely loved as Nicholas. He is honored by Greek and Russian Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and even Reformed Protestantism. Justinian named a church for him in Constantinople in the sixth century and about 1000 A. D. he was revered in Germany by Otto 2 (whose wife was Greek Orthodox). When the Saracens took the city, the Italians moved his relics to Bari in Italy in 1087. He is considered the Patron Saint of Moscow as well as many other places. In the Middle Ages, 400 churches were named for him in England alone. His image was used on Byzantine seals and icons more than any other saint, and he was a favorite subject of medieval artist and liturgical plays.

Born at Patar in Lycia in Asia Minor, orphaned at a very early age, he was raised by his Uncle in a Monastery. His parents died of a plague, leaving him very wealthy - but he gave it all away secretly to the poor and the needy. This was done in creative ways. For example, he bought a carpet from a man at a ridiculously high price. Then he gave the carpet to the man's wife as a gift.

The best know tale of his generosity concerns three girls whose impoverished father had no money for their marriage dowries, and who faced slavery as a result. Nicholas tossed bags of gold coins through girl's windows at night. Some versions have him dropping the third bag of coins down the chimney. Each of the girls was able to marry as a result of these gifts from nowhere.

Nicholas wanted to become a monk, but as a result of a dream where Jesus gave him a jeweled copy of the four gospels, he became a priest, tradition has it at the age of 17.

Nicholas may have made a pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine. Perhaps on the journey home, there was a fierce storm during which he saved three sailors by appearing and stilling the storm.

The Bishop at Myra had recently died, and there was disagreement on the selection of a new bishop. During a time of fasting and prayer, came the revelation of an angel that they were to make a man named Nicholas, a stranger, who would be the first to arrive for morning prayers, the new Bishop. Young Nicholas was made the Bishop of Myra.

Nicholas was a good choice. He was known for his piety and zeal for the faith, as well as his concern for children, the needy and the poor. Some miracles were attributed to him and the nick-name the Wonder Worker as well. He would soon become known for his courage. He was imprisoned and tortured during the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian and his Regent Maximian somewhere between 303 and 311 A.D., but Nicholas continued to teach even in chains, refusing to renounce Christ, despite imprisonment and torture.

When Constantine became Emperor, Christianity suddenly became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313 A.D. Nicholas was released and returned to his flock. One of the oldest accounts of Nicholas has him saving three innocent soldiers who had been condemned to death by appearing in the Emperor's dreams interceding in their behalf.

Soon after this, the Council of Nicaea met in 325 A.D. to deal with Arius and his false teachings about Christ's Divinity. While the records do not show him as having attended, tradition suggests he was not only there, but had slapped Arius in the face for his heresy, was temporarily defrocked and then restored by miraculous revelation. If not there, at least, according to one account, Myra alone was untouched by the filth of this heresy due to the faithful teaching of its bishop, Nicholas.

Nicholas died on December 6th, either in 345 or 352 A.D. That day has become his feast day. A European custom in the Middle ages was the election of a boy as Bishop on Nicholas' feast day (Dec. 6th) who would reign until Holy Innocent's day (Dec. 28th) when he would have to preach a sermon!

Another tradition of remembering Nicholas by giving anonymous gifts to children and the poor as gifts coming from him developed in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands - similar to the gifts given by of the Three Kings in Spain on Epiphany Eve (Jan. 6th). It is thought by some that this gift giving custom originally replaced a pagan yuletide celebration of Woden, coming on horseback with gifts.

With the Reformation's break from Roman Catholicism, "St. Nicholas" became "Pere Noel" (France) "Father Christmas" (England) "Christkindl" (German Lutherans), "Grandfather Frost" (under Russian Communism - wearing blue) and "Sinterklaas" (Dutch) - the mispronunciation of the latter in America became "Santa Claus".

The fat jolly Santa with his red suit we know was the creation of an illustration by Thomas Nash in 1864 and 1878, and Haddon Sundblom's illustrations for Cola-Cola from 1931 to 1964, and Clement Moore's Poem "Twas the Night before Christmas" in the 1860's.



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Told by Eldrbarry

Let your continual mercy, O Lord, enkindle in your church the never-failing gift of charity, that, following the example of your servant Nicholas of Myra, we may have grace to deal in generosity and love with children and with all who are poor and distressed, and to uphold the cause of the those who have no helper and are tossed in tempests of doubt or grief; for the sake of Him who gave His life for us, your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and ever.

Christmas 1998 ---- Barry McWilliams (eldrbarry)
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