

From the Pastor

December 23, 2018

As I sit to write this message to you, it is December 17th. It occurs to me that the stories and folk-tales people invent in order to make history more interesting, are, more often than not, less interesting than the real history. In support of my belief, I offer for your consideration, the life of Saint Nicholas (15 March 270 to 6 December 343 A.D.), the historical basis for *Santa Claus*.

Nicholas was born in the city of Patara (*modern Gelemis, southwest coast of Turkey*), at the time in the Roman Imperial Province of Asia Minor. His parents, Epiphanius and Johanna, died when Nicholas was still a boy, so he was adopted by his uncle Theophanes, Bishop of nearby city of Myra (*modern Demre, Turkey*).

Nicholas literally grew up in the church, under his uncle's guidance; but his parent's left him a large inheritance, and his uncle exerted no pressure on him to become a priest. Uncertain what to do with his future, Nicholas made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Choosing to travel by sea, instead of the longer overland route, he rented passage on a merchant vessel. Before arriving at their destination, the ship was enveloped in a severe storm. Saint Nicholas, not being a sailor, could only pray. He, the ship, and the entire crew survived, so upon reaching the Holy Land, Nicholas resolved to become a priest.

Subsequently ordained by his uncle, after returning to Myra, Nicholas used his inheritance for good works; yet, he soon noticed that many people in the gravest of need would never ask for help. His solution was to place coins in the shoes people left outside their doors to dry, or to throw bags of coins through open windows at night. One famous story involves his clandestine generosity to prevent a bankrupt widower from selling his daughters into slavery to repay a crushing debt (a disgusting practice that was entirely legal in the Roman Empire).

Uncle Theophanes was executed for his faith during the persecution of the Roman Emperor Diocletian (284 to 305 A.D.). The same fate befell his successor. The office of Bishop of Myra then fell to Nicholas himself. He was arrested for the crime of Christianity (*considered so by the Romans because Christians refused to sacrifice to the emperors*). Nicholas endured imprisonment and torture, and would have followed his predecessors into martyrdom, except Diocletian died and the empire descended into civil war. By the end of that war, Constantine the Great was emperor of Rome. His mother, St. Helena, was a secret Christian, so for her sake he legalized Christianity.

Now able to practice the faith openly, Bishop St. Nicholas took as his special ministry the care of prisoners and buying freedom for enslaved Christians. He was one of the 318 bishops who attended the First Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., where he was arrested for

assault after an altercation with a heretic named Arius (*the Greek Orthodox have a well-known icon celebrating this event*).

Over a century after the death of St Nicholas, the Roman Empire in the west fell to invasion by German barbarians. The eastern portion of the empire continued for centuries afterwards, but in 1071, it lost a decisive battle to an Islamic invasion of Seljuk Turks; hence the name of the current nation of Turkey. To save them from desecration, the faithful transported the remains of the saint to Italy, where they were placed in a church built for them in 1087. It still exists: the *Pontifical Basilica di San Nicola*, in Bari, southern Italy. In May of 2017, Pope Francis loaned these relics to the Russian Orthodox Church, where one million pilgrims visited them in the *Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood* in St. Petersburg (*this church was constructed on the site where Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 by anarchist terrorists*).

Saint Nicholas is the patron saint of sailors, merchants, archers, repentant thieves, children, brewers, pawnbrokers, and students, as well as some countries such as modern Greece, and pre-Communist Russia. As devotion spread throughout Europe, his name was pronounced in various ways. In the original Greek, Nicholas means "People's Victory". As a saint, Latin speakers called him *Sancti Nicholai*, or "Holy Nicholas". In the West Frisian dialect of the Netherlands, this became *Sinterklaas*. The Dutch brought this with them when they established the colony of New Amsterdam on the Hudson River (*present-day Manhattan, New York*). The name was later Anglicized into *Santa Claus*.

A vestige of this Dutch association endures today in New York City: St. Nicholas Park, a twenty-three acre public area bound by 141st Street to the north, 128th Street to the south, St. Nicholas Terrace to the west, and St. Nicholas Avenue to the east.

Nicholas' reputation for secret charity, and his special concern for impoverished children, led to his association with gift-giving. The color red honors his suffering torture during the persecution. As a bishop, he wore a pointed mitre, which was softened into the pointed floppy hat as his ecclesial origins were forgotten. Nicholas died on December 6th, which is always near the beginning of the Advent Season, hence his association with Christmas, and therefore his practice of gift-giving with Christmas.

The many subsequent additions (*reindeer pulling a sleigh, elves at the North Pole, talking snowmen, etc.*) should never lead us to trivialize the life of a real man, a real bishop, a real saint. He would have been the first to admit his faults, yet the example of his generosity and compassion continue to shine seventeen centuries later.

St. Nicholas of Myra, Pray for us. St. Louis King of France, Pray for us.

Merry Christmas,

Father Mark