

The real St. Nicholas

By Thomas J. Craughwell

He bears likeness to another jolly old fellow, but this legendary saint, renowned for his charity, lived long before Santa Claus took root

There is St. Nicholas, and there is Santa Claus, and, contrary to common opinion, they are not the same person. We'll explain how the saint became confused with Santa later, but for the moment let's focus on the real St. Nicholas.

The legends

St. Nicholas (died c. 350) was the bishop of Myra in what is now Turkey, where he was famous for his generosity to the poor. The details of his life have not come down to us, but a host of legends have sprung up to fill the void, almost all of them emphasizing Nicholas' goodness to people in need.

It is said that St. Nicholas rescued three innocent men who had been falsely accused of robbery and were about to be executed, and that he saved the crew of a ship that had lost its mast in a storm and was about to sink.

The most famous legend tells of a widowed merchant whose business went bankrupt. He and his three unmarried daughters survived by pawning their valuables, one by one. At last there was nothing left to sell and no hope that any man would ask for the hand of a young woman who was a pauper; the father feared that his daughters would be forced to become prostitutes.

St. Nicholas heard about the family's desperate situation, and, so, after dark one evening he walked to the merchant's house and tossed a bag of gold coins through an open window. Now the eldest daughter had enough for a respectable dowry. The next night, he went again to the merchant's house and threw in a second bag of gold for the second daughter. Finally, on third night, the merchant and his daughters were waiting for him. As the third bag of coins sailed through the window, the grateful family flung open the door and rushed outside to thank their benefactor.

Patron saint of children

The story of the three bags of gold is the origin of giving gifts on St. Nicholas Day (Dec. 6). But how he became the patron saint of children comes from another legend, which is not for the squeamish.

Nicholas was traveling, and when night came he stopped at an inn where he asked for a room and a meal. The inn-keeper, proud of the opportunity to entertain a bishop, declared he would serve Nicholas a splendid dinner, including meat that had been delivered fresh that day. Bishop Nicholas did not say a word, but pushed the man aside and walked into the kitchen. There, in the middle of the room, stood a large wooden tub brimming with fresh meat. Nicholas made the Sign of the Cross over the tub, and the meat vanished, replaced by three little boys. The innkeeper had murdered the children and planned to serve them to his guests.

After his death, St. Nicholas' tomb in his cathedral in Myra became a destination for pilgrims. Then, around the year 1085, the Seljuk Turks conquered Myra. Christians across Europe feared that the Turks would desecrate or destroy the saint's relics.

In Italy, city officials in Venice and Bari resolved to rescue St. Nicholas, but the men from Bari got to Myra first. They took the saint's casket from the cathedral, and on May 9, 1087, sailed into the Bari harbor bearing the relics of the saint. The relics are still in Bari, enshrined in a crypt beneath the Basilica of St. Nicholas.

'A right jolly old elf'

For centuries, St. Nicholas was one of the most popular saints, with many churches, chapels and altars raised in his honor. Before the Reformation, there were more than 400 churches dedicated to St. Nicholas just in England. He was named the patron of Greece, Russia, Sicily, the French province of Lorraine, as well

as many cities and towns. Newlyweds, longshoremen, sailors, pawnbrokers, thieves and children venerated him as their patron saint.

Today, St. Nicholas is still widely venerated in the Orthodox Church and among Catholics of the Eastern rites, and in many parts of Central and Northern Europe his feast day is still celebrated, especially by children. But in the United States, devotion to the saint is virtually nonexistent.

Blame it on Clement Clarke Moore, a professor of biblical studies at the Episcopal Church's General Theological Seminary in New York City. In 1823 Moore published a poem titled "A Visit from St. Nicholas," better known today as "'Twas the Night before Christmas."

There was a popular trend among New Yorkers of the early 19th century to try to "recapture" their city's Dutch heritage. Influential men such as Moore and the author Washington Irving (who wrote the stories of Rip Van Winkle and the Headless Horseman) invented a host of traditions and folklore that they claimed had been part of day-to-day life in old New Amsterdam. Moore, Irving and their friends were especially enchanted by the stories of St. Nicholas, and so claimed that the first Dutch colonists arrived in Manhattan aboard a ship bearing a figurehead of St. Nicholas (it didn't); that the first church in New Amsterdam was dedicated to St. Nicholas (it wasn't); and that the Dutch colonists celebrated St. Nicholas Day (they didn't).

Moore took these innocent fabrications and used them as the basis for a full-blown treatment of a brand-new Christmas legend, complete with eight flying reindeer, a sleigh full of toys and an elderly overweight man in a red suit who climbed up and down chimneys. It is a delightful poem; and in Santa Claus, Moore has given the world one of the most memorable characters ever, one that is recognized all across the globe.

Moore's poem kicked off a Santa Claus phenomenon, but it had an unintended side effect — it all but guaranteed that devotion to the real St. Nicholas would not take root in the United States. We shouldn't be surprised: How could anyone be expected to pray to a saint who is described as "a right jolly old elf"?

We don't have to choose between St. Nicholas and Santa Claus; they are two different figures, and we can have them both. Let Santa keep what's his — the big chair in the department store, the reindeer and the sleigh, the magic of presents under the Christmas tree. And let St. Nicholas have what is his — the Mass in his honor on Dec. 6, the tradition of giving children a little gift or some chocolates on his feast day as a prelude to Christmas. Most importantly, let us honor St. Nicholas by imitating his virtues, especially his generosity to people in need.

Celebrating St. Nicholas (sidebar)

Dec. 6, the feast of St. Nicholas, is especially well suited for children. It is a little foretaste of Christmas, an occasion when we can drive home the message that there is joy in heaven when we share our blessings with the less fortunate.

- The night before St. Nicholas Day, gather the children and tell them his story, or read together a child-friendly account of his life, such as "The Legend of St. Nicholas" (Simon & Schuster, \$19.95), by award-winning children's author Demi, or one of the stories available online at the St. Nicholas Center website (www.stnicholascenter.org).
- Have the children hang a sock or place one of their shoes at the foot of their beds. After the children are asleep, leave a small toy and some Christmas chocolates in their sock or shoe as a gift from St. Nicholas.
- On St. Nicholas Day, hold a party in your home, or at your parish's school or church hall. Have an adult dress as St. Nicholas. You'll need a red cape, a bishop's miter that can be made of cardboard covered with gold or silver foil, and a fake white beard. This is an opportunity to shift the focus of the holiday from the things the children receive to what they can do to brighten the day of less fortunate children. Let each child give St. Nicholas some chocolates, candy canes or gingerbread cookies that the saint will take to the local food bank as a treat for disadvantaged children.

Other Advent saints

St. Ambrose, a doctor of the Church, was known for leaving his door open to listen to the needs of the poor. Pray for his intercession during Advent that you might open your heart to the requests of others. Feast day: Dec. 7

St. Lucy (d. 304), virgin martyr, was tortured for choosing Christian devotion over the advances of a Roman

soldier. Her name means light. Pray her intercession grants you strength to live in the light of Christ. Feast day: Dec. 13

St. John of the Cross, the great mystic, endeavored to devote his life to Christ in all of his works and writings. Pray for his intercession that you might be able to appreciate your humble daily tasks in relation to the significance of the Incarnation. Feast day: Dec. 14