

Catholic

SPECIAL EDITION

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UPDATE

St. Nicholas The Original Santa Claus

Kathleen M. Carroll

Historians generally write that much of what is said about Nicholas is legend. At Nicholas's time there was no investigation and no authentication of claimed miracles before canonization took place. Attributing miracles and wonders to a person was a way of expressing people's conviction about the holiness of the person, and enough to qualify him or her for sainthood.

There are many stories of miracles attributed to the intercession of St. Nicholas. One of the most popular tells of his generosity to a prominent citizen of Patara, near Myra, Turkey. The man had lost all his money and as such could not provide a dowry for his three daughters. Without a dowry, women of that time could not marry, and instead might be sold into slavery. On three separate occasions, Nicholas tossed a bag of gold coins into an open window in the man's house. The coins landed in shoes left by the fire to dry. These unexpected gifts allowed the man to provide dowries for his daughters.

This legend led to the custom, popular in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, of leaving shoes outside the bedroom door on the eve of December 6, in expectation of a small gift or coins. It is the basis for our modern-day custom of hanging stockings by the fire at Christmas. Incidentally, it is also the reason why pawnbrokers are often symbolized by three gold balls.

In our Christmas customs, the gifts of gold coins are memorialized by hanging oranges or gold balls as decorations, and Nicholas's generous gesture was remembered by gift-giving.

St. Nicholas traditions were first brought to the New World by the Vikings, who dedicated to him their cathedral in Greenland, and then by Christopher Columbus, who named a Haitian port for St. Nicholas on December 6, 1492. As the Americas became populated by Europeans from different countries, they brought their own customs and practices with them, including a wealth of traditions for celebrating the feast of St. Nicholas.



ARTWORK BY MARY KURNICK MAASS

In the early 1800s, the character of St. Nicholas began to develop into a more secular symbol of Christmas, especially evidenced in 1823 by the publication of "A Visit from St. Nicholas," a poem attributed to Clement Moore. Moore's depiction of the jolly saint is quite a departure from the image of a fourth-century Turkish bishop.

Whatever the historical basis of Nicholas of Myra, he has proved to be an enduring figure and symbol of the Christmas season. The elements of wisdom, generosity and kindness found in his story provide an excellent model for us during this time of year. Santa Claus or St. Nicholas, jolly man or gentle giver, he models the gifts we share in his name.

Kathleen M. Carroll is the author of A Franciscan Christmas and A Catholic Christmas.

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St. Nick and Catholic Tradition

John Feister

For many Christians, St. Nicholas, precursor to Santa Claus, is no quaint figure from the past. He is one of the most popular saints, especially among Eastern and Orthodox Catholics, and constantly intercedes on behalf of the Church.

Archbishop Nicholas of Myra was devoted to charity, poverty and the protection of children and families. Due to the many miracles associated with him, St. Nicholas is the patron of children, of travelers, of those seeking husbands and of many other causes. His feast is December 6.

Really a Saint

So many legends have cropped up around St. Nicholas that some commentators question whether he really existed. One of the few things we can say with historical certainty about this saint of early Christianity is that he indeed lived. He was born in 280 and became the archbishop of the busy seaport of Myra, in present-day Turkey. He was such a devoted and holy bishop that, much like Mother Teresa, the people of his day immediately recognized him as a saint. Thus, the Church kept careful track of his remains after he died in 342.

The relics exude a sweet-smelling oil, or myrrh, called “St. Nicholas Manna.” Many have sought this oil for its healing powers. The oil is “a sign of the purity of Nicholas’s life, that his body, even in death, is uncorrupt and sweet,” says Fr. Nicholas Palis, an authority on saints and a Greek Orthodox priest from Aliquippa, Pennsylvania.

From his studies, Fr. Palis raises the question of whether there was more than one Nicholas. He refers to a manuscript of one “St. Nicholas of Zion,” a beloved and well-known abbot at Mount Zion Monastery near Myra, who lived around

the time of Archbishop Nicholas. This abbot traveled to the Holy Land and returned and is credited with miracles at sea along the way. Stories of these two Nicholases could have blended over time, says Fr. Palis. That would explain some of the contradictions in Nicholas’s biography.

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