

Catholic

UPDATE

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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.

December 6
Feast of
St. Nicholas
of Myra

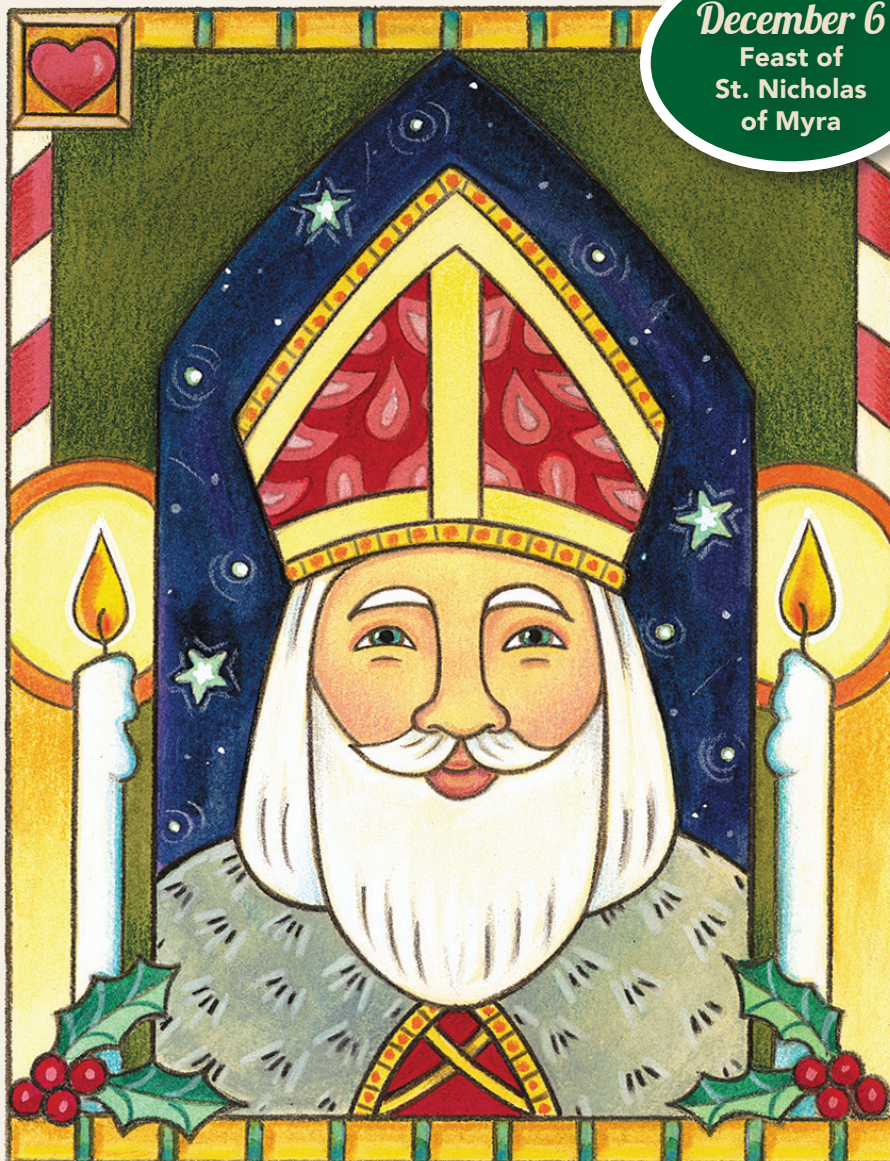


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This legend led to the custom, popular in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, of leaving shoes outside the bedroom door on the eve of December 6, in expectation of a small gift or coins. It is the basis for our modern-day custom of hanging stockings 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.



St. Nicholas and Catholic Tradition

JOHN FEISTER



RUSSIAN ICON DEPICTING SAINT NICHOLAS WITH SCENES FROM HIS LIFE; LATE 15TH CENTURY OR EARLY 16TH CENTURY; NATIONAL MUSEUM, STOCKHOLM / WIKI COMMONS