

2. The Life of St. Nicholas

While everyone has heard of “Santa Claus,” surely not everyone realizes that St. Nicholas is a real person. As we like to say at St. Nicholas church, we believe in Santa Claus! That’s because St. Nicholas, the real 4th-Century bishop who later came to be known as “Santa Claus,” (from the Dutch pronunciation of “St. Nicholas”) is our church’s patron Saint. We love him, and we hope you’ll come to know and love him, too.

Known especially for his generous spirit and great love for the poor and needy, St. Nicholas lived in the region of Lycia in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), where he eventually became bishop of the city of Myra. His parents, Theophanes and Nonna, lived in the city of Patara, and were wealthy and well-respected. More importantly, they were faithful Christians who dedicated their only son to God. Little Nicholas had an uncle, also named Nicholas, who was the bishop in Patara. This uncle helped to raise his nephew in the spirit of the Christian faith, and eventually ordained him to the Priesthood. Assisting his uncle faithfully, Nicholas became known as an unusually compassionate and generous pastor.

One famous story illustrates that generosity. There was a formerly rich man who had fallen into poverty. The man had three daughters. Because he had no dowry to offer any would-be suitors, the man had fallen into despair about what to do with his daughters. He decided to sell them into prostitution. St. Nicholas somehow learned of the man’s intentions, and one night he secretly took a sack of gold with him to the man’s house. He dropped the sack through a window, and, as some say, it landed in the stocking (or shoe) of the eldest daughter. Understanding this to be God’s providence, the man then gave that daughter in marriage, with the dowry she had received. St. Nicholas did the same thing two more times, providing gold for the other two daughters. Though Nicholas tried to keep his giving a secret, the man chased after him the third time, and discovered who he was.

During a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, St. Nicholas foresaw that the ship on which he sailed would face a dangerous storm. There was indeed a terrible storm, but St. Nicholas averted disaster by his prayers. A sailor who fell from the mast during the storm was injured so badly that he was sure to die. However, again at the prayers of St. Nicholas, the man was miraculously healed. Eventually St. Nicholas became known as a patron Saint of those at sea, and of all travelers.

While in the Holy Land, Nicholas felt a deep desire for a life of solitude, completely dedicated to God. He wanted to remain living in the desert of Palestine, but the Lord led him to return to Lycia. There he at first tried to live in a monastery, but again he heard the Lord directing him a different way, back into the world to minister to spiritually hungry people. So he settled in the town of Myra. There one day the bishop died, and a council of regional bishops gathered to choose a successor. One of them had a vision of an Angelic messenger who revealed that on a certain day the first man to arrive at church would have the name “Nicholas” and would be the future bishop of Myra. Nicholas, who was apparently keeping his priesthood secret at that time, was in the habit of arriving early at church for prayer, and he was indeed the first to arrive that day. The bishop asked his name, and he

humbly told him, "My name is Nicholas." So, in spite of his desire to serve the Lord quietly and humbly, he was consecrated as bishop of Myra.

As bishop, he continued to live a simple life, and continued his works of tender mercy. He also became a zealous defender of his flock against evil and treachery. Gentle towards the lowly, he was a fierce adversary of those who would harm his spiritual children. He stood against the persecution of Diocletian, and suffered imprisonment as a result. In prison, he continued to be a pastor, encouraging his fellow Christians in fetters. He lived through that experience, and when St. Constantine became emperor he was restored as bishop of Myra.

In 325, at the Council of Nicea, St. Nicholas again showed his fiery zeal for the well-being of his spiritual children. When Arius refused to be convinced by the pious teaching of the many holy fathers gathered at that council, St. Nicholas resorted to striking Arius in the face. Thus, our "Santa Claus," so tender towards children, showed his love for children once again, this time by boldly opposing the snake-like attempt of Arius to lead those children astray.

Some of the clergy at the council were scandalized by Bishop Nicholas' behavior, and he was suspended from his duties as bishop and kept in confinement. However, several of the Fathers gathered in Nicea had the same vision of both Christ and the Mother of God standing beside St. Nicholas and returning the Gospel book and omophorion (bishop's vestment) to him. The bishops clearly understood this to indicate that the Lord was pleased with St. Nicholas' zeal, and accordingly they restored him as bishop of Myra.

A further example of the courage and clear-sightedness of St. Nicholas was seen when three men were falsely convicted of a capital crime. A regional governor had been bribed to convict them in spite of their innocence. Just as they were about to be executed, St. Nicholas arrived, grabbed the sword of the executioner, which was poised to come down on the neck of one of the men, and explained that the men were innocent. He forcefully denounced the governor for his corruption, and the governor repented and freed the men.

Coming to the assistance of countless other people in need, St. Nicholas led a gloriously God-pleasing life. After he fell asleep in the Lord, his body remained incorrupt, and exuded fragrant myrrh, remaining for centuries in the cathedral in Myra. In 1087, his relics were moved from Myra to Bari, Italy, where they remain to this day. St. Nicholas remains active, though, alive in Christ like all the Saints! He is rightly seen as a protector and intercessor for children, as well as for all those in dire need, those falsely accused or convicted, those in prison, and those who travel by land, sea or air. He is an inspiration for those struggling to be faithful to Christ, and his prayers continue to work miracles. He asked that people pray for his parents, Theophanes and Nonna, and promised his prayers in return. We are blessed to have him as our patron Saint. O Holy Father Nicholas, pray to God for us!

Here is the Troparion (hymn) which we sing to honor our Patron Saint at each Liturgy:

"You were revealed to your flock as a measure of faith. You were the image of humility and a teacher of self-control. Because of your humble life, heaven was opened to you. Because of your poverty, spiritual riches were granted to you. O holy Bishop Nicholas we cry out to you: Pray to Christ our God that our souls may be saved."