St. Nicholas

Feast: December 6

Facts

Feast Day: December 5
Patron: of Bakers and Pawnbrokers

The great veneration with which St. Nicholas has been honored for many ages and the number of altars and churches all over the world that are dedicated in his memory are testimonials to his wonderful holiness and the glory he enjoys with God. As an episcopal see, and his childhood church falling vacant, the holy Nicholas was chosen bishop, and in that station became famous by his extraordinary piety and zeal and by his many astonishing miracles. The Greek histories of his life agree he suffered an imprisonment of the faith and made a glorious confession in the latter part of the persecution raised by Diocletian, and that he was present at the Council of Nicaea and there condemned Arianism. It is said that St. Nicholas died in Myra, and was buried in his cathedral.

St. Nicholas’ episcopate at Myra during the fourth century is really all that appears indubitable authentic, according to Alban Butler, an English Roman Catholic priest from the 1700s. This is not for lack of material, beginning with the life attributed to the monk who died in 847 as St. Methodius, Patriarch of Constantinople. Nevertheless, the universal popularity of the saint for so many centuries requires that some account of the legends surrounding his life should be given.
St. Nicholas, also known as "Nikolaos of Myra," was a fourth century saint and Greek bishop of Myra. Nicholas was born in Asia Minor in the Roman Empire as an only child to Christian parents. Nicholas would take nourishment only once on Wednesdays and Fridays, and that in the evening according to the canons. "He was exceedingly well brought up by his parents and trod piously in their footsteps. The child, watched over by the church, enlightened his mind and encouraged his thirst for sincere and true religion." Both of his parents tragically died during an epidemic when he was a young man, leaving him well off, but to be raised by his uncle - the Bishop of Patara. Nicholas was determined to devote his inheritance to works of charity, and his uncle mentored him as a reader and later ordained him as a presbyter (priest).

An opportunity soon arose for St. Nicholas and his inheritance. A citizen of Patara had lost all his money, and needed to support his three daughters who could not find husbands because of their poverty; so the wretched man was going to give them over to prostitution. Nicholas became informed of this, and thus took a bag of gold and threw it into an open window of the man's house in the night. Here was a dowry for the eldest girl and she was soon duly married. At intervals Nicholas did the same for the second and the third; at the last time the father was on the watch, recognized his benefactor and overwhelmed Nicholas with his gratitude. It would appear that the three purses represented in pictures, came to be mistaken for the heads of three children and so they gave rise to the absurd story of the children, resuscitated by the saint, who had been killed by an innkeeper and pickled in a brine-tub.

Coming to the city of Myra when the clergy and people of the province were in session to elect a new bishop, St. Nicholas was indicated by God as the man they should choose. This was during the time of persecutions in the beginning of the fourth century and "as he [Nicholas] was the chief priest of the Christians of this town and preached the truths of faith with a holy liberty, the divine Nicholas was seized by the magistrates, tortured, then chained and thrown into prison with many other Christians. But when the great and religious Constatine, chosen by God, assumed the imperial diadem of the Romans, the prisoners were released from their bonds and with them the illustrious Nicholas, who when he was set at liberty returned to Myra."

St. Methodius asserts that "thanks to the teaching of St. Nicholas the metropolis of Myra alone was untouched by the filth of the Arian heresy, which it firmly rejected as death-dealing poison," but says nothing of his presence at the Council of Nicaea in 325.
According to other traditions St. Nicholas was not only there during the Council of Nicaea in 325, but so far forgot himself as to give the heresiarch Arius a slap in the face. The conciliar fathers deprived him of his episcopal insignia and committed him to prison; but our Lord and His Mother appeared there and restored to him both his liberty and his office.

As against Arianism so against paganism, St. Nicholas was tireless and often took strong measures: among other temples he destroyed was that of Artemis, the principal in the district, and the evil spirits fled howling before him. He was the guardian of his people as well in temporal affairs. The governor Eustathius had taken a bribe to condemn to death three innocent men. At the time fixed for their execution Nicholas came to the place, stayed the hands of the executioner, and released the prisoners. Then he turned to Eustathius and did not cease to reproach him until he admitted his crime and expressed his penitence.

St. Nicholas' presence was found in a separate occasion involving three imperial officers simply on their way to duty in Phrygia. When the men were back again in Constantinople, the jealousy of the prefect Ablavius caused them to be imprisoned on false charges and an order for their death was procured from the Emperor Constantine. When the officers heard this they remembered the example they had witnessed of the powerful love of justice of the Bishop of Myra and they prayed to God that through his merits and by his instrumentality they might yet be saved. That night St. Nicholas appeared in a dream to Constatine, and told him with threats to release the three innocent men, and Ablavius experienced the same thing. In the morning the Emporor and the prefect compared notes, and the condemned men were sent for and questioned. When he heard they had called on the name of the Nicholas of Myra who appeared to him, Constatine set them free and sent them to the bishop with a letter asking him not to threaten him any more, but to pray for the peace of the world. For a long time, this has been the most famous miracle of St. Nicholas, and at the time of St. Methodius was the only thing generally known about him.

The accounts are unanimous that St. Nicholas died and was buried in his episcopal city of Myra, and by the time of Justinian, there was a basilica built in his honor at Constantinople.

An anonymous Greek wrote in the tenth century that, "the West as well as the East acclaims and glorifies him. Wherever there are people, in the country and the town, in the villages, in the isles, in the furthest parts of the earth, his name is revered and churches are built in his honor. Images of him are set up, panegyrics preached and festivals celebrated. All Christians, young and old, men and
women, boys and girls, reverence his memory and call upon his protection. And his favors, which know no limit of time and continue from age to age, are poured out over all the earth; the Scythians know them, as do the Indians and the barbarians, the Africans as well as the Italians." When Myra and its great shrine finally passed into the hands of the Saracens, several Italian cities saw this as an opportunity to acquire the relics of St. Nicholas for themselves. There was great competition for them between Venice and Bari.

Bari won and the relics were carried off under the noses of the lawful Greek custodians and their Mohammedan masters. On May 9, 1087 St. Nicholas' relics safely landed in Bari, a not inappropriate home seeing that Apulia in those days still had large Greek colonies. A new church was built to shelter the relics and the pope, Bd. Urban II, was present at their enshrining.

Devotion to St. Nicholas has been present in the West long before his relics were brought to Italy, but this happening greatly increased his veneration among the people, and miracles were as freely attributed to his intercession in Europe as they had been in Asia.

At Myra "the venerable body of the bishop, embalmed as it was in the good ointments of virtue exuded a sweet smelling myrrh, which kept it from corruption and proved a health giving remedy against sickness to the glory of him who had glorified Jesus Christ, our true God." The translation of the relics did not interrupt this phenomenon, and the "manna of St. Nicholas" is said to flow to this day. It was one of the great attractions that drew pilgrims to his tomb from all parts of Europe.

The image of St. Nicholas is, more often than any other, found on Byzantine seals. In the later middle ages nearly four hundred churches were dedicated in his honor in England alone, and he is said to have been represented by Christian artists more frequently than any saint, except our Lady.

St. Nicholas is celebrated as the patron saint of several classes of people, especially, in the East, of sailors and in the West of children. The first of these patronage is most likely due to the legend that during his lifetime, he appeared to storm tossed mariners who invoked his aid off the coast of Lycia and brought them safely to port. Sailors in the Aegean and Ionian seas, following a common Eastern custom, had their "star of St. Nicholas" and wished one another a good voyage in the phrase "May St. Nicholas hold the tiller."
The legend of the "three children" is credited to his patronage of children and various observances, ecclesiastical and secular, connected there with; such were the boy bishop and especially in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, the giving of presents in his name at Christmas time.

This custom in England is not a survival from Catholic times. It was popularized in America by the Dutch Protestants of New Amsterdam who converted the popish saint into a Nordic magician (Santa Claus = Sint Klaes = Saint Nicholas) and was introduced into this country by Bret Harte. It is not the only "good old English custom" which, however good, is not "old English," at any rate in its present form. The deliverance of the three imperial officers naturally caused St. Nicholas to be invoked by and on behalf of prisoners and captives, and many miracles of his intervention are recorded in the middle ages.

Curiously enough, the greatest popularity of St. Nicholas is found neither in the eastern Mediterranean nor north-western Europe, great as that was, but in Russia. With St. Andred the Apostle, he is patron of the nation, and the Russian Orthodox Church even observes the feast of his translation; so many Russian pilgrims came to Bari before the revolution that their government supported a church, hospital and hospice there.

He is also the patron saint of Greece, Apulia, Sicily and Loraine, and of many cities and dioceses (including Galway) and churches innumerable. At Rome the basilica of St. Nicholas in the Jail of Tully (in Carcere) was founded between the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh centuries. He is named in the preparation of the Byzantine Mass. St. Nicholas became recognized as a saint long before the Roman Catholic Church began the regular canonizing procedures in the late 10th century. Therefore, he does not have a specific date of canonization, rather records of him exist in a gradual spread until his stories became widely known and celebrated. St. Nicholas' feast day is December 6.

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