

THE ORIGINAL SANTA CLAUS: SAINT NICHOLAS

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WID you ever think of praying to Santa Claus? You perhaps have, in the sense that you often hoped that this figurative person would not fail to bring you what you were looking for at Christmas. But, did you ever consider him as a great saint of the Church and pray to him in that light? Probably not. However, countless numbers have done so in the past and many are very devoted to him today. We still hear, though infrequently, that other name for Santa Claus—old Saint Nick. Not many people could explain the exact connection between the two, but the fact that the latter term is still used is an indication that it is more than a chance association. There is very real relationship, which can be appreciated by summarizing the course of the devotion to the Catholic Saint, Nicholas.

At first, these statements must seem quite astounding to the adult American mind. For anyone to maintain seriously the existence of Santa Claus is, to say the least, puerile, but further to hold that he is a Roman Catholic Saint, with all that term means, is downright suspicious. Nevertheless, he is the originally very real person whose extraordinary life and holy death the Church commemorates on December the sixth.

St. Nicholas was born about the close of the third century in Asia Minor, at Patara in Lycia, a place which had heard the Gospel from St. Paul. Its capital, Myra, was also an episcopal seat. It was the direction of this diocese which fell upon the shoulders of Nicholas and in which he distinguished himself by his piety, zeal and miraculous powers. Many authors hold that he confessed the Faith during one of the persecutions of that time and that he also strenuously opposed Arianism at the Council of Nicea. At any rate, his boundless zeal for the Faith and the extirpation of heresy is generally acknowledged. He died full of sanctity about 342 A. D. and was buried in his cathedral church. This is all that factual history has to offer us,—poor material indeed, upon which to delineate a character. But, the truly great veneration which has always been paid to this Saint is a proof of a strong living tradition concerning him. He has been for ages one of the most popular Saints in both the Eastern and Western

Churches, as innumerable churches and other works of religion bear witness. No Saint, except Our Lady, is said to have been portrayed more frequently in Christian art. Consequently, several legends have sprung up in time about St. Nicholas, which based more or less on fact, have had a definite influence on modern notions of Santa Claus. We can mention only a few of the stories about the holy bishop. When still a young man, the death of his parents left him quite wealthy. This wealth he used in the charitable service of others. It seemed that the father of a certain family in Patara who was in dire financial straits and therefore could not marry off his dependent daughters, was considering giving these girls over to evil ways. Upon learning this, Nicholas paid a nightly visit to the unfortunate man's house and threw in a bag of gold, enabling the first daughter to possess a dowry. He did likewise for the other two. Naturally, when the father found out the truth about the mysterious benefaction, his gratitude to the Saint was boundless.

It was after he had been elected bishop that the governor, Eustathius, out of his greed for money, condemned three innocent men to death. At the moment of execution, the Bishop of Myra arrived, released the innocent men and made the governor confess and repent his injustice. Three Imperial officers, on their way to Phrygia, had witnessed this extraordinary scene. Later, when they also were unjustly imprisoned by a jealous prefect and their death warrant procured from the Emperor, they prayed that God would aid them through the holy Bishop Nicholas. The Saint appeared to the Emperor Constantine and to the unjust official. He threatened them if they persisted in the crime. When the Emperor learned of the prefect's similar experience and that the officers had invoked the help of the bishop, he released them with a letter imploring the Saint to cease threatening him and to pray for the peace of the world. In the course of time, this incident lost its original form and the three officers became three young children who had been killed by an inn-keeper, and their bodies concealed in a tub of brine. The latter story accounts, in a measure, for Nicholas' special patronage of children and of certain European customs connected with it, such as the boy-bishop and the giving of presents in his name at Christmas.

As the fame of the life and miracles of this early Saint spread wider and wider, the tomb which housed his relics was more and more enriched. In 1304 A. D. the Saracens took over Myra. Thereupon, many Italian cities attempted to secure the relics of one who had been for a long time much venerated in the West. The citizens of Bari succeeded in making off with them. They brought them to their city

where Urban II was present at their enshrinement. The presence of the Saint's body, coupled with the continuance of miracles through his intercession and the flow of a sweet smelling oily substance from his remains doubled the devotion to him.

And so it goes on; if we study the traditions of the people of former times, we can begin to see the relation between Santa Claus and St. Nicholas. At one time there was no Santa Claus, only a Saint Nicholas; today the real has been forced to give way to the mythical. It is not the Catholic Saint that the followers of the Reformers have preserved. They have changed his character and made him into a "nordic magician." The Dutch Protestants of New Amsterdam introduced into this country the custom of giving presents at Christmas in the name of Santa Claus,—the Saint's name having been gradually transformed: *Saint Nicholas*—*Sint Klaes*—*Santa Claus*. Names are not so very important if the reality signified by them remains the same, but that is precisely what has been changed. The whole tradition of St. Nicholas has been de-Christianized and a new one set up in its stead. What has happened is that the virtues so characteristic of this holy man have been taken out of their Christian setting and personified in their purely material values. For example, the great love of neighbor, which in Nicholas was one with his love of God, his meekness, goodness, etc. have developed into that rotund, jolly, good-natured fellow we see every Christmas in any department store. His simplicity and childlike virtues have been symbolized into friendship for children.

There is no doubt that today the true Christian is dangerously exposed to countless subtle paganizing influences. It is profitable, even necessary, from time to time to take inventory of the genuine virtues residing in the larder of the soul—to see how often we sell them to ourselves or rather are satisfied with using some cheap imitations. We might include ourselves in the question which suggests itself at Christmas time. What is it that prompts people to give at this season? Is it social convention, or is it some material good they will receive in return? Perhaps it is an expression of that entertaining modern notion of the brotherhood of man. But, any true follower of Christ knows that the brotherhood of man has no meaning unless the fatherhood of God is first acknowledged. St. Nicholas recognized this truth and, more than this, he saw in the celebration of Christmas the commemoration of the supreme act of giving on the part of an All-Good Father Who gave to man a divine gift, His Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.