

ST. NICHOLAS AT BARI

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HERE WAS A DAY AND AGE when whole cities and leagues of cities would plan not only war, not only commerce, but even such projects as the rescue of relics from the hands of the infidels. One city would vie with another in seizing the bodies of saints which were imperiled, and many towns compared themselves with their rivals by the relics they possessed. In short, time was when cities were Christian.

Typical of these communities was Bari, where were blended the ancient Roman, novel Barbarian and decaying Byzantine cultures. Almost directly opposite the peninsula was Naples, while Constantinople was but a short distance away by sea. A good harbor on the main route from Venice to the East contributed to the wealth and importance of the citizens. Both the Church and the State realized the strategic position of Bari, the latter as a stepping stone into Italy, and the former as a large and influential center of the Faith. Christianity had come early (legend has it that St. Peter himself evangelized the ancient Barium), but not until the eleventh century was the ecclesiastical and political overlordship of the East removed.

But a new force arose—a wild horde which threatened to engulf the new Rome. To the horror of all Italy, these Turks did not want commerce, would not hear of treaties, but rather sought complete domination. Most of all did they seek the destruction of the Church. Everywhere the Seljuks went churches were pillaged, Christians killed or enslaved and relics profaned. With increasing momentum the Christian communities of Europe began their fight to save the historic shrines and sacred relics of the East.

Bari, alike with all the early churches, fostered the cult of St. Nicholas, the great Bishop of Myra. The citizens considered what a fortune the relics of this saint would be for Bari. The city would have a patron renowned even before his death as a thaumaturge. Bari then could confound her rivals and increase her fame. So the plans were made.

Several merchants had remained in Asia Minor to attempt to keep the lucrative trade with the East despite the increasing menace of the Moslems. The latter however were not in favor of treaties,

and the merchants hastened to return home with their goods. Stopping at Myra, they quietly hid the Saint's body among their bales and boxes. All was done in haste, since the Arabian hostility grew by the day, and because rival factions also coveted the relics. But it was done, and the merchants sighed with relief as the Golden Horn fell below the horizon. A small boat was despatched from the two larger vessels to bring the news to Bari, that preparations might be made to receive the relics in a befitting manner. On hearing the news, the citizens immediately began to work with one heart and mind to honor their new patron. Roger of Apulia, a leading figure of the day, undertook the building of a mausoleum worthy of the Saint; distinguished pilgrims came from nearby cities to be present at the festivities, while messengers brought the news to all the corners of Christendom—"St. Nicholas is at Bari."

On May 9, 1087, the body of the Saint was solemnly received into the city walls of Bari. That day St. Nicholas espoused a new see, and Bari entered upon its golden age. A short time later, Pope Urban II publicly venerated the relics, and chose Bari as the site for a council on the reunion of the Eastern Church with Rome. Perhaps he looked to the intervention of St. Nicholas, who had been revered for centuries in the East and was also becoming a favorite with the West. At this council St. Anselm and the other prelates added their names to the already impressive list of pilgrims.

Through the centuries the popular cult grew. The prodigies which were wrought at the shrine never ceased. To this day the most famous of the miracles continues—that of the *Manna*. This is a liquid which the body of the Saint secreted from the year of his death. The flow of the Manna is almost continuous, but the quantity varies. Pilgrims may obtain a vial of the fluid from the shrine and use it when needed. Many miracles have taken place upon the application of the Manna, the authenticity of which cannot be questioned.

For generations Bari was the scene of great fêtes and the goal of many a pilgrim. But with the passing of time, its glory began to fade. The fall of the Eastern Empire, together with Venice's monopoly of the trade of the Levant, reduced Bari to a fishing port. The city lost all but local strategic importance. Civilization changed, too. Pilgrimages lost their importance in the eyes of the world, or else circumstances did not favor pilgrims. The Moslem conquest, for instance, cut off all routes from the East to Bari. Then there were new cults for new ages; the admirable fecundity of the Church gave birth to fresh saints who won the attention of the people. St. Nicholas

was rejected by the Protestant rebels in those European countries wherein he had been most popular. However, he was not excluded altogether. He persists as a pious legend of a lovable man who goes about doing good. That legend has now become the innocuous tale of Santa Claus.

What is the status of St. Nicholas today? Officially he is listed as the Patron of Greece, pre-revolutionary Russia, Naples and Sicily; by popular acclaim he is the tutelary saint of many cities of Italy, Germany, Austria, Belgium and The Netherlands, and in a special way, of Moscow. Mariners, merchants, bakers, travellers and of course children look to Nicholas in their troubles. In the East, especially among the Russians, there is great devotion to him, while children receive gifts in his name in Germany, The Netherlands and Switzerland. Today in Bari the Saint's remains are venerated still in the magnificent church built by Roger of Apulia.

The citizens of Bari desire that St. Nicholas should once more be brought to the attention of the Christian world. They who have fostered his cult through the centuries have petitioned the Holy Father to take the Basilica and shrine under his own protection, that he might take the necessary steps to revive the cult. Accordingly, the *Osservatore Romano* of February 16, 1951, announced that the Pope had named the Archbishop of Bari as Grand Prior of the Basilica, and at the same time had committed the care of the shrine to the Order of Preachers.

The devotion of the early friars to St. Nicholas is evident both from the prominence given his feast in the very first calendar of the Order, and also by the many chapels dedicated to the Saint in their churches. The people of Bari have known the Preachers almost from the beginning of the Institute, the Dominican convent in Bari dating from about 1309. Now the friars have joined the citizens that honor might be paid to the Bishop of Myra.

The Master General has not hesitated to accept the charge of the Basilica. In Bari, only a few days after the decree was published, he met with the mayor of the city, and later with the Canons of the Basilica. Fr. Suarez has pointed out the advantages the world-wide organization of the Order will bring. Dominicans in the Middle East, the Balkans and the Americas can do much to spread the cult of St. Nicholas, especially among the Italian emigrants. The Iron Curtain itself will be pierced by the convents in the Communist zone. In Bari itself, the number of friars will be increased to accommodate the pilgrims and to allow for the solemn liturgy of the Dominican

Rite in its full splendor in the Basilica. The Curia is also considering establishing in Bari a National Studium of the Order, and also an international Center for studies. The friars will conduct studies on the life of St. Nicholas and edit a special periodical. All this the Order intends to do, beginning in the Spring when the Dominicans will take official possession of the church. In conclusion, Fr. Suarez asked for the united efforts of the citizens of Bari, perhaps recalling the fervor of their eleventh century ancestors.

In the Major Chapel of the Basilica of St. Dominic at Bologna (once the church of St. Nicholas of the Vines), St. Dominic and St. Nicholas are painted flanking the Ancon. Here the Patriarch and the Bishop meet, and the unifying element is the love of God which so consumed them that they left an undying impression on the world. St. Dominic received the heritage that St. Nicholas handed down from his century and adapted it to the thirteenth. Now the successor of the Patriarch pledges all the resources of the Preachers to rekindle the flame of that love which St. Nicholas has always symbolized through the centuries.

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