

St. Nicholas -- Imitator of God's Gift-giving Compassion and Predilection for the Poor

Model for Mary's Beloved Sons

St. Nicholas is the religious origin of today's secular Santa Claus, known as Father Christmas in England, Kris Kringle in Germany and Sinterklass in the Netherlands. Nicholas was born in the year 270 in the Greek village of Patara in present day Turkey where St. Paul had spread the Gospel. He died December 6, 346, or thereabouts. He is one of the most popular saints in the Greek and the Latin Church, especially in Europe and Asia, particularly in Russia, and in parts of the United States such as Wisconsin, southern Ohio and St. Louis. When his wealthy parents died during an epidemic, Nicholas took the Lord's words to "sell what you own, give the money to the poor and come follow me" quite seriously. He gave his money to the poor, the sick and the needy and dedicated his life to God, becoming a priest and was soon after made bishop of Myra in Lycia.

St. Nicholas was imprisoned under the Roman Emperor Diocletian who ruthlessly persecuted Christians; he was released when Constantine came to power. It is said that under Diocletian the prisons were so full of bishops, priests and deacons that there was no room for real criminals. Some claim that on his release St. Nicholas attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 where he participated in condemning the Arian heresy and even, supposedly, slapped the arch heretic Arius in the face, an act for which he lost his Episcopal insignia and was imprisoned, but Our Lord and Our Lady appeared to him and restored both his insignia and his freedom. Upon his death he was buried in the cathedral church in Myra where a miraculous oily substance with healing powers, called manna or myrrh, formed on his relics in his grave. In 1087 merchants stole his body and transferred it to Bari in southern Italy where it is today. Hence, he is also known as Nicholas of Bari. The many miracles attributed to him both before and after his death merited for him the name "Nicholas the Wonderworker" and nurtured a growing devotion to this saint who quickly became the patron saint of Greece, Naples, Sicily, Lorraine, many cities in Italy, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Campen in the Netherlands, Corfu in Greece, Freiburg in Switzerland, and Moscow in Russia. He is patron of sailors and travelers, merchants and pawnbrokers, bankers, scholars, orphans and children, laborers, judges and victims of judicial mistakes, paupers, captives, marriageable maidens, even thieves and murderers. He is patron of anyone in trouble or need. In 1809, here in America, Santa Claus, the modern version of Sinterklass, the Dutch name for St. Nicholas, was named the patron saint of New Amsterdam, now New York City.

There are many legends about St. Nicholas that cannot always be verified historically, but considering how enduring are the traditions celebrating him in so many churches and in so many countries still today, it would seem plausible that there must

be some prevailing truth surrounding them. The name Nicholas, in the Greek, means “victory of the people,” and indeed, legend shows him to be a genuine champion for the people, the poor people.

We may be familiar with the story of the man with three daughters who would be sold into slavery if their father could not afford the necessary dowries to obtain a husband for them. Mysteriously, bags of gold were tossed through an open window and landed in the stockings or shoes the girls had placed by the fireplace to dry. Thus began the custom of hanging stockings or putting out shoes on the eve of St. Nicholas’s feast. For his help to the poor, Nicholas is seen as the patron saint of pawnbrokers who hang three gold balls outside their shops to symbolize the three sacks of gold given to those poor girls. It is said Nicholas spent his parents’ wealth in giving gifts anonymously to the needy and, after his death, many began the practice of secret gift-giving and attributed it to St. Nicholas. There is a story of three children being kidnapped and murdered and his prayers bringing them back to life, making him a patron and protector of children. It is also said he made a trip by boat to the Holy Land to walk the path of Jesus’ life, and on his return trip a storm threatened to destroy the ship, but he prayed and calmed the waves as Jesus had done. Thus he became the patron of sailors and travelers. Likewise there is a legend that three men were falsely accused of treason and Constantine issued an order for their death, but St. Nicholas appeared to Constantine in a dream and bid him release them. Having been wrongfully imprisoned himself, he became patron of captives of every kind and those who are falsely accused or are the victims of injustice. By his example of generosity and care for the poor he became the model of the compassionate life. Often young boys in Germany and Poland, inspired by his holy life, would dress up as bishops and beg for alms for the poor. His paternal generosity symbolized in his bishop’s staff gave rise to the custom of giving candy canes at Christmas time, the season of gift-giving that celebrates God’s gift of His Son to the world. In Belgium and the Netherlands St. Nicholas is depicted as coming from Spain by ship and riding a white horse to make his gift-giving rounds. Children would leave carrots and hay for his horse in their shoes and hope for gifts in return. To many, sharing small gifts in honor of St. Nicholas on his feast in early Advent helps to keep the focus of Christmas on the Christkindel, the Christ Child.

It is interesting to note that the remains of many saints have been divided up and spread over numerous churches in several countries, but the bones of St. Nicholas have been preserved in one spot, his grave crypt in Bari in southern Italy. Each year on his feast it is claimed his bones exude the aforementioned miraculous oil which is then distributed for medicinal purposes. Of equal interest is the fact that the Roman Catholic Church allowed hand-picked scientists to photograph and measure the contents of the crypt grave in the late 1950’s. In the summer of 2005, the report of these measurements was sent to a forensic laboratory in England, revealing that St. Nicholas was barely five feet in height and had a broken nose.

References: <http://www.stnicholascenter.org/Brix?pageID=38>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Nicholas
<http://www.ewtn.com/library/mary/nicholas.htm>

So what message does St. Nicholas have for us? And especially for priests and bishops? Quite simply, he is a perfect example of the very nature of God, the Eternal First Love and greatest Gift-Giver of all, for it is God Who has given us life itself and all that there is, creation with all its wonders for our enjoyment and good; redemption to take away our sins and restore us to His favor; every grace and blessing for our sanctification, and most dearly, Himself as our spiritual food, and His Divine Indwelling Presence that is a share in His very own life and is a pledge of eternal glory forever in heaven with Him. St. Nicholas mirrors for us that utter compassion and generosity that defines Who God Is. St. Nicholas likewise mirrors for us God's preferential predilection for the humble and the poor—those financially poor, the distressed, the enslaved, the captives, the sick and the suffering, the sinner, the lowly and needy of every kind. He is especially a model for priests and bishops of the kind of fatherly care they must have as pastors of their flocks, using their authority humbly and wisely to serve the needs of Christ in His Mystical Body that is so wounded and broken by the sins of its members. He is a model of faith, both in living out the Faith and in his defense of the Faith against heresy and false teaching and in his willingness to suffer for it. He is a model of the interior life and the renunciation of the riches and glamour of the world. He had a great devotion to Our Lady, especially as Theotokos, God-bearer, a term for her Divine Maternity that comes to us from the Greeks, so it is no surprise to see him pictured with the Sacred Book and an image of Mary as "Theotokos."

In this regard and with this year dedicated to prayer for priests, we cannot help but focus on the exhortation to priests that Our Lady gave to Sister Mildred Mary Ephrem Neuzil in the message of "Our Lady of America®". We will let her words speak for themselves-- to the hearts of all her priests—with our prayer that they will be inspired by the life of St. Nicholas to be all that Our Lady calls them to be as her "beloved sons!"

My dear daughter, sweet child, write my words carefully, because they are of the utmost importance. I address them to my beloved sons, the priests, dedicated to the most intense and extraordinary imitation of my Son in the perfect carrying on of His Eternal Priesthood.

Beloved sons, so cherished and greatly blessed among the sons of men, be careful to uphold the sanctity and dignity of your calling. Let the faithful see in you the favored and especially loved imitators of the Son of God. Be modest in your dress and speech as becomes those of so exalted a vocation. The apparel and manners of a man of the world is not for you, who, though living in the world, must not take on its ways.

It is through you that the grace of the Sacraments is given to souls. Strive then to make yourselves more worthy receptacles to receive these graces and transmit them in turn to the souls under your care.

Dear sons, I ask you to practice self-denial and penance in a special manner, because it is you who must lead my children in the way of peace. Yet this peace will come only by way of the sword, the flaming sword of love. If, therefore, you love my Son and wish to honor me, heed my admonition and be the first to give the example of a life of penance and self-denial. Thus, by sanctification from within you, you will become a bright and burning light to the faithful, who look to you for help and guidance.

I am pleased, dearly beloved sons, by the honor and love you have until now accorded me. Will you now go further and honor me yet more by taking my words to your hearts and doing what I ask?

(Sister Mildred Mary Ephrem Neuzil, "Our Lady of America ®," Fostoria, Ohio, pg. 20 – Words of Our Lady as recorded under the dates of September 26-27,1957)

Our Lady's words to Sister for her beloved sons echo our dear Lord's words that we cannot serve two masters; we cannot serve God and mammon (man). In other words, to take Jesus seriously, we will inevitably find ourselves in complete contradiction to the thinking and ways of the world and will have to make a choice between God and man, between the kingdom of Jesus and the kingdom of the world.

Seeing how St. Nicholas and so many other bishops, priests and deacons, leaders in the Church in his time, were called to defend the Faith even to the point of persecution and imprisonment, we pray for our bishops and priests in our own day that they, too, will be given the grace and courage to both teach correctly and defend the Faith in all its splendor and purity with the same willingness to suffer for it. By their example of prayer, fasting and renunciation of the world, may they witness to the faithful that same call to choose God over man in all our affairs. **We are reminded again of the significance of "Our Lady of America®'s" choice of day for her first appearance as the patroness of our country under her singular privilege of the Immaculate Conception, that of the feast of the North American martyrs who loved her so and whose missionary zeal for spreading the Faith and defending it led to their own martyrdom. It was their blood that watered the seeds of the Faith in our great Nation, a Nation that is today so rapidly dying, spiritually, at its very roots. It would do us well to read again the previous newsletter on "The North American Martyrs – Priesthood at its Heights."**

<http://www.ourladyofamerica.com/whatsnew/TheNorthAmericanMartyrs.pdf>

Considering the enormity of the role of leadership Our Lady has placed on America to bring the world back to Faith and Purity, the question that we must ask of ourselves is this:

Whose blood will water the withering seeds of the Faith in our land now?

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