

Saint Nicholas: Myths, Legends and Stories

The Feast of Nicholas, Bishop of Myra December 6, 2004

Very little is known about the life of Nicholas, except that he suffered torture and imprisonment during the persecution under the Emperor Diocletian. It is possible that he was one of the bishops attending the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325. He was honored as a saint in Constantinople in the sixth century by the Emperor Justinian. His veneration became immensely popular in the West after the supposed removal of his body to Bari, Italy, in the late eleventh century. In England almost 400 churches were dedicated to him.

Nicholas is famed as the traditional patron of seafarers and sailors, and, more especially, of children. As a bearer of gifts to children, his name was brought to America by the Dutch colonists in New York, from whom he is popularly known as Santa Claus.

Collect for the Feast of Nicholas

Almighty God, in your love you gave your servant Nicholas of Myra a perpetual name for deeds of kindness both on land and sea: Grant, we pray, that your Church may never cease to work for the happiness of children, the safety of sailors, the relief of the poor, and the help of those tossed by tempests of doubt or grief; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

--Lesser Feasts and Fasts

Saint Nicholas Legends

The stories, like fairy tales, are great entertainment, whether they are Advent bedtime stories, or become stories for a larger group.

Of the Three Golden Balls

One story tells of the three golden balls or sacks of gold which Saint Nicholas, during the night and with great secrecy, threw out into the window of a poor householder. His three daughters lived without any hope of suitors and hence feared that they would be sold into slavery or prostitution for lack of a dowry. The three golden balls saved them from their poverty and shame. The pawnbroker's three balls have sometimes been explained as derivatives of the Medici coat of arms or as the bezants, or gold coins of the merchants of Lombardy. But it is plausible that perhaps these three golden balls may be the same ones that Nicholas is depicted with wherever this story comes up in image or iconography. Their charitable significance, however, is often in danger of crossing over into a sign of exploitation and profit.

One year the teenagers wrote and performed a drama in the form of a medieval miracle play using this story as a base and performed it for the rest of us at one of our celebrations. It was a thrilling affair with a dashing devil to tempt the girls' father as he was the only suitor that ever turned up. The fair damsels in question, named Faith, Hope and Charity, were rescued from their plight when Nicholas delivered three golden grapefruits to their window sill.

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From this legend, Nicholas became known as “a protector of virgins” and patron of maidens in search of a husband. Because of Nicholas’ secret gift we draw the parallel story from Matthew 6:1—4 where we are taught not to trumpet our good deeds, but to give our gifts so that “the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing.”

Of the Miraculous Grain

Another story tells of a famine in Myra. The people were suffering from severe hunger. Merchant ships involved in grain exchanges between east and west passed through Myra, but Myra itself was without grain. As ships laden with grain stopped on route, Bishop Nicholas begged for some of this grain to feed his starving people. He promised the sailors that at the final weighing in on their arrival home not an ounce would be missing if they would only share some of their load. The story says that some of the grain he stored as seed. As he was a special friend to children, he used the rest and baked bread himself – sugar bread in his own image. I wonder if these were the first gingerbread men? Today, especially in Holland, Germany and Greece, there are beautiful cookie molds carved in wood, with the image of Nicholas on them. How can you avoid making a parallel connection with the story of the manna from heaven, the multiplication of loaves and fishes or with the Eucharist itself? We read the parallel lesson from John 6:28-34 which contains the passage, “It is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven, the true bread; for the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

Of the Wicked Butcher

Another story out of this famine time tells of three wandering students, or three young boys, who are robbed, killed and pickled in a vat by a desperate and cruel innkeeper. Nicholas finds out and restores these three to life. In many places in Europe you can see this miracle depicted on church walls or in carvings. The image shows three children rising from the vat and singing the praises of Nicholas as he blesses them. From that story, Nicholas is invoked as the patron of butchers and of vat makers, children and students.

This is the story which the children in our parish especially look forward to. Its gruesomeness is tempered when you hear it chanted as an old French folk song, sung in minor tones. But when the mode used is storytelling, the children will giggle and hug themselves and boo and cheer until the wicked butcher is finally brought to justice. Like a true fairy tale, what is inhuman and evil in the story is tolerable because it has a ritual, repetitious quality about it and the predictable and finally good ending.

We found another miracle play, a variation of this story, which the children in the community have also put on for the Nicholas celebration. It is called “The Sausage Maker’s Interlude” and is in a book of plays by Henri Gheon. It is a wild story, no doubt from the beginning of the industrial revolution, which tells of a butcher who sells sausages at the fair. He is very proud of his marvelous new, food-processor-sausage-making-machine. He has a supply of pigs that, stuffed in whole at the front end of the machine, come out as sausage at the other end. Everyone at the fair is having a great old time of it. They love his sausages and soon buy up his supply. With no more pigs to convert, he has a little argument with his wife about supply and demand,

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and no matter how his wife protests that they'd made enough money for the day, the butcher becomes more and more greedy, convinced that an endless sausage production will bring him endless customers. The devil in an elegant disguise joins the arguing couple and convinces the butcher to find a quick substitute to convert into sausage. He argues that the wheels of machinery must never stop but must ever grind onward. Such, after all, is progress! Even the butcher's wife is at risk. However, when three juicy young boys happen by, the butcher quickly interests them in the inner workings of the machine. He urges them to check out the groaning and grinding cavernous mouth of the funnel and then stuffs them in, when, who should happen by, in the "Nick of time," but the good bishop of this community, just back from the council of Nicea. He feels that he has lost control of his flock in his absence, and has a dread intuition of what is going on here at the fair. He asks the butcher to explain this machine. But the converted boys are already emerging as sausages out the other end. On a holy hunch, Nicholas grabs the wheels of progress and turns them in the opposite direction. The string of sausages is retracted and out of the feed tub emerge three bewildered little boys who think that they have just had a very bad dream. The devil is sent away and the butcher brought to his knees with remorse and the resolve to make amends for the rest of his days.

You can image the delight the children had inventing a sausage machine that looked in some parts like a medieval hell with a toothy maw and in other places like a blinking, flashing, computer with a bicycle wheel. For sound effects, the children had made a tape recording of every household appliance imaginable switched on in succession. The sausages were stuffed stockings in endless strings and were produced in a fashion that greatly satisfied the preschool contingent. It was a masterful production, and since we had to use the church as our stage, we quickly saw how the medieval miracle plays were banished from the sanctuaries and sent to the streets.

Of Deodatus

Even after the death of Nicholas, people continued to pray to him for special favors. It seems appropriate that this representative of the Father-Creator has special concern for women wanting to bear children. It seems that a couple, anxious to have a child, invokes Saint Nicholas and they have a son whom they then called Deodatus (Given by God). The thankful father, having promised to offer a sacrifice of a golden cup at a shrine to Saint Nicholas, waits to make his offering until Deodatus is old enough to accompany him on the sea voyage himself. Well, little Deodatus perhaps proves to be more of a handful than they had reckoned with. Whatever the case, when it is time to undertake the voyage, the father has changed his offering to a more ordinary cup of lesser value, and father and son strike out to sea. At sea, there is a tremendous storm and Deodatus is swept overboard. The distraught father arrives first at the shrine with his inferior gift and his dreadful remorse and then must return home to tell his wife of the tragedy. When he returns home and spills the whole sorry tale, his wife brings him in to the boy's bedroom where Deodatus is sound asleep. Saint Nicholas had fished him out of the sea and returned him to his home.

There are many, many more stories and legends about the life of Saint Nicholas and about more miracles after his death. Themes and variations of these legends spread throughout the eastern Church and were brought to the western Church, sometimes telling of these miracles. Sailors

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going east made it a point to visit his grave. Norman sailors brought the stories, as they heard them from the Sicilian sailors, back to Normandy and England. His name spread with the Russians trading in Constantinople in the ninth century, and before long he was made a patron saint of Russia, and many nobles and czars were named Nicholas after him. In Greece, he is also a patron. Bankers, pawnbrokers, girls hoping to marry, women hoping for children, sailors, butchers, boat makers, vat-makers, thieves, prisoners and children all claim his special patronage.

Family Ceremonies for Saint Claus or Saint Nicholas

So as you evolve a Santa Claus or a Saint Nicholas tradition for your family, you will have to find the elements that will be strong for you and then abide by them – even if everyone has vanished off to college. At home, things have to remain the same.

Use elements out of your childhood or your family backgrounds that worked and add whatever will give strength and substance to this father figure. You might use December 6 as a Nicholas feast to give some relief from long waiting and incentive to carry on and prepare further.

This might be the time to put out a shoe before the door or hang up the stocking on the hearth or set out a place on the table for some little sign.

You may wish to introduce the concept of being a “little Saint Nicholas” and involve each family member in secret kindnesses to one another. You can include friends and neighbors into being secretly gifted. You might want to introduce anonymous gift giving, even into your Christmas giving where gifts are given and received without a name. I had a women’s study group for some time; we became quite interested in the process of gift-giving and received and the ego feelings that got caught into the action. We thought to take seriously the suggestion that the “left hand not know what the right hand is doing.” We devised for ourselves an interesting exercise for the last day of our meeting. Each woman brought a small gift of no great monetary value but of some symbolic value. Without words or cards, the little gifts arrived on the day of our meeting, wrapped only in a brown bag with a white cotton string tied around the neck. This way each gift looked exactly the same on the outside. They were placed in the center of the room, like so many bag lunches. At the end of this final meeting, each woman picked up one of the bags and left the house silently. She didn’t open her sack until she was at home alone with her little gift. If she didn’t happen to choose back her own sack by chance, she had a little gift which she now had to as gracefully “receive” as the one she had given. She would never know who got her gift and whose gift she had received. It took away all ego involvement and left room for some powerful, new feelings. I see this as a lesson in gift-giving that might work in a classroom on Saint Nicholas day and as a little prelude to the preparation of our gift-giving at Christmas.

Nicholas ceremonies extended to the larger family, to include friends or neighbors, add to the festive spirit. It gives the children some company in what might seem to unique and individual.

*--Courtesy of “To Dance with God”
Family Ritual and Community Celebration
Gertrud Mueller Nelson*