

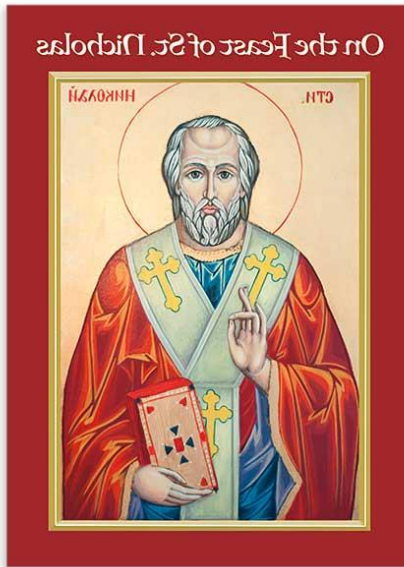
A Rose by Any Other Name ... Is Still a Rose

The Feast of St. Nicholas

Eph 6:10-17 Lk 13:10-17

Father Deacon Howard

“We praise you, O bishop of Christ, Nicholas,
And we venerate your memory, for you pray for
us to Christ our God.” **Hymn of Praise of the Feast**



Among the various saints we commemorate during the Church Year, St Nicholas merits special consideration. His feast-day is celebrated in both the Byzantine and Latin Rite churches on the same day, December 6. His icon is almost always seen on the iconostases of our Eastern Rite churches and revered in most of our homes. Among Ukrainians his icon, in number, occupies 1st place next to the icons of the Mother of God.

St. Nicholas died 1,600 years ago but he continues to live on in the hearts of millions of people. It's no exaggeration to say that he still enjoys world-wide veneration and universal respect. But what do we know about St. Nicholas as a person? We know for certain that he was a fourth-century bishop from a town in southern Turkey. We know he took part in the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea. We know that he died around 345. Other than that, we know very little about him. In fact, there are almost no references to his actual life by any of his contemporaries. Much of what we do know is somewhat embellished with various legends.

The oldest biography of St. Nicholas comes from the 9th century. The story-line tells us, that after he died, our Lord blessed him with the gift of working miracles. That's how he got his title "Great Wonder-worker". His widely known miracles were the chief reason for the rapid spread of his cult-like popularity. If he lived among us today, he would have the same pop star attraction, cult following, as did John Paul II. Like Pope John Paul, Nicholas aroused intense interest, admiration, and lifelong devotion in those who came to know him personally or by reputation. His whole life was dedicated to works of generosity and mercy, both spiritual and non-spiritual. Even during his life, he was called the father of orphans, the protector of widows and the benefactor to the poor.

There are stories of him saving sailors caught in storms off Myra. Stories of his helping Russian shepherds protect their flock from wild animals. Stories of him protecting houses from being burned down. It's reported that he appeared in a vision to some soldiers who were falsely accused and awaiting execution. He consoled them and brought about their release.

A very significant factor which contributed to the spread of his popularity among the people was when his relics were stolen from Turkey by Italian merchants who took them to the city of Bari in southern Italy. They regarded Nicholas as a great saint. Immediately after they arrived in Italy, glorious miracles began to take place. And the city became famous for pilgrimages. The devotion to and the veneration of St. Nicholas then spread throughout Europe. He was popular and much loved in Rome, Germany, France, England and Greece. The cult of St. Nickolas came to Ukraine along with the Christian faith.

This love for him was kept live when churches were erected in his honor. First from Byzantium and then throughout the entire world! Emperor Justinian in the 4th century built a church in his honor in Constantinople. Pope Nicholas, the first Pope bearing this name, erected a church in Rome in the 7th century. In the 10th century Emperor Manuel prescribed that the feast of Saint Nicholas be celebrated on the 6th of December. A church was built in Kiev, in his honor in the 11th century. It's estimated that in France and Germany there are 2000 churches dedicated to his name. An additional 400 can be found in England.

As early as the 14th century children in Northern Europe were told by their parents, that on every December 6 St. Nicholas would come down the chimney and bring them gifts. But only if they had been good that year. The joy of gift-giving to family and friends continued until the late 18th century when a re-versioning of the name began. It's the story of how St. Nicholas became Santa Claus.

The Dutch name for St. Nicholas is "Sinterklaas". In Manhattan which is part of the city of New York, the American accented version of the Dutch name "Sinterklaas," was pronounced Santa Claus. Over time St. Nicholas's name gradually changed into Santa Claus. Yet a rose by any other name is still a rose. What happened then was that the gift giving customs associated with St. Nicholas were transformed out of all recognition. It became more and more associated with commercialism.

Notwithstanding, St. Nicholas still has his cult of followers all over the world. He is a pop-idol, a super saint, because he appeals to anyone with any moral basis. No belief system can disagree with what he stands for. Whereas so much theology today can be hard to understand, the theology of St. Nicholas and his stories are simple. As simple as Jesus's message as contained in the parable of the Good Samaritan! Everlasting life is ours if we love God and love our neighbor.

St. Nicholas saw Jesus Christ in his neighbor. His life as lived is a beautiful example of his sacrificial love of God and neighbor. His love of neighbor is universal, full of mercy and ready to assist in every necessity of soul and body. His message for us today hasn't changed in 1600 years. It's very simple: **help those in need, and show charity to all.**

O, St. Nicholas, you are the hope of all Christians, the great defender of the wronged, the comforter of the distressed, the almsgiver to the poor and the steadfast lover of goodness. We pray that at the Last Judgment our Lord will judge us, as he judged you, by our devotional works of love and by our compassionate mercy to others. AMEN

Suggested Readings

Jeremy Seal. "Nicholas: The Epic Journey from Saint to Santa Claus" (Bloomsbury USA.)
November 1, 2005.

*Julian J. Katrij, OSBM. "A Byzantine Rite Liturgical Year",
Basilian Fathers Publication, 1992, Toronto.*

*A Monk of the Eastern Church. "The Year of Grace of the Lord".
St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY. 1992.*