

# saint nicholas the wonder-worker

Nicholas was born to a wealthy family in Patara, Lycia. His parents died, and he inherited a considerable sum of money, but he kept none of it, giving it instead to the poor.

Nicholas was cast into prison during the persecution of Diocletian, but when Constantine became emperor, Nicholas was released with countless others and returned to his preaching only to find a new threat: Arianism, a heresy that taught that Jesus was a created Spirit and not the second Person of the Holy Trinity. Thanks to the teaching of St Nicholas, the metropolis of Myra was spared the Arian heresy. St Nicholas was present at the Council of Nicea, where he slapped (some sources say he punched) Arius in the face for his heresy!

St Nicholas was represented by medieval artists more frequently than any saint but Mary, and nearly 400 churches were dedicated in his honor in England alone during the late Middle Ages.

In Holland he was known as Sinterklass, and the Dutch in New Amsterdam brought the stories to America, where Sinterklass came to be known as Santa Claus.

Martin Luther tried to replace this St Nicholas as a bearer of gifts with the Christ Child, or, in German, Christkindl. Over the years, that became pronounced as Kriss Kringle, which ironically is now considered another name for Santa Claus!

St Nicholas' name occurs in the Orthodox liturgy of St John Chrysostom.

The following places honour him as patron: Greece, Russia, the Kingdom of Naples, Sicily, Lorraine, the Diocese of Liège; many cities in Italy, Germany, Austria, and Belgium; Galway in Scotland; Campen in the Netherlands; Corfu in Greece; Freiburg in Switzerland; and Moscow in Russia.

He is patron of mariners, merchants, bakers, travellers, children, etc.

In Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, they have the custom of making him the secret purveyor of gifts to children on 6

December, his feast day; in the United States and some other countries St. Nicholas has become identified with Santa Claus who distributes gifts to children on Christmas eve.

His relics are still preserved in the church of San Nicola in Bari; up to the present day an oily substance, known as *Manna di S. Nicola*, which is highly valued for its medicinal powers, is said to flow from them.

Perhaps the best-known story about Nicholas concerns his charity toward a poor man who was unable to provide dowries for his three daughters of marriageable age. Rather than see them forced into prostitution, Nicholas secret-

ly tossed a bag of gold through the poor man's window on three separate occasions, thus enabling the daughters to be married. Over the centuries, this particular legend evolved into the custom of gift-giving on the saint's feast.

St Nicholas was tireless in opposing paganism and took strong measures: among other temples he destroyed was that of Artemis, the principal in the district.

The governor Eustathius had taken a bribe to condemn to death three innocent men. At the time fixed for their execution Nicholas came to the place, stayed the hands of the executioner, and released the prisoners. Then he turned to Eustathius and did not cease to reproach him until he admitted his crime and expressed his penitence.

During his lifetime, Nicholas appeared to storm tossed mariners who invoked his aid off the coast of Lycia and brought them safely to port. This is the origin of his patronage of sailors.

