

22.01.02 Views from the Pews: The real St Nicholas

St. Nicholas is one of the most endearing saints revered by Western and Eastern rite, both Catholics and Orthodox. There are many fascinating facts connected to his life that we should remember in order to keep Christmas in our hearts throughout the year.

Nicholas was born in Patara in A.D. 270 and served as Bishop of Myra, both seaport towns off Turkey's southern coast where he lived all his life (and died in 345). His remains ended up in another seaport town — Bari, in the heel of Italy's boot. The Feast of the Translation of the Holy Relics St. Nicholas from Myra to Bari in 1087 is celebrated in Italy to this day on May 9 in the basilica there, built as a shrine to him and completed in 1089.

When Nicholas was born, his parents were serving the needs of the sick. They contracted the same disease as the sick and died. Being the only child, he inherited everything. St. Nicholas is the first of the saints you can consider a philanthropist in the way he determined that his wealth must be used for the benefit of the poor.

According to ancient tradition, Nicholas heard of a destitute family, a widower father and his three daughters. The father, trapped in dire poverty, was considering selling his daughters into slavery. To deliver them, the young Nicholas secretly threw three bags of gold coins through their window on three consecutive nights. Saint Nicholas's compassion for the poor, marginalized and, in particular, children, especially by providing aid anonymously to those in greatest need, became so legendary that it never faded over the centuries, but inspired others, and was imitated especially around Christmas in many countries. For example, French nuns during the Middle Ages started the tradition of bringing anonymous gifts under the cover of night to needy families and their children on Dec. 5, St. Nicholas Eve. When the poor tried to find out who their benefactor was, they got the answer, "It must have been St. Nicholas." His anonymous nocturnal gift-giving has continued in many countries to today. Christmas traditions still include chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil.

Nicholas got to be called Santa Claus thanks to a corruption of his name in Dutch, "Sinterklaas." The Dutch brought "Sinterklaas" with them to North America in 1621 when they founded New Amsterdam on the tip of Manhattan. English speaking settlers later corrupted the name, which evolved into "Santa Claus."

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