



Written by [Fr. James Thornton](#) on December 5, 2023

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Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra

St. Nicholas was born late in the third century — according to tradition, in the year 270 A.D. — of a wealthy family in the city of Patara, in a region of southwestern Asia Minor known as Lycia. Early in his life, upon the completion of his education, he was ordained to the priesthood. Upon the death of his parents, he set aside his patrimony and, over time, gave it away to the poor. That philanthropic disposition was most characteristic of him, the virtue of charity shining above all else during his life. In that regard, it is noted in some early Christian writings, St. Nicholas considered himself not the owner of his inherited wealth, but the caretaker of that wealth, which, in his view, was intended by God for the poor.



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A well-known story tells of a man with three daughters who had no money to provide the dowries necessary in those days for a proper marriage. Thus, it seemed that the girls were doomed to a life of ignominy, of dishonor, more than likely of slavery, or even worse. However, St. Nicholas secretly provided a bag of gold coins on three separate occasions, which the father used to guarantee good marriages for his three daughters. It is from that story, as well as other similar stories, that the saint is associated with the giving of gifts.

Bishop of Myra

Early in the fourth century, St. Nicholas was elected bishop of Myra, an important seaport near his home town. The people of Myra were delighted with that choice, since previously the saint's uncle had served as bishop there. St. Nicholas was therefore known to the faithful and recognized for his thoroughly upstanding life, honesty, decency, and piety.

Not long after his enthronement as bishop, the Roman Emperor Diocletian ordered the suppression of Christianity throughout the empire. Thus began what is sometimes called the Great Persecution, in which huge numbers of Christians went to their deaths or suffered torture for the sake of their Christian beliefs. It is noteworthy that this persecution was particularly harsh in the eastern half of the empire, where the saint lived and where Diocletian's subordinate, Galerius, ruled. Since Christian clergy, especially bishops, were prime targets, St. Nicholas was seized by the authorities and locked in a prison. We can say with certainty that he suffered serious privation there, since it was well known that Galerius enjoyed seeing Christian clergy insulted and humiliated. However, thanks be to God, the life of the saint was preserved. We next hear of St. Nicholas after Constantine's accession to the imperial throne and his Edict of Toleration, which decreed the legalization of Christianity and its elevation to equality with the dominant state paganism. The saint was therefore liberated from prison and returned to his home in Myra, to the joy of its inhabitants.



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The teachings of an Alexandrian priest, Arius, became the focus of major controversy shortly after Constantine's Edict of Toleration. Arius taught that Jesus Christ was not, with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, a member of an eternal Divine Trinity, but was rather a created being, created in time, rather like a mere prophet of God. In fact, Arius flatly denied the doctrine of the Trinity altogether. From a traditional Christian perspective, Arius' theology was grossly heretical, creating major divisiveness within the church during that time. Consequently, in 325 the emperor called together the First Ecumenical Council, known to history as the Council of Nicaea, in which the assembled bishops from throughout the empire were brought together to resolve the dispute and restore theological unanimity to the church. St. Nicholas was among the council's 318 voting participants.

Now it happens that Arius, who was indeed a clever man, was particularly fond of spreading his untraditional views by means of simple rhymes set to the music of popular tunes of the day — soldiers' and sailors' songs, drinking songs, and the like. During the council, from time to time the delegates called upon Arius for clarifications of his position. He would sometimes answer by singing his propaganda tunes, the ones with which he had spread his notions far and wide. These songs caused outrage among all but a tiny handful of the delegates. To St. Nicholas, the singing was blasphemous and therefore so infuriating that, according to an ancient tradition, in answer to the insolent words, the bishop of Myra slapped Arius across the face, an act of indecorum for which the council temporarily deprived St. Nicholas of his rank as bishop. Ultimately, however, the saint's rank and his see were returned to him, particularly after the council condemned Arius and his opinions.

Many Christians, though not all, believe that God will perform miracles through the intercessions of saints who by their singular and unswerving devotion to the teachings of Jesus Christ and to the Christian way of life become true friends of God. As a result, by the power of God Himself, people are helped through all sorts of misery and calamity by those intercessions.

With respect to St. Nicholas, it is believed that he helped those in difficult straits during his life in Myra, and has never ceased doing so, though almost 1,700 years have passed since the time of his life. Let us consider some examples. (Please remember that while some believe these to be folk tales or legends from long ago, others believe them to be stories of genuine miracles. In either case, to hear or read about them helps us to understand the phenomenon of the popularity in our own 21st century of this man who lived in the early centuries of the Christian Era.)

When, at the time of his reign as bishop of Myra, his city was afflicted with severe famine, a ship loaded with grain happened to be sailing nearby. Although the ship's captain was intending to bypass Myra, St. Nicholas miraculously appeared to him, telling him of the suffering of his flock from starvation and asking him to sail into the harbor of Myra. The captain obeyed the hierarch, and the city was saved.

On another occasion, three soldiers were unjustly accused of plotting against the imperial government, a crime for which they were sentenced to death. But St. Nicholas appeared in a dream to the emperor, who then ordered the matter investigated more deeply. Discovering that the soldiers were innocent, the emperor had the charges dismissed and the soldiers restored to their former positions in the military.

There are many stories of St. Nicholas saving ships in distress, and of calming the violent winds at sea. In one of these stories, it is said that when the ship was endangered by gale-force winds, St. Nicholas appeared at the helm and sailed the ship safely into harbor. On another occasion, when a passenger fell overboard into the sea and cried "St. Nicholas, help me!" the man instantaneously found himself sitting



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at home, his family gathered all around him and astounded by his sudden appearance out of thin air.



Defender of Christian orthodoxy: St. Nicholas' commitment to orthodox Christian doctrine led him to slap Arius across the face for spreading heretical teachings about the Godhead. The scene is depicted here in a late-medieval Greek Orthodox fresco. (Wikimedia Commons/public domain)

Commemorations

St. Nicholas died in the year 346. It is written that at his death the people of his city greatly lamented the loss of their much-loved pastor through whom they had received so many benefits and such wonderful guidance. He was buried in a tomb in his cathedral, which quickly became a place of pilgrimage. In 1087, the relics of the saint were stolen by Venetian sailors and taken from Myra in Asia Minor to Bari, a seaport in southern Italy, near the "heel" of the Italian "boot." Therefore, at the present time, the saint is entombed in Bari in a crypt beneath the huge Basilica of St. Nicholas, an edifice built just after the transference of the relics.

Curiously, in 2009, a Turkish archeologist called upon his government to demand the return of the relics to Myra (now called "Demre"). Apparently, he believes that the return of the relics will increase the number of tourists to the city, which is already a popular place of pilgrimage for Christians.

St. Nicholas is commemorated primarily on December 6, the day on which he died, but also on May 9, the day of the transference of his relics from Myra to Bari. There is no saint as widely honored as St. Nicholas. Thousands of churches around the world are named for him. The 11th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, published early in the 20th century, relates that there "are nearly 400 churches in England dedicated to St. Nicholas." Doubtless the number is still large, and similar numbers are repeated in many countries. In other words, his veneration remains tremendously widespread. For example, he is greatly venerated in Russia and Greece. In Russia, he is honored as the protector of crops. In Greece, he is the patron of the Greek navy. In Serbia, it is customary (as elsewhere) that each individual has a patron saint. However, in addition, each family has a separate patron. St. Nicholas is the most widely chosen family patron, and his day is celebrated as a festive occasion by those families. In the Netherlands and Belgium, St. Nicholas is celebrated in mid-November with a character named *Sinterklaas*, a man dressed in a bishop's red robes and miter, who brings presents to good children. In the Czech Republic, *Svatý Mikuláš* (St. Nicholas) brings gifts to children



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on the eve of St. Nicholas Day.

His memory is celebrated as well in Romania, Bulgaria, Italy, Ireland, England, Portugal, Germany, Spain, Albania, Slovakia, and elsewhere. There are special celebrations on his feast day in several locations in the United States, especially in places with large concentrations of people of Dutch and German ancestry. And so we see that around the world, he is immensely esteemed.

St. Nicholas is the patron of hundreds of cities around the world, including New York City, which, we remember, was founded by the Dutch, who have long had a special devotion to the saint. He is the patron of sailors and fishermen. He is the patron and protector of children. He is the patron of soldiers. He is the patron of prisoners and the unjustly condemned. He is the patron of bakers, butchers, and brewers; the patron of pawnbrokers, poets, and paupers; the patron of candle-makers, choristers, and clerks. He is, indeed, the patron of more professions, occupations, and categories of people than any other saint.

St. Nicholas is truly the universal saint, a patron of all, and, even after so many centuries, still remembered for his lovingkindness, his wisdom, and his fearlessness.



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