

him by one foot. The mystery was solved at last He had captured the unknown!

"Bishop Nicholas!" exclaimed the nobleman, falling on his knees. "So, it was you. I might have guessed it could be none other. How can I ever thank you?"

"Say no more, my dear son," said the Saintly bishop, who was overcome with confusion because his good deed had been discovered. "Only promise me one thing."

"Anything, anything, good Father Nicholas," said the nobleman, while tears of happiness and gratitude flowed down his cheeks.

"Promise me on your honor never to reveal what you have found out tonight."

The nobleman gave his word that he would not tell but curiosity made him ask Saint Nicholas what prompted him to perform his secret acts of generosity.

"Tomorrow is the Birthday of the Lord," replied Saint Nicholas. Accept the gold as a gift for His sake, Who for our sakes became poor."

For many years Saint Nicholas continued his Christmas Eve custom, and not until after he had died and gone to Heaven was the secret revealed. Is it any wonder that he has come to be looked upon as "Santa Claus," who is the symbol of Christmas giving and the Christmas spirit? As the Patron Saint of Children, Saint Nicholas has always been and always will be loved by countless little folks everywhere.

Even as a child Saint Nicholas showed every indication of his future Saintliness and nobility. He was the son of wealthy parents, who brought him up to love and serve God. He was only a youth when they died and left him to manage a large fortune. From the beginning he devoted it to the poor, seeking out those who most needed help.

His good deeds won him renown far and near but his humility was as great as his charity. He shunned popular notice and performed his

works of mercy in secret. In spite of himself, he was recognized even in lifetime as a Saint and was appointed bishop of his diocese.

Saint Nicholas had a special love for the small ones of his flock, who in turn loved him dearly. His great love of the Divine Babe of Bethlehem inspired them with a like devotion. He looked upon his wealth as a gift from God, freely bestowed upon him to be used for others rather than himself. His example has come to us through the ages as the perfect model of Christmas giving. His gifts were made for the sweet sake of the infant Savior Who came down from Heaven on Christmas morn to bestow upon us the priceless gift of Himself.

Based on articles by Rev. H. J. Heagney, Litt. D.; Norman Griffin; Fr. Frances Weiser, S.J. Introduction and Compilation by Pauly Fongemie

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P.O. Box 267

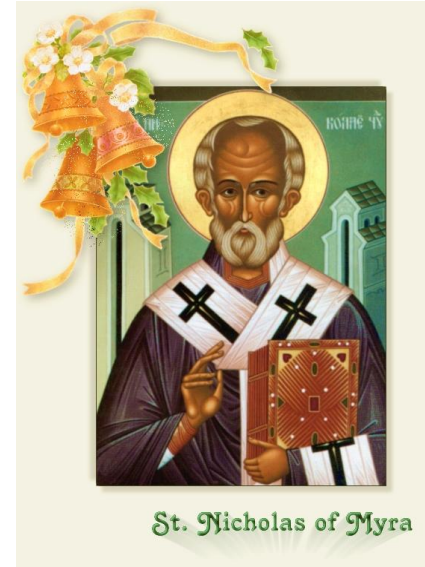
Angels Camp, California, 95222, USA

Telephone: 209-728-5598

E-mail: evangelization@earthlink.net

www.evangelizationstation.com

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A Story of Santa Claus

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

There are several Saint Nicholas', two of whom, found in many a Saints' dictionary is actually the same Saint, that of St. Nicholas of Bari and Myra, because he was given the first name last, since his relics are reposed there, and the second name comes from his Bishopric see in Asia Minor. He is our subject here. But before we present the true story of "Santa Claus" let us list some of the other Saint Nicholas': St. Nicholas of Flüe, Patron of Switzerland; St. Nicholas of Tolentino; and St. Nicholas I, Pope in the 9th century. St. Nicholas, of Myra or Bari is venerated in both the Latin and Greek calendar of Saints on December 6. He belongs to the fourth century; suffering under the persecution of Christians waged by the Roman emperor, Diocletian, and is believed to have worked a miracle in restoring three kidnapped children who had been dismembered when he

was the Bishop of Myra. Thus is derived his patronage of children. The giving of gifts in honor of the Saint became a tradition through an act of generosity in another matter as you will read below.

THE STORY OF THE REAL "SANTA CLAUS"

Who is Santa Claus? Did he ever live on this earth like other folk? Was he a real person? Yes; Saint Nicholas, whose feast day is observed by the Church on December sixth, is the great and good Saint who first acted the part of Santa Claus. How it happened is a real Christmas story of very long ago.

It was the night before Christmas in the great castle of a famous nobleman. No lights shone in the mansion and no fires burned on the hearths in the lofty rooms. All was dark and cold and desolate. The owner of the castle sat before the empty fireplace in the dining hall, his head sunk in his hands. Upstairs, his three young daughters had gone supperless to bed.

Despite the fine stone palace in which they lived and the high rank to which they belonged, the nobleman and his children were desperately poor. His entire fortune had been swept away some time ago. The nobleman's thoughts were centered upon his children rather than himself.

"What will become of my three poor little girls?" he said to himself sadly. And, indeed, the future seemed hopeless. Unable to work and with no means to support them, they had nothing to look forward to. His pride would not permit him to beg the help of the other nobles and he realized that the worldly lords and ladies of his station in society would consider his family disgraced because they were no longer wealthy.

Lost in his gloomy meditations, the nobleman remained in his chair while the hours slipped by, unheeded. Outside the streets grew

deserted and silent. Everybody had gone home. Finally, his head sank on his chest and he fell asleep.

Suddenly he was awakened at midnight by a strange sound. Someone had hurled something down the chimney. The mysterious package lay on the empty hearth before him. He jumped up and looked wildly around. When he discovered the parcel he was afraid to open it at first. Who could tell what it might contain or what enemy might have sent it rolling down in that queer manner!

After a while his curiosity overcame his fright and he cautiously reached out and picked up the object. It was a large ball, securely tied. It was heavy and gave out a chinking sound when he handled it. Quickly he untied the string and emptied the contents of the ball. Imagine his astonishment and delight when he saw a pile of gold pieces!

For a long time the nobleman wondered who could have done such a kind deed to him and his daughters. But he was unable to discover the identity of the unknown benefactor. The months sped by and after a while the nobleman gave up all hopes of solving the mystery. In the meantime his eldest daughter had married and he had been able to provide her with a suitable dowry from the ball of gold.

Again it was Christmas Eve and the nobleman had come once more to the end of his money. His daughter's marriage had taken the greater portion of the mysterious gift and now he was faced with the same hopeless prospects as before. Again he remained before the cheerless, empty fireplace until sleep overcame him.

Then a remarkable thing took place. Exactly at the stroke of midnight another Christmas parcel was thrown through the chimney and landed on the hearth. The nobleman jumped up, wide awake, and picked it out of the ashes. He

could hardly believe his senses when he found that it was another ball of gold pieces.

He rubbed his eyes as if he were still dreaming. But no, there could be no mistake. Here was another small fortune, coming to him out of the sky on Christmas Eve.

"Who among all the people I know can be such a real friend in need?" he wondered. "Why does he perform this kind act at Christmas time and in such a secret way? Whoever he may be, God bless him and keep him!"

This time the count made careful inquiries and discovered that he was not the only person who shared the charity of the unknown benefactor. Many other people who needed help, especially the little children of the poor, had received mysterious presents while they were asleep on Christmas Eve. But nobody knew who it was that remembered them so generously.

"He must be a Saint or an Angel from Heaven!" they exclaimed.

The following Christmas the nobleman again sat before the empty hearth in the castle dining hall but this time he did not fall asleep. He was determined to discover who the mysterious benefactor really was. When the midnight hour drew near, he was trembling with excitement.

He was not disappointed. With a loud thump another heavy ball of gold came down the chimney. He did not wait to pick it up but ran as fast as he could out into the street. He was just in time to see a shadowy figure climbing down the wall of the castle. He shouted to the stranger to stop but he leaped to the earth and darted through the rear gate. The nobleman had no intention of giving up so easily. He hurried after the disappearing form at full speed. Down the street and around a corner he rushed, calling at the top of his lungs.

Suddenly the figure darted into a doorway but his pursuer made a final plunge and grasped