

## The Saint Who Inspired “Santa”

In the United States, the day after Halloween kicks off the Christmas season. We're told, "Christmas is just around the corner!" Catalogs, department stores, TV and radio ads tell us we have only so many shopping days left until Christmas. We begin to see images of that plump old man with a white beard, dressed in red, surrounded by his jolly old elves. And we say to our children, yes, Santa Claus is coming! Yes, he is real....but he's a copy of St. Nicholas. And they ask, just who is this St. Nicholas?

Holy Father Nicholas the Wonderworker was born in 272 A.D. near the Asia Minor town of Myra, in present day Turkey. Named Bishop and then Archbishop of Myra, St. Nicholas was famous for his generous gifts to the poor. He was very religious from an early age and devoted his life entirely to Christianity. In the year 325 A.D. St. Nicholas was a participant in the First Ecumenical Council. He was later thrown into prison for his Christian faith but was released unharmed. He was known to have visited pagan temples and smashed pagan idols. He performed miracles! Yet he was most known for his gentleness, charity and kindness to all, especially the poor and helpless. Legend has it that he presented three impoverished daughters of a pious Christian family with dowries so that they would not have to become prostitutes.

Having reached old age, St. Nicholas peacefully fell asleep in the Lord around December 6, 342 or 343 A. D. His relics were preserved in the local cathedral church and flowed with myrrh, from which many received healing. His bones were transported by sailors to Bari, a port in Italy, where a tomb was built over his grave and where a basilica was constructed in 1087. St. Nicholas' tomb became a very popular pilgrimage site and his popularity spread throughout the Mediterranean region and Europe. He was reputed to be able to calm the raging seas, rescue desperate sailors, help the poor and downtrodden, and save children. Saint Nicholas became revered by many as the patron saint of seamen, merchants, archers, children, prostitutes, pharmacists, lawyers, pawnbrokers and prisoners. As time went on, he primarily became associated with gift-giving and generosity and slowly became a legendary figure named Sinterklaas, later mispronounced as "Santa Claus."

Many cultures are attracted to this saint. In the Netherlands, legend has it that Sinterklaas arrives on December 6<sup>th</sup> by way of a steamboat from Spain; in Germany, St. Nicholas has had many names but more recently has begun showing up on Christmas Eve as Father Christmas. In France he is now called Pere Noel; and in Russia, he has become Grandfather Frost. In Ukraine, St. Nicholas is an especially venerated saint, for it is believed Prince Vladimir brought back tales of St. Nicholas from Constantinople, where he was baptized. Prince Vsevolod Yaroslavych officially declared the feast of St. Nicholas in Ukraine in 1088. Wherever he visits, St. Nicholas leaves candy and gifts.

In the United States, St. Nicholas is almost an unknown entity. Fortunately, in our Ukrainian Catholic churches, we still celebrate the Feast of St. Nicholas on December 6<sup>th</sup> (Julian Calendar, December 19<sup>th</sup>).

Some of our parishes have very large celebrations, complete with borsch, varenyky and holubsti, and of course, a visit from St. Nick, dressed in bishop's vestments. Some of our smaller parishes celebrate on a smaller scale – St. Nicholas might give a small gift, such as a special cookie, to everyone in the parish. In all of our parishes, we robustly sing “O Kto Kto – Those Who Love, Nicholas the Saintly!”

In our homes, how can we continue the celebration of St. Nicholas' feast day? First, as during any special church holy day, we can place an icon of St. Nicholas in our icon corner and as a family, pray to this great saint, asking him to bless us. We can prepare small food treats and place them before the icon, for sharing after family prayer.

Educating the family about St. Nicholas is probably the second most important part of the celebration. We can tell stories, read books, act out scenes from this great saint's life. Age-appropriate books about St. Nicholas can be selected – check out the library, your local bookstore, the internet. Some children's books include *The Saint Who Became Santa Claus* by Evelyn Bence, *St. Nicholas The Wonder Worker* by Anne Newberger and *St. Nicholas, The Real Story of the Christmas Legend* by Julie Stiegmeyer.

The family can bake and decorate St. Nicholas cookies; pictures of St. Nicholas can be colored, acts of charity to the needy can be made, modeling the kindness and generosity of St. Nicholas. Families, children included, might bring food, toys or monetary gifts to the church on December 6<sup>th</sup> to be blessed and distributed to those who need help, such as those living in shelters, orphanages or hospitals. And of course, last but not least, presents can be given to the children in the family in honor of this great and holy man.

Don't forget to end your St. Nicholas celebration with the song that we sing but once a year, on his feast day:

*“Those who love, Nicholas the saintly,  
Those who serve, Nicholas the saintly,  
Him will Nicholas receive  
and give help in time of need,  
Holy Father Nicholas.”*

And the next time you see Santa Claus, remember where he came from!