The Story of St. Nicholas

St. Nicholas, also known as "Nikolaos of Myra," was a fourth century saint and Greek bishop of Myra. Nicholas was born in Asia Minor in the Roman Empire as an only child to Christian parents.

Both of his parents tragically died during an epidemic when he was a young man, leaving him well off, but to be raised by his uncle - the Bishop of Patara. Nicholas was determined to devote his inheritance to works of charity, and his uncle mentored him as a reader and later ordained him as a presbyter (priest).

An opportunity soon arose for St. Nicholas and his inheritance. A citizen of Patara had lost all his money, and needed to support his three daughters who could not find husbands because of their poverty; so the wretched man was going to give them over to prostitution. Nicholas became informed of this, and thus took a bag of gold and threw it into an open window of the man's house in the night. Here was a dowry for the eldest girl and she was soon duly married. At intervals Nicholas did the same for the second and the third; at the last time the father was on the watch, recognized his benefactor and overwhelmed Nicholas with his gratitude.

Another story of St. Nicholas is that he was once traveling by sea to the Holy Land to see where Jesus had lived and died. While sailing, a strong storm caused the waters to become dangerous, and the sailors were frightened. St. Nicholas prayed for the seas to calm, and shortly thereafter, he did. It is due to this story that St. Nicholas is considered a patron of sailors and those traveling by sea.

Coming to the city of Myra when the clergy and people of the province were in session to elect a new bishop, St. Nicholas was indicated by God as the man they should choose. This was during the time of persecutions in the beginning of the fourth century.

St. Nicholas attended the Council of Nicaea in 325, in which he fought against a heresy that a man named Arius was spreading. This heresy said that Jesus the Son was not equal to God the Father. Many bishops listened to Arius and were close to agreeing with his position until St. Nicholas presented the truth to them, at which point the bishops agreed with St. Nicholas. The Nicene Creed, which is recited at the Catholic Mass, was written in response to what was determined as truth at this council.

St. Nicholas died on December 6, 343 in Myra. His body was buried in the cathedral. Due to turmoil in the land, in the year 1067 his relics were moved to Bari, Italy, where many of them remain today. His body exudes an oil to this day (called the “manna of St. Nicholas”) which is said to have healing properties. The site of his burial in Bari is a popular location for pilgrimages. St. Nicholas is the patron saint of children and sailors.
Sinter Klaas Comes to New York

St. Nicholas made his first inroads into American popular culture towards the end of the 18th century. In December 1773, and again in 1774, a New York newspaper reported that groups of Dutch families had gathered to honor the anniversary of his death.

The name Santa Claus evolved from Nick’s Dutch nickname, Sinter Klaas, a shortened form of Sint Nikolaas (Dutch for Saint Nicholas). In 1804, John Pintard, a member of the New York Historical Society, distributed woodcuts of St. Nicholas at the society’s annual meeting. The background of the engraving contains now-familiar Santa images including stockings filled with toys and fruit hung over a fireplace. In 1809, Washington Irving helped to popularize the Sinter Klaas stories when he referred to St. Nicholas as the patron saint of New York in his book, The History of New York. As his prominence grew, Sinter Klaas was described as everything from a “rascal” with a blue three-cornered hat, red waistcoat, and yellow stockings to a man wearing a broad-brimmed hat and a “huge pair of Flemish trunk hose.”

In 1822, Clement Clarke Moore, an Episcopal minister, wrote a long Christmas poem for his three daughters entitled “An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas,” more popularly known as “’Twas The Night Before Christmas.”

In 1881, political cartoonist Thomas Nast drew on Moore’s poem to create the first likeness that matches our modern image of Santa Claus. His cartoon, which appeared in Harper’s Weekly, depicted Santa as a rotund, cheerful man with a full, white beard, holding a sack laden with toys for lucky children. It is Nast who gave Santa his bright red suit trimmed with white fur, North Pole workshop, elves and his wife, Mrs. Claus.