

In 1853, John Neale published an unusual Christmas carol with no reference to the birth of Christ. Instead, the carol *Good King Wenceslaus* tells of the saintly deeds of a king from 10<sup>th</sup> century Bohemia. King Wenceslaus braved the harsh winter weather to bring alms to the poor on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Christmas, the Feast of Saint Stephen. His young servant was ready to give up but instead follows the example and the footprints of Wenceslaus through the deep snow.<sup>i</sup>

In 903, 950 years before the Christmas carol, Wencelsaus was born into a noble family. When his father, the Duke of Bohemia, died there was political unrest. The land was troubled by rival factions of Christians and non-Christians. His saintly Grandmother Ludmilla, who had raised him in the faith, tried to promote Wenceslaus as ruler of Bohemia over his mother, Princess Dragomir.

Although baptized a Catholic, the Princess never accepted the faith and tried to destroy it when she had the chance. She purged Catholics from public office. She had churches closed and forbid the teaching of the faith.

When Wenceslaus came of age at 18<sup>ii</sup>, he sought to assert his right to the throne over his mother who had been serving as a regent. Wenceslaus loved God and loved his neighbor. Like his Grandmother Ludmilla, he came to the judgment that Princess Dragomir should be banished from the kingdom for the sake of good order. He sent her away, but the country was divided in two with his brother taking up where his mother left off.

Wenceslaus sought God's help for the difficult political decisions he faced. He was a man of fervent prayer, extreme asceticism, a charitable heart, and a chaste celibate. He supported the church and tried to negotiate peace.<sup>iii</sup> Where he was interested in unity, his brother, Boleslaus, was interested in division.

In the Book of Genesis, the Lord questions Cain: "Why are you angry? Why are you dejected? If you act rightly, you will be accepted; but if not, sin lies in wait at the door: its urge is for you, yet you can rule over it" (Genesis 4:6-7). The Lord tried to guide Cain to let go of his pride and anger. He did not, instead his anger blew up and Cain slew his brother Abel. So, to with Boleslaus.

Princess Dragomir carried out a plot to kill Ludmilla and with the help of one son, plotted against the other.<sup>iv</sup> Boleslaus invited Wenceslaus to church for the feast of the Martyrs Cosmas and Damian. Then he attacked his brother, and with the help of his supporters, they took his life. "Boleslaus himself delivered the final blow, killing his brother by running him through with a lance. St. Wenceslaus died on September 28, 935."<sup>v</sup> Those who live by the sword often die by the sword. The Roman Emperor Otto 1<sup>st</sup> invaded Bohemia and by force Boleslaus relented of his persecution of Christians.

In death, Wenceslaus accomplished more than he could in life. He was hailed as a martyr<sup>vi</sup> and the miracles that took place at his tomb played a hand in the conversion of his brother. Boleslaus repented of his murderous actions and had his brother's tomb relocated to the Cathedral where the faithful could honor his memory and seek his intercession.

Like Bohemia a thousand years ago, our own nation appears to be deeply divided along partisan lines. Statues of historical figures have been toppled. Churches have been vandalized. Innocent lives have been taken and violence only seems to escalate. The devil always takes something that is good and twists it to his evil ends, seeking to divide and conquer.

Like Wenceslaus, we too can seek God's help to guide us through these turbulent times through fervent prayer, fasting, and alms giving. In the words of Neale's Christmas carol, let us follow in the footsteps of Good King Wenceslaus:

Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing,  
Ye who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing.<sup>vii</sup>

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- i [carols.org.uk/good\\_king\\_wenceslas.htm](http://carols.org.uk/good_king_wenceslas.htm)
  - ii [classicfm.com/discover-music/real-story-good-king-wenceslas-carol/](http://classicfm.com/discover-music/real-story-good-king-wenceslas-carol/)
  - iii [catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-wenceslaus-608](http://catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-wenceslaus-608)
  - iv Ibid
  - v Ibid
  - vi [franciscanmedia.org/saint-wenceslaus/](http://franciscanmedia.org/saint-wenceslaus/)
  - vii [carols.org.uk/good\\_king\\_wenceslas.htm](http://carols.org.uk/good_king_wenceslas.htm)