

A SAMPLE ISSUE

SAINTS ✠ BY MAIL

a saint story in the mailbox

THIS ISSUE

Nicholas of Myra

The bishop behind Santa Claus

Long before the red suit, a bishop gave in
secret.

Born c. 270, Patara, in Asia Minor

Died c. 343, Myra (6 December)

Feast December 6

✠ IN THIS ISSUE ✠

FEAST December 6 PLACE Myra PATRON OF children

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A bishop who gave it away

Nicholas was born around the year 270 in Patara, a harbour town on the southern coast of what is now Turkey, to Christian parents of some means. Tradition holds that they died while he was young and left him a fortune, and that the young man resolved to spend it quietly on the poor rather than on himself.

He became bishop of nearby Myra, and he served through hard years: the last great Roman persecution under Diocletian, when Christians were imprisoned and tortured, and then the sudden turn under Constantine, when the faith was free at last. Tradition remembers Nicholas as a prisoner who outlived his jailers.

Almost nothing he wrote survives, and the earliest accounts of his life were set down long after his death. What endured instead was a reputation: for open-handed generosity, for defending the wronged, and for giving without being seen.

C. 270

Born at Patara; later bishop of *Myra* in Lycia.

THE SOURCES

His life was written down generations later; the history is real but thin.

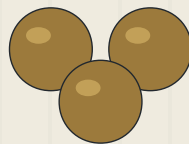
6 DECEMBER

The day of his death, kept as his feast ever since.

The gift in the night

Three bags of gold, thrown in secret, and Christmas giving was born.

The story that made Nicholas beloved is a small one. A poor man of the town had three daughters and no dowry for them, which in that world meant they could not marry and might be sold into servitude. According to a much-loved tradition, Nicholas came by night and tossed a bag of gold through the window, enough for the eldest, and returned twice more for the others.



THE THREE BAGS OF GOLD

He did not want to be seen or thanked. When the father finally caught him, Nicholas asked him to tell no one. The gold, some later versions say, landed in stockings or shoes left by the fire to dry, which is why, on his feast, children still set out shoes and stockings to be filled.

From that one gesture grew everything else: his patronage of the poor and of children, and, in time, the whole idea of the secret Christmas giver. The gift was quiet. The reputation was not.

A FEW THINGS WORTH KNOWING

A secret kept. In parts of Europe an anonymous gift is still called, with a smile, ‘a Saint Nicholas.’

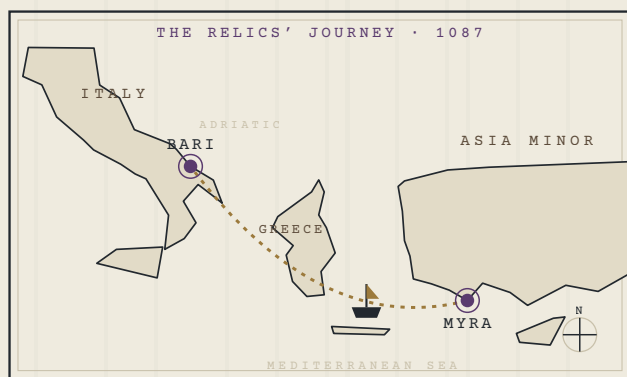
Into the stocking. Later tellings dropped the gold down the chimney into drying stockings, the seed of the Christmas stocking.

The world around him

Nicholas lived at the hinge of an age. He was born into a Roman Empire that still hunted Christians, and he died in one that had begun to build them basilicas. Myra was a busy port on the sea lanes between Egypt and Constantinople, full of sailors and grain ships, which is why sailors, too, came to claim him as their own.

Bishops in that century were not only pastors but protectors, expected to feed the hungry, ransom captives, and stand up to corrupt officials. The stories told of Nicholas (rescuing the falsely condemned, calming storms, confronting the powerful) are the stories a fourth-century city told about a good bishop.

Tradition also seats him among the bishops at the Council of Nicaea in 325, the gathering that gave us the Creed. It is a cherished scene, but the earliest reliable lists of who attended do not name him, one of many places where the beloved Nicholas and the documented one part ways.



THE SEA ROUTE FROM MYRA TO BARI

A FEW THINGS WORTH KNOWING

The manna. On his feast a clear liquid, the ‘manna of St Nicholas,’ is still gathered from his tomb at Bari.

Bones and Bari. In 1087 merchants from Bari carried his relics to Italy; Venice claims a share as well.

Symbols, patronage & feast

How Nicholas is known in art and devotion.

Three gold balls: the three bags of dowry gold, and why he is patron of pawnbrokers.

Mitre & crozier: he is a bishop first, the red-robed shepherd of Myra.

A ship or anchor: for the sailors who prayed to him, and who carried him to Bari.

Shoes by the fire: left out on his feast to be filled, echoing the gold in the night.



PATRONAGE

Nicholas is patron of children, sailors, merchants, pawnbrokers, and the falsely accused, and, fittingly, of all who give in secret and would rather not be thanked.

ON THE FEAST DAY

His feast is **December 6**. In many countries children set out a shoe or stocking the night before, and wake to find it filled with coins, chocolate, or an orange: a small, early gift in the heart of Advent.

A FEW THINGS WORTH KNOWING

The orange. The orange or gold coin in the shoe recalls the balls of gold given in secret.

The boy bishop. In medieval Europe a child was chosen 'boy bishop' on his feast, to lead and preach for a day.

From Myra to the North Pole

In 1087, sailors from Bari in southern Italy carried Nicholas's relics away from Myra, and his great basilica there draws pilgrims still. But his longer journey was through the imagination of the West. The Dutch kept his feast as *Sinterklaas*, a gift-bringing bishop, and carried the custom to New Amsterdam, the city that became New York.



SAN NICOLA, BARI

There the bishop slowly changed coats. A poem of 1823, “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” gave him reindeer and a sleigh; nineteenth-century illustrators gave him the round, red-suited shape we know; and a soft-drink campaign fixed it for good. Santa Claus is the great-grandchild of Sinterklaas, who is the memory of a bishop of Myra.

It is worth saying plainly: the modern Santa is a cultural descendant, not the saint himself. But pull the thread all the way back and you reach something true: a man who gave in secret, and asked that no one be told.

A FEW THINGS WORTH KNOWING

The eight reindeer. Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, and Blitzen come from Moore's 1823 poem; Rudolph arrived in 1939.

A face restored. Scientists used his skull, measured at Bari, to reconstruct his face: olive-skinned, grey-bearded, with a broken nose.

What they call him

One bishop of Myra, remembered under many names. Wherever sailors and merchants travelled, Nicholas went with them, and each country kept its own version of his feast.

NETHERLANDS

Sinterklaas

Arrives by steamboat in late November; children leave shoes out on 5 December.

ITALY (BARI)

San Nicola

His relics rest in Bari, where a fleet re-enacts their arrival each May.

GREECE & RUSSIA

Ágios Nikólaos

Patron of sailors and of Russia; a favourite of the Christian East.

FRANCE

Saint Nicolas

In the northeast, 6 December parades and gingerbread bishops; patron of Lorraine.

GERMANY

Nikolaus

Fills boots on 5 December, sometimes with the shaggy Krampus in tow.

UNITED STATES

Santa Claus

The Dutch Sinterklaas, reshaped in New York into the figure the world now knows.

SERBIA

Sveti Nikola

The most common family patron (slava) in Serbia, kept with a great feast in December.

SWITZERLAND & ALPS

Samichlaus

Comes on 6 December with mandarins and nuts, alongside the sooty Schmutzli.

A FEW THINGS WORTH KNOWING

Why Spain? Dutch tradition says Sinterklaas sails in from Spain, a memory of the old Spanish Netherlands.

Krampus. In Alpine lands a horned companion deals with naughty children while Nicholas rewards the good.

How we know

We separate what the Church officially recognizes and what the historical record shows from long-standing devotional tradition. Here is where this account comes from.

HISTORICAL Nicholas was a real bishop of Myra in the early 4th century; his feast is 6 December.

St. Nicholas Center (stnicholascenter.org); Encyclopaedia Britannica, "St. Nicholas."

HISTORICAL His relics were translated to Bari, Italy, in 1087, where the Basilica di San Nicola stands.

Basilica di San Nicola, Bari; Britannica.

HISTORICAL The Dutch Sinterklaas custom, carried to America, evolved into the modern Santa Claus (Moore's 1823 poem; 19th-century illustration).

St. Nicholas Center, "Origin of Santa"; the documented cultural history.

DEVOTIONAL The three-daughters dowry gift given secretly by night. *According to a beloved and early tradition, though not the documentary record.*

Hagiographic tradition; St. Nicholas Center.

LEGENDARY That Nicholas attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 (and rebuked Arius). *A cherished later tradition; the earliest reliable attendance lists do not name him.*

St. Nicholas Center, "Nicholas at the Council of Nicaea."

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Nicholas is a case study in how a real life grows a legend. The bishop of Myra is history; the secret gold is devotional tradition; the slap at Nicaea is later legend; Santa Claus is cultural memory. We keep them labelled, because the honest version is the better story.

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