

*The Real Saint Nicholas*  
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When considering the custom of gift giving at Christmas time it's hard to overlook Santa Claus. But let's set the record straight.

The legend of Santa Claus has its basis in the benevolence of a fine Christian man who actually lived in the fourth century A.D. His name was Nicholas.

Nicholas was born in 280 A. D. in the city of Patara in the Roman province of Lycia in southern Asia Minor, which is now the country of Turkey. This was a coastal town on the Mediterranean. As a youth, he was inordinately interested in the Scriptures, even more so than participating in games and other activities typical of boyhood. When his parents died, Nicholas became wealthy. However, because of his spiritual orientation, he did not wish to keep the wealth he had inherited but chose to distribute it anonymously according to needs of which he became aware.

One time he learned of a man who had three unmarried daughters who was contemplating selling them into slavery because he had no dowry for them. On three different occasions Nicholas dropped a bag of gold through a window in their house so that each of the daughters might have a dowry. Over time the father discovered who had made such provision for his daughters, but Nicholas prevailed upon him to keep his identity a secret.

Nicholas would have liked to remain in a monastery, but he sensed a calling from God to serve him in the world, and in that part of the world called the city of Myra, which was approximately 15 miles east of Patara. It was a special calling.

The Archbishop of the city of Myra had just died, and the bishops were in the process of selecting a successor. It is said that the oldest of the bishops had a dream that they should all watch the door of the cathedral the next morning, and the first person who entered by the name of Nicholas should be appointed Archbishop. The following morning Nicholas arrived to the joyous greeting of the bishops who, to his great surprise, immediately appointed him to the office of Archbishop of Myra.

Whether or not that event is entirely factual is uncertain, though stranger events have occurred, but we do know that during his tenure in this office, Nicholas achieved renown for his graciousness and benevolence. His work included saving the people of the city of Myra from a severe famine, opposing the injustices and immorality of the Roman rule with courageous and prophetic preaching, and suffering persecution. He was called a confessor, which means that he was persecuted but not martyred. When he was persecuted and put in prison, he always shared his limited provisions with the inmates. He maintained the Biblical principle that giving to those in need was the same as giving to the Lord.

Nicholas was a member of the first general council of the early church, held in Nicea in A. D. 325. This was the council which was convened to settle the first great heresy which threatened the life of the church; it concerned the nature of Jesus. The council established the doctrine to which all Christians who hold to the authority of the Bible agree, that Jesus' being was the same as the Father's, and not just like the Father's. This latter position, was held by followers of a pastor named Arius, of the influential Baucalis Church in Alexandria, Egypt, who taught that Christ was more than human but less than God. If this doctrine were to become the official teaching of the church, it would have made Jesus a separate being from God; it is a position some cults still teach today. The council, which Nicholas attended, agreed that God the Father and God the Son were two distinct persons yet part of the same essence, as indicated by Jesus himself when he said, "I and the Father are one," as recorded in the Bible in John 10:30.

Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God; he is 100% human and 100% God. These two Biblical truths, believed by the early church, were overwhelmingly affirmed by the Council of Nicea (the vote was 300-2, hardly a squeaker as people read in the spurious novel, *The DaVinci Code*). Nicholas powerfully advocated the position that the council took; only Arius and one of his followers voted for his position. This overwhelming vote, a strong testimony about Christ that defeated Arius and his followers at the Council, needs to be understood by all of us and explained to Arius' present day followers, the Jehovah's Witnesses...and others!

Nicholas was a faithful servant of his Lord. He died on December 6, A. D. 343.

In the 11th century his relics were moved to Bari in southern Italy. This occurrence was part of the growing legend that has built up over the centuries concerning him, his life and his work. Many legendary features have become attached to Saint Nicholas, as he came to be known. In the 17th century Dutch children in New Amsterdam shortened Nicholas to Klaus, which became Anglicized to Claus. The Spanish influence in the southern part of the Netherlands changed Saint to Santa. People in Holland still celebrate St. Nicholas' death on December 6. Other segments of the legend portray St. Nicholas dropping the bags of gold down the chimney instead of dropping them through the window of the three daughters' house, with one version having a bag of gold landing in a stocking by the chimney. From this Santa Claus emerges as an individual coming down chimneys and filling stockings.

In the early 19th century Washington Irving described Santa Claus as a jolly little man with a tubby tummy who flew through the air in a sleigh pulled by reindeer. Fourteen years later Clement Moore, a professor of theology at New York Theological Seminary, building on Washington Irving's work and the preceding legends surrounding the outstanding fourth century Archbishop, wrote the poem, "The Visit of Saint Nicholas," which has become more commonly known as "The Night Before Christmas," first published in the Troy, New York, *Sentinel* on December 23, 1823. In the 20th century Madison Avenue took over, and we now have the Santa Claus of today, a figure uncomfortably remote from the Saint Nicholas of reality.

What, then, do we do with Santa Claus? Briefly, the answer to the question of what to do with Santa Claus depends upon the age of our children or grandchildren, nieces or nephews.

In general, don't teach Santa Claus as having the quasi-divine qualities which have come to be attributed to him by our culture. But tenderly, and at opportune (teachable) moments, tell the true story of Saint Nicholas and demonstrate the Christian charity he modeled for us as a desirable response to God's grace, which we see taught in the Scriptures, for example, in Luke 19:8 "...Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.'"

You might also at times, when singing Christmas carols, sing the following “Nicholas Song.” Celebrate as well by using the advent wreath around daily devotions where our children and grandchildren, or others with whom we have a special relationship, see us as having a clear and unmistakable commitment to the Lord, whose birth we celebrate this month and for whom we live and to whom we are accountable. In those ways, our loved ones will be more inclined to grow strongly in the faith with no question as to whom they are giving their allegiance and to live their lives in faithful service to Him.

## Nicholas Song

Source unknown

Tune: Jolly Old Saint

Thankful Bishop Nicholas, friendly, good and wise;  
When he could he helped the poor, always by surprise.  
Rich men came to Nicholas, bringing wealth to share;  
So it could be sent to those living in despair.

Zealous Bishop Nicholas, born in Pa-ta-ra,  
Became the Bishop of Myra in times of such great trial;  
He suffered prison for his faith, but tortured, still  
held firm,  
Released by Constantine the Great, to Myra he returned.

Three maidens husbands could not find, their father  
was so poor,  
No dowry was available, to tempt a suitor’s lore;  
Word came to Bishop Nicholas who acted in good taste,  
In darkness threw three bags of gold, through the  
window in great haste.

Holy Bishop Nicholas, the sailor’s patron saint,  
Saved some storm-tossed mariners from a salty fate;  
In turn his love of justice, saved prisoners from  
cruel fate,  
He followed Jesus faithfully even to his death.

Patron saint of children, Saint Nicholas did become,  
Giving gifts at Christmastime a special act of love,  
His style was different from his peers, as he was  
wont to say,  
“Give to the truly needy ones expecting no return.”

Jolly Bishop Nicholas, friendly, good and wise;  
When he could, he helped the poor, always by surprise;  
We, too, must always seek to share our means with  
those in need,  
God help us imitate this saint, this Advent winter day.