

St. Nicholas of Myra

On Dec. 6, the faithful commemorate a bishop in the early church who was known for generosity and love of children. Born in Lycia in Asia Minor around the late third or fourth century, St. Nicholas of Myra is more than just the inspiration for the modern day Santa.

As a young man he is said to have made a pilgrimage to Palestine and Egypt in order to study in the school of the Desert Fathers. On returning some years later he was almost immediately ordained Bishop of Myra, which is now Demre, on the coast of modern day Turkey. The bishop was imprisoned during the Diocletian persecution and only released when Constantine the Great came to power and made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

One of the most famous stories of the generosity of St. Nicholas says that he threw bags of gold through an open window in the house of a poor man to serve as dowry for the man's daughters, who otherwise would have been forced into prostitution. The gold is said to have landed in the family's shoes, which were drying near the fire. This is why children leave their shoes out by the door, or hang their stockings by the fireplace in the hopes of receiving a gift on the eve of his feast.

St. Nicholas is associated with Christmas because of the tradition that he had the custom of giving secret gifts to children. It is also conjectured that the saint, who was known to wear red robes and have a long white beard, was culturally converted into the large man with a reindeer-drawn sled full of toys because in German, his name is "San Nikolaus" which almost sounds like "Santa Claus."

In the East, he is known as St. Nicholas of Myra for the town in which he was bishop. But in the West he is called St. Nicholas of Bari because, during the Muslim conquest of Turkey in 1087, his relics were taken to Bari by the Italians. St. Nicholas is the patron of children and of sailors. His intercession is sought by the shipwrecked, by those in difficult economic circumstances, and for those affected by fires. He died on December 6, 346.

PRAYER TO ST. NICHOLAS OF MYRA

O Saint Nicholas, bountiful Father and special Patron of our Byzantine Catholic Church. You are a shepherd and teacher to all who invoke your protection, and who, by devout prayer, call upon you for aid. Hasten and save the flock of Christ from ravenous wolves; and by your holy prayers protect all Christians and save them from worldly disturbances, earthquakes, attacks from abroad, from internal strife, from famine, flood, fire, sword, and sudden death. As you had mercy on those three men in prison and saved them from the king's wrath, now also have mercy on me who by word, deed, and thought have sunk into the darkness of sin, Save me from the just anger of God, and from eternal punishment. Through your intercession and aid as well as through his own mercy and grace, may Christ our God allow me to lead a tranquil and sinless life, and save me from standing at "his left," but deem me worthy to stand at "his right" with all the saints. Amen.