Five ways to celebrate the feast of St. Nicholas

Do your kids know that today's Santa Claus is based on a real historical figure, St. Nicholas of Myra? The story of the historical figure is much more interesting than the legend of Santa Claus, however, and offers a better example of Christian virtue.

Nicholas was born in the port city of Patara, Greece, in 270. His wealthy parents died during an epidemic when he was still quite young; he was raised by his uncle (also named Nicholas), the bishop of Patara, who eventually ordained Nicholas a priest.

Like so many other early Christian saints, Nicholas was inspired by Jesus' words to the rich young man to "go, sell your possessions and give to the poor" (Matthew 19:21). He devoted his entire inheritance to helping the poor and needy, most famously by secretly leaving

He was among those imprisoned during the persecution of Christians under the Roman emperor Diocletian in the first years of the fourth century. After his release, he journeyed to Bethlehem (the Biblical birthplace of Jesus), where he lived for several years with a small band of holy hermits in a cave overlooking the city, journeying as a pilgrim to various shrines in the Holy Land.

Feeling called by the Holy Spirit to return to his homeland, he settled in the port city of Myra (in modern-day Turkey), where he was made bishop. In 325, he attended the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical (worldwide) council of the Church's bishops, and was among those who signed the resulting creed (the first part of the Nicene Creed that Catholics recite every Sunday) affirming that Jesus Christ, the second

person of the Trinity, was “begotten [of the Father], not made.”

A scientific analysis of his bones (which have been carefully preserved in the Italian city of Bari) in the 1950s revealed a man about five and a half feet tall; a later analysis in 2005 found that he suffered from a broken nose, perhaps during his imprisonment or during his many travels.

Nicholas must have been a kind and generous man, because the people of Myra immediately began venerating him as a saint after his death in 343. Many legends told of his generosity, especially to the poor, children, and sailors. According to one legend, he once restored three young men to life after they had been murdered by an evil innkeeper; another version of the legend has him rescuing three innocent men from execution. Another time, long after his death, the saint is said to have appeared to a young boy who had been kidnapped and spirited him back to his home in Myra.

His association with sailors is not surprising, given that he was bishop of an important port city and traveled extensively. One story tells of how he miraculously appeared to some sailors whose ship was in danger of capsizing in a storm. After he guided them safely to port, he vanished; the astonished sailors sought out the bishop in his church, where they recognized him immediately, even though they had not met him prior to the miraculous incident on the ship.

Another time, the good bishop persuaded some sailors to unload a portion of their cargo of grain to help feed the hungry during a famine. The sailors were reluctant, fearing that they would be punished when the missing grain was discovered at their destination. Miraculously, those weighing the grain at its destination found the same amount as the ship had embarked with.

The devotion of sailors to St. Nicholas was still going strong

more than seven hundred years after his death when a band of sailors succeeded in secretly removing the bones of the saint from his crypt in Myra. They transported the bones to Bari, Italy, where they remained sealed in a stone vault for more than nine hundred years.

An interesting miracle has accompanied the relics of the saint since his death: clear, pure water exudes from his bones. This phenomenon was reported when his relics were first interred in Myra, and has continued to this day. The water was observed by the investigators examining the relics in the 1950s, and is ceremoniously removed from the crypt annually on the anniversary of the arrival of the relics in Bari, as this YouTube video shows:

Celebrating the feast day

Here are five simple ideas for celebrating the feast of St. Nicholas.

1. The Visit of Bishop Nicholas

Perhaps the most wide-spread tradition connected to the feast of St. Nicholas (December 6) involves the bishop “visiting” the homes of children. In some places, someone dressed up as St. Nicholas would examine the children about their faith; more commonly today, children leave their shoes or socks out on the eve of the feast day so that St. Nicholas can fill them with treats overnight.

If you’re looking for appropriate treats to leave in your children’s shoes overnight, consider getting chocolate coins, a reminder of his secret gift to the three young maidens of Myra. Chocolate coins are generally available around this time of year at any retailer with a large selection of candy.

Another appropriate treat would be the candy cane, which is shaped like the bishop’s crozier (the pastoral staff with a

curved top). Incidentally, the candy cane gets its bent shape thanks in part to Fr. Gregory Harding Keller, the brother-in-law of the first manufacturer of the treat; he invented a machine to automate the process of bending the stick candy.

2. Tell the story of Saint Nicholas

Another way to celebrate the day is to tell your kids the story of St. Nicholas. This story is especially appropriate for kids who are just beginning to decide that Santa Claus is "not real." You can affirm their maturity but at the same time teach them about the reality of the communion of saints: Even if the modern, commercialized Santa Claus is a fairy tale, St. Nicholas is real, and he remains with us today in a very real way thanks to our communion in the love of Christ.

3. Celebrate with prayer

You can also incorporate a prayer to Saint Nicholas into your family prayer time (or your meal prayer). The St. Nicholas Center offers a large collection of prayers, or you can guide your kids in composing their own prayer.

4. Gift giving

In some places, St. Nicholas Day is traditionally a day for giving gifts. You might give your kids some small toys or treats on this day in anticipation of Christmas. Or you might try to imitate the saint's example by giving away some of your wealth to the poor and needy in honor of St. Nicholas.

5. Food for the feast

Finally, St. Nicholas Day wouldn't be complete without some special food. Check out these recipes.

Learn more

Simply Catholic
More on the life of St. Nicholas

Feast Day of St. Nicholas at Fish Eaters
A traditional Catholic take on the saint's feast day, including traditions and extensive excerpts from *The Golden Legend*.

St. Nicholas at Catholic Cuisine
Recipes for the feast, both traditional and modern inventions. Scroll down to the feast of St. Nicholas.