

SAINT NICHOLAS



Saint Nicolas, bishop of Myra, in Lycia, (the southern coast of present day Turkey) is a saint honored by both the Greek and the Latin Church on the 6th of December. His cult is as celebrated as his history is obscure. All the accounts that have come down to us are of a purely legendary character, and it is impossible to find any single incident confirmed historically. The main facts of his life are usually given as follows:

He was bishop of Myra in the time of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, was persecuted, tortured for the faith, and kept in prison until the more tolerant reign of Emperor Constantine. Nicholas was one of the bishops present at the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325.

The oldest known monument of the cult of St Nicholas seems to be the Church of Saints Priscus and Nicholas built at Constantinople by the emperor Justinian. In the West, the name of Saint Nicholas appears in the 9th

century martyrologies, and churches dedicated to him are to be found at the beginning of the 11th century. It is more especially, however, from the time of the removal of his body to Bari, in Apulia of Italy, that his cult became popular. The inhabitants of Bari organized an expedition, seized his remains by means of a ruse, and transported them to Bari, where they were received in triumph on the ninth of May 1087, and where the foundations were laid of a new basilica in his honor. This was the origin of a famous and still popular pilgrimage.

Nicholas is the patron saint of Russia; the special protector of children, scholars, merchants, and sailors; and is invoked by travellers against robbers. In art Saint Nicholas is represented with various attributes, being most commonly depicted with three children standing in a tub by his side. Of the various interpretations of this, none is absolutely certain. One explanation has been sought in the legend of Saint Nicholas miraculously restoring to life three rich youths, who had been murdered, cut up and concealed in a salting tub by a thievish innkeeper or butcher, in whose house they had taken lodging.

A legend of his surreptitious bestowal of dowries upon the three daughters of an impoverished citizen, who, unable to procure fit marriages for them, was on the point of giving them up to a life of shame, is said to have originated the old custom of giving presents in secret on the Eve of Saint Nicholas Day (December 6), subsequently transferred to Christmas Day. Hence the association of Christmas with "Santa Claus," an American corruption of the Dutch form "San Nicolaas," the custom being brought to America by the early Dutch colonists.