

Diocletian returned home. Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, was one of them. He found many idol shrines still present and they harbored disturbing demons. So by the power of God, Nicholas set about with great force and zeal to destroy these shrines, drive the demons away, and bring calm to the land. The most supreme deity of the Pantheon of Myra was Artemis and her temple was the most stunningly beautiful and impressive structure in all Lycia. Nicholas attacked this temple with great might and vigor, causing its total destruction. So complete was its fall that the foundation stones were on top and the pinnacle was driven into the ground. The evil demons then fled, inspiring the people's awe of God.

Details of Nicholas' death are not known, but early reference is made to the Manna of St. Nicholas, a liquid that formed in his tomb and was renowned for its healing properties. For 750 years St. Nicholas' tomb in Myra was an ever-increasingly popular pilgrimage site as reverence for the Saint grew and spread throughout the Christian world.

As a bishop, Nicholas, servant of God, was first and foremost a shepherd of the people, caring for their needs. His active pursuit of justice for his people was demonstrated when he secured grain in time of famine, saved the lives of three men wrongly condemned, and secured lower taxes for Myra. He taught the Gospel simply, so ordinary people understood, and he lived out his faith and devotion to God in helping the poor and all in need.

Gift Giver

Children around the world know and love St. Nicholas—for he brings gifts and treats in December. He is known by different names—

and even looks different from place to place. But, it is the same St. Nicholas who delights with small surprises and good things to eat. Nicholas gave in secret, alert to others' needs, and expecting nothing for himself in return. It is this selfless generosity which seeks only the good of the other that made Nicholas' gifts the gifts of a Saint

In the West the saint's image changed between the eleventh and twelfth centuries from a rather severe figure to the compassionate children's friend. There his main virtue came to be seen as generosity to children—rooted in the stories of rescuing the desperate maidens with gold for their dowries and of saving three children or schoolboys from an evil fate. Nuns in France began leaving treats on St. Nicholas Eve, December 5th, for the small children of poor families. St. Nicholas' gifts were usually good things to eat: apples, oranges, nuts, and eventually cookies and sweets. The custom quickly spread across Europe and was adopted by both rich and poor. St. Nicholas' example still inspires acts of charity and generosity.

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Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra



As Bishop of Myra, Nicholas lived the qualities that caused his fame and popularity to spread throughout the Christian world. His vigorous actions on behalf of his people and in defense of the Christian faith reveal a man who lived his convictions. Nicholas was not timid—he did what was necessary and was not easily intimidated by others' power and position. His concern for the welfare of his flock and his stand for orthodox belief earned him respect as a model for bishops and a defender of the faith.

Selection

Nicholas' selection to be a bishop was unusual. After the former bishop's death,

other bishops gathered to select the next bishop for the See of Myra. During the conclave, the wisest bishop heard a voice in the night telling him to watch the doors of the church the next morning at Matins. The first person to enter named "Nicholas" was to be the new bishop. The wise one told the others, counseling them to be at prayer while he waited at the doors. When the hour came, the first to arrive was a young man. When asked his name, he replied, "I am Nicholas." The bishop addressed him, "Nicholas, servant and friend of God, for your holiness you shall be bishop of this place." They brought him into the church and placed him in the bishop's seat where he was consecrated the new Bishop of Myra.

Grain Ships and Famine

Myra experienced famine in AD 311 and 312, and again in 333. Crops had failed and people were hungry. Bishop Nicholas learned that ships bound for Alexandria with cargos of wheat had anchored in the harbor. The holy man implored the sailors to take a measure of grain from each ship so that the people would have food. The sailors said, "No," as the wheat was "meted and measured" and every bit must be delivered. Nicholas replied, "Do this, and I promise, in the truth of God, that it shall not be lessened or diminished when you get to your destination." So the sailors took a measure from each ship and continued on their way to Alexandria. When the wheat was unloaded, the full amount was accounted for and the tale told—all the emperor's ministers worshiped and praised God with thanksgiving for his servant Nicholas. Throughout the famine people came to Bishop Nicholas for wheat. He gave it to all who had need and the

grain lasted for two years with enough remaining to plant new crops.

Council of Nicaea

In 325 Emperor Constantine called the Council of Nicaea, which was the first ecumenical council ever held. More than 300 bishops from all over the Christian world came to debate the nature of the Holy Trinity, one of the early church's most intense theological questions. Arias, from Egypt, taught that the Son Jesus was not equal to God the Father. This was the Arian controversy which shook Christianity's very foundations. According to one account, when confronted by the unyielding Arias, Nicholas slapped him in the face. For such a breach of decorum, Nicholas was brought before Constantine, who stripped him of his office and had him thrown into prison. During the night, Jesus with his Mother Mary appeared to Nicholas: Jesus bringing the book of the Gospels, and Mary, the bishop's stole which had been taken from him. In this way Nicholas was reinstated. Many Eastern Church icons of St. Nicholas reflect this event with Jesus on the left returning the Gospels, and Mary on the right, bringing the bishop's stole or omophorion.

Three Condemned Innocents

In the time of Emperor Constantine, all was not peaceful in the empire. When unrest would break out, soldiers would be sent to restore order. Some such soldiers were on shore leave in Andriaki, the port which served Myra. As they were in the marketplace, disputes began and there was some disturbance and looting. Bishop Nicholas went to the port to help settle the trouble. On his way back to the city, he saw people crying and saying, "If you had been in the city three

innocent men would not have been handed over to death, as they have been ordered beheaded." Nicholas ran to the place, asking if the men were still alive. The three men were in position-faces covered, hands bound behind, expecting death. The executioner's sword was up and ready to fall. Nicholas fearlessly grabbed the sword, throwing it down. The freed men went on their way while Nicholas sought to have the charges against them cleared.

Reduction of Taxes

The people of Myra begged Bishop Nicholas to ask the emperor for relief from the high taxes which were causing much hardship. Nicholas went to plead their cause with Constantine. The emperor granted a large reduction, giving Nicholas a copy of the order. The bishop immediately put the document on a stick and threw it into the sea. Soon afterwards it was found and taken to the authorities in Myra. The order was immediately put into effect, substantially lowering the taxes. Meanwhile Constantine, whose finance ministers had convinced him that this lost revenue would seriously harm the royal treasury, summoned Nicholas to return the document for revision. Nicholas reported that the order was already in effect in Myra. Doubting this, Constantine sent a runner to determine the truth. When Nicholas' words were confirmed the emperor allowed the reduction to stand. A century later Myra still enjoyed low taxation which the people attributed to St. Nicholas.

Artemis' Temple

After Galerius, and later, Constantine, declared tolerance for Christianity, the Christians who had been imprisoned under