

Everybody loves jolly ol' Saint Nicholas, right? But in truth, the “jolly old elf” of Clement Clarke Moore’s 1823 poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” a pipe-smoking grandpa with a bucket full of coal for naughty boys who don’t eat their cauliflower, is fantasy and a far cry from the wiry bishop who, at the 1st Ecumenical Council, pulled Arius’ beard and punched him in the face for teaching heresy.

Still, some of our images of St. Nicholas are reality-based. Consider our picture of Santa Claus (a corruption of the Dutch “Sinterklaas,” “St. Nicholas”) as the gift-bringer. That’s rooted in the real St. Nicholas tossing three bags of gold through a worried father’s window. Why? Let’s begin at the beginning. Nicholas was born in Lycia on the southwest coast of modern Turkey. His wealthy, pious parents, Theophanes and Nonna, read the Bible to him and faithfully taught him his prayers, but died while he was still young. His uncle, Bishop Nicholas of Patara, ordained young Nicholas a priest and made him his personal assistant. The zealous youth proved himself an inspiring catechist in the Christian community and an obedient servant to his uncle. During these years he showed great kind-heartedness and generosity by distributing his inheritance to the poor.

And it was during this time, when the three grown daughters of a formerly rich inhabitant were in danger of being sold into prostitution because of their father’s pennilessness, that young Nicholas literally threw his money around. Hearing of their plight, young Nicholas secretly visited the man’s house at night and threw a bag of gold in at the window to provide a dowry for one of the girls. The eldest daughter was soon married, and Nicholas again made secret donations for the other two daughters, with equally happy results. And according to one version of the story, one of St. Nicholas’ gifts landed in a sock that was hanging by the fire to dry.

But what’s crucial here is that Nicholas lived the truth of Proverbs 14:21, that “he who despises his neighbor sins; but he who has mercy on the poor, happy is he.” To put it another way, the “old elf” was jolly because he’s generous. And he was generous because, firstly of all, he looked beyond himself, and took the time and made the effort to notice what was happening to other people, like that family. Others likely stayed away from them, because a man who’d lost his fortune was “bad luck” or “bad news” or just plain “bad.” But St. Nicholas took the Lord Jesus at His word in Matthew 25:40, “Assuredly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” And secondly, Nicholas took Sacred Scripture seriously when, in 2 Corinthians 9:11 the Apostle teaches that we “are enriched in everything for all liberality [generosity];” that whatever we have over and above our own needs God intends us to share with the poor. Nicholas had a heart for obedience to the written word of God and the living Word of God, Jesus Christ; and he both talked the talk and walked the walk.

When he was young, St. Nicholas made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. During the voyage, a fierce storm came up; but through the prayers of the saint, the waves were calmed, and passengers and crew were saved. When he returned some three years later to Asia Minor, Nicholas was made archbishop of Myra. Difficult years followed for the archbishop and his flock, forced underground by the Roman Emperor Diocletian’s brutal, pitiless persecution of Christians.

The archbishop, himself in hiding, nonetheless did his best to encourage his people, until the day he too was betrayed and thrown into prison. In jail Nicholas continued to sustain and exhort his fellow believers to endure torture and death for the love of Christ. Mercifully, Diocletian's died; the persecution ended; and Nicholas was released and returned to his duties.

As a bishop, Nicholas attended the first Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in AD 325, where he assailed the heretic Arius. In the middle of his hearing, Arius stood up on his seat in order to be better heard. Enraged by Arius' denial that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, Nicholas lost it, strode quickly over to Arius, pulled him down by his beard, and punched him in the face. The scandalized Council fathers sprang upon Nicholas, stripped him of his omophorion (defrocked him as a bishop), and threw him in prison for his brutish behavior. That night Nicholas was visited by the Theotokos who loosed his bonds and vested him again in his apostolic garb. The bishops, astonished by this miracle, realized that Nicholas' anger, although improperly expressed, was nonetheless righteous; and he was honorably restored to his episcopal see.

During one session of the Council, Nicholas appeared to be dozing. But he actually appeared miraculously to and by his intercession saved sailors whose ship was in danger of sinking during a storm at sea. The Council fathers resentfully charged Nicholas with sleeping through the entire council, whereupon the saint answered, "While you were talking, I was busy rescuing a disaster-driven ship at sea." Some of the pious brethren took the ship to be a metaphor for the Church. Others dismissed his words as the babblings of an old man. But not long after the council, the rescued sailors returned safely home and, traveling through Myra, recognized Nicholas as their deliverer. Not surprisingly, every Orthodox Christian sailor for the past 1500 years has sailed under the protection of St. Nicholas.

Archbishop Nicholas peacefully fell asleep in the Lord on December 6, 343. He was immediately recognized as a saint and the patron of travelers; and Christians around the world still seek his intercession to be delivered from flood, poverty, or any misfortune. St. Nicholas' incorrupt relics were venerated for centuries in the local cathedral church of Myra. Like those of many other saints, his bones exude sweet-smelling myrrh, through which God has worked many miracles of healing for those anointed with it. During the Middle Ages the Turks conquered Byzantine Asia Minor and were a constant threat to Christianity in that region. In 1087, solicitous for the safety of St. Nicholas' venerable remains, Italian sailors, who were devoted to this saint, plotted to steal the body and in May of that year brought it back to their home village. St. Nicholas' relics were thus taken from Myra to the city of Bari, where the saint's body continues to exude holy myrrh 17 centuries after his death. Every year, on May 9th, the rector of the basilica in Bari crawls into a small opening in the crypt to drain the holy myrrh out of St. Nicholas' tomb into a glass jar. The myrrh is diluted with water and serves as anointing oil for pilgrims to Bari from across the globe, including the late Metropolitan Volodymyr of Kiev, of blessed memory.

Sadly, here in North America, we've forgotten the true St. Nicholas, who's not nearly as much fun as our Santa: a funny, fat, white-bearded egalitarian who gives kids whatever they want (and knitted sweaters from Grandma that they don't want) whether they were nice or naughty, because he's a fair Santa. The real St. Nicholas seems to just spoil the story. (And if children stop believing in the Santa who flies down from the North Pole with his reindeer, won't they stop getting presents?) And if we tell Orthodox children different St. Nicholas stories, won't it wreck Christmas for someone's precious child when she hears one of our kids tell her at school: "Santa doesn't live at the North Pole. He sleeps by the Adriatic Sea, sweating off myrrh for lame pilgrims"?

Maybe. But telling the truth is not being a spoil-sport; it's spreading the good news. The wonderful reality of St. Nicholas' life is that he deeply loved the Lord Jesus Christ and so ardently believed Christmas is about the incarnation of God that even at the risk of his own life he took the Lord Jesus at His word when, in Luke 12:8, the Lord promises, "Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God;" and he was willing to courageously proclaim and defend his faith, despite Diocletian's tortures. And if he accosted the deceiving unbeliever Arius, it was because the real St. Nicholas was passionate enough to both defend the truth of Christ's divinity and provide just reproof to a sinner. It's a privilege to be corrected from the Word of God by a godly person, even if Arius was too foolish to receive it. As Proverbs 17:10 so wisely observes, "A rebuke goes deeper into a wise man than a hundred blows into a fool."

Look: far from being unexciting or overly religious, the real story of the real St. Nicholas is exactly the gift kids (and grownups) need today. Most of us do not need more stuff. What we do need is someone who inspires our moral imagination and both challenges and encourages us in the virtues of love, generosity, courage, justice, and evangelism. And through his example of following Jesus Christ no matter what, St. Nicholas gives us exactly that gift we so need.