

St. Nicholas

the Wonderworker

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Introduction and Life of St. Nicholas: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen. We are fortunate this year that the Feast of our Father among the Saints, Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia, falls on a Sunday. With as much as Feast Days have fallen into neglect amongst the Orthodox of our country the souls of the faithful are deprived of the heavenly nourishment of the feasts of certain saints. And whose life is more important to celebrate than that of St. Nicholas? Whose life is more central to our Advent journey or to our celebration of Christmas than St. Nicholas?

Now St. Nicholas is a very famous saint. Next to our Lady he is probably the most famous. He has churches, monasteries, and schools dedicated to him throughout the world. This is all the more incredible because he left us no sacred writings. It is his person, his character which has elicited the love, devotion, and emulation of the faithful worldwide, and he is to be found in many places in Riverside during this Advent. Presently I believe he is climbing up the chimney of the Mission Inn, and I have seen him in many other places as well, but often he is seen without clarity. There is something of a cultural haze about his exact identity. Somehow he has put on a few too many pounds (is this designed to ease the conscience of so many fat Americans?), and we have lost something of the contours of his image.

If we look at the common portrayal of St. Nicholas today we are able to see the vestiges of the image, however. He is, in fact, clothed in beautiful red clothes, and in some Orthodox traditions this is the very color that the clergy wear during the Advent Fast. We can see St. Nicholas' red clothes as his episcopal vestments. He has donned a red sticharion, epitachelion, and sakkos, and his omophorion is white. He is girded about with a big black belt. What is this? We can see in this the leather monastic belt that all our monks and nuns wear, for St. Nicholas was a monk. He became a monk in Asia Minor where he grew up in the early fourth century when he was young, and would have remained in the quiet of monastic seclusion had not the Lord appeared to him and told him to gain his crown amidst the people as a shepherd. Of course, he has a funny hat- and that seems to be a necessary qualification for all of us Orthodox clergy- we have and love our funny hats. As an Archbishop St. Nicholas would have worn a beautiful mitre in the divine services as well as his kamilavfka. He has a big white beard like priests so often wear to de-emphasize their personal traits and to emphasize the fact that they represent Christ Himself. And then there is his big sack- this sack represents St. Nicholas' limitless charity, for as we shall see, he was a man of great generosity. When we see St. Nicholas like this we can then remember better who he is.

St. Nicholas has become so famous because there is found in him a combination of two most wonderful and awe-inspiring characteristics. Two traits that are so essential in every Christian's life, and especially in the life of a hierarch and priest. These two characteristics are a great zeal for the truth and a boundless charity. St. Nicholas was born to pious parents. His uncle was a bishop and personally taught Nicholas the Orthodox Faith. When his parents died St. Nicholas freed himself from the heavy chains of earthly possessions and dispossessed himself completely, giving everything to the poor. He retired to a monastery to take up the life of unceasing prayer, but received a vision from the Lord to enter again into society as a shepherd of the flock of God. As a good shepherd and priest St. Nicholas suffered in prison during the persecutions of Diocletian and Maximian, and proved himself throughout his life a rule of faith and an image of meekness and charity. Let me share a few stories that demonstrate these two great qualities of zeal for the truth and boundless charity in his life.

St. Nicholas' Zeal for the Truth: St. Nicholas was a model of loving the truth of God. He demonstrated this love by being willing and actually suffering greatly for his confession and teaching of the Orthodox faith during a time when pagan Emperors ruled the empire who punished such faithful proclamation of the Orthodox Faith. St. Nicholas could not be deterred from instructing all in the Orthodox Faith, even from his prison cell for he considered the words of St. Paul, "For to you it has been granted not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29). St. Nicholas, as all the saints, zealously contested for the truth, embracing it earnestly himself, teaching it fervently to the flock, and exposing falsehood because without the truth we have nothing. Our Savior taught us saying, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father but through Me" (St. John 14:6). The truth is Christ. When we alter to truth or live indifferently to it we separate ourselves from Christ and live indifferently toward Him! Truth orders and restores man's life. Truth is the key to true freedom. "If you abide in My word you are truly disciples of Mine, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free", proclaims our Savior in St. John 8:31-32. This is why we should all be great zealots for the Orthodox Faith. Christ the Truth saves. Heresy and ignorance do not save, for inasmuch as they separate us from the truth they separate us from Christ Who is the Truth.

There is one particular incident in the life of St. Nicholas which shows forth his great zeal for the truth for which he is justly famous. St. Nicholas attended the great First Ecumenical Council in 325 AD convoked by the pious and God-fearing Emperor Constantine the Great in Nicea. It was this Council which defended Orthodoxy against the inroads of the Arian heresy. There, gathered with so many other famous hierarchs like Ss. Athanasius and Spyridon, Nicholas was forced to listen to the blasphemy of Arius against our Savior Jesus Christ. Unable to bear Arius' foul confession any longer or to listen to one more impious assertion that our Savior and God Jesus Christ was a creature St. Nicholas hauled off and punched Arius right in the face, right in the kisser. At first, this scandalized the fathers of the Council and they put Nicholas out of the assembly of the fathers and stripped him of his episcopal dignity. In doing this the Holy Fathers were faithfully following the Sacred Canons of the Holy Apostles. Canon XXVII of the Holy

Apostles reads “As for a Bishop, or Presbyter, or Deacon that strikes believers for sinning, or unbelievers for wrong-doing, with the idea of making them afraid, we command that he be deposed from office. For the Lord has nowhere taught that: on the contrary, He Himself when struck did not strike back; when reviled, He did not revile His revilers; when suffering, He did not threaten” (The Rudder, p. 38). Christians, and especially clergy who must be above reproach in all things, are not ever to strike others. We do not use brute force. Instead, we show forth true power which is meekness in the face of insult and offense. Shortly hereafter, however, a number of the holy hierarchs all had the same dream in which the Lord and His blessed Mother appeared and showed they sided with Archbishop Nicholas and that Nicholas had struck Arius in piety, as a new zealous Phineas defending the Lord’s glory and dignity (Numbers 25), and not in passion or sin. In fact, in St. Nicholas’ troparion we even call him a “model of self-control”. As a result the Fathers reinstated Nicholas and began to honor him as a pious and saintly man, whose striking of Arius was a sign of God and defense of the faith. Such was St. Nicholas’ great zeal for the truth.

St. Nicholas’ Boundless Charity: St. Nicholas combined his zeal for the truth with innumerable acts of charity. Early on this was shown when he sold all his great wealth and gave it to the poor, and it is especially remembered in an incident in which St. Nicholas rescued a poor man’s daughters from unworthy marriages because there was no money for any kind of dowry. Having discovered this St. Nicholas, always about distributing gifts of charity, anonymously cast three bags of gold into the poor man’s house to provide him with what he needed. As I recall, these bags came through the window and not down the chimney. Today, more than 16 centuries later, we continue to follow in St. Nicholas’ charitable steps and see him as our great model of charity. His bag of love gifts was not depleted at his repose, but he has constantly over these centuries proved the helper of the Orthodox people, saving sailors from catastrophe, warning others from the air of imminent danger, and inspiring acts of charity. He shows us, indeed, that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Ac. 20:35), and He is our pre-eminent Advent guide leading us to the ultimate gift, even the gift of our Heavenly Father of His Precious and Only-Begotten Son Jesus Christ Who is coming to be born of the Virgin.