

Saint Nicholas - 6th December 2020

Liturgical colour: red (the fire of the Holy Spirit and the Church, the love of God, and the blood of the Martyrs) or white (the colour of Christ, white like cleansed from all sins, the colour of the redeemed, the colour of peace with God, heaven, and eternity)

Each year on 6th December the Church commemorates Saint Nicholas of Myra. This year on the 2nd Sunday of Advent. Therefore, I send you these thoughts a few days beforehand.

Saint Nicholas was born between the years 270 and 286 in *Patara*, an ancient city in Minor Asia, present-day *Turkey*, near *Antalya*. He is one of the best-known and most popular Saints. His day of death, 6th December, is commemorated in almost all traditional churches (who commemorate the Saints) in the world.

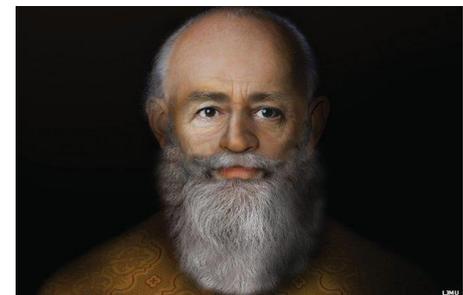
There are just few facts known about his life. He was ordained by his uncle to the priesthood at the age of 19 and then became abbot of the monastery of Sion near the city of *Myra*, also in the region of *Antalya*, today known as *Demre*. During one of the last but extensive persecutions of Christians under Emperor Galerius, Nicholas was caught



and tortured. He gave his inherited property to the needy. Later he became Bishop of Myra. It is likely that Nicholas was participant of the First Oecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325, when the first and most important Christian Creed, the Nicene Creed, was defined. Saint Nicholas belonged to the definitively orthodox (“correctly believing”) party and it is said that he slapped Arius (see medieval picture), the leader of the party who proclaimed that Jesus and the Holy Spirit do not have the same “position” as the Father, thus an “anti-trinitarian” position. At the First Council of Nicaea this theology was declared as heretic (“false”).

According to this fact, the Epistle Reading for this day reminds us of the core of our faith (Ephesians 2, 1-10): 1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

The year of Saint Nicholas’s death is not clear. It was 326, 345, 351, or 365. But he was buried in a church in Myra. In the chaos of war and after the city had been conquered by Muslim Seljuks in 1087, Italian merchants stole the bones and brought them to Bari/Italy, where they built a great basilica for them. In 2014 scientists reconstructed the face of Saint Nicholas after forensic examinations of the bones from the grave. They reckon that Saint Nicholas looked probably like this (actually, he had a broken nose – maybe a revenge of Arius?):



There are many legends known about Saint Nicholas. He mainly became popular because of his generous gifts to the needy. Therefore, the **Old Testament Reading** for this day, taken from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 61, verses 1-2+10, says, matching his life: 1 The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our

God; to comfort all who mourn. 10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

One story says that in times of a famine, Nicholas heard that a ship with wheat for the Emperor laid at the port. He asked the seafarers to give a bit to the hungry people what they denied because of fear of the Emperor when something of the weighed wheat was lost. After Saint Nicholas promised that they would not get into trouble, they gave a bit of the wheat to him. When they came to the Emperor and the wheat was weighed again, nothing was lost. But the wheat in Myra lasted for two years. – Another story tells that there was a father with three girls, not having enough money to let them marry but out of his poverty planning to send them into prostitution. After learning about that, Saint Nicholas threw secretly during the night three times – for each girl – a ball of gold through the window, right according to the Gospel Reading of this day (Matthew 6, 1-4): 1 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. 2 “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

These stories are the basis for the Christmas tradition to give presents to the children. Formerly, and still today in Catholic countries like Belgium, Saint Nicholas brings the Christmas presents on 6 December. In fact, it was Martin Luther postponing the Christmas presents to Christmas because he wanted to highlight the great gift of Jesus Christ for us and to limit the overtopping veneration of saints. – There are many different traditions around Saint Nicholas and the 6th December. In some countries, where the children do not receive their “main” presents on this day, they find nuts, fruits, chocolates, and today also often small gifts in their shoes in the morning. And there are some regions in Germany where the children dress up as Saint Nicholas or in other costumes with masks and go from door to door, singing or repeating poems and then receiving sweets for it.

For us today Saint Nicholas is firstly an example as a representative and confessor of correct theology and the true faith – also against hardships of persecution. And secondly, he is an example to live the message of the Gospel practically to help the needy where it is possible in the full trust in God and His power, as the watchword for this day says: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” (Matthew 5, 7) Therefore, it is a good thing to commemorate him.

Prayer for Saint Nicholas's Day

Loving God, we thank You for the example of St. Nicholas,
who fed the hungry,
brought hope to the imprisoned,
gave comfort to the lost,
and taught the truth to all.
May we strive to imitate him by putting You first in all we do.
Give us the courage, love and strength of St. Nicholas,
so that, like him, we may serve you through loving our brothers and sisters.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven; give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

BLESSING

The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make His face shine on us and be gracious to us. The Lord look upon us with favour and + give us peace. Amen.



This compilation comes from **All Lutheran Church of Brussel**, www.alcb.be
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