

Feast of St. Nicholas
December 6, 2019

Nicholas was the son of wealthy parents who died while he was a child. Despite the insecurity of being an orphan, he selflessly wanted to share this wealth with those in need. In those times, like today, wealth and poverty lived side by side.

Nicholas was aware of a man who had three teenage daughters. The family was so poor they could not fill their bellies. And, without money for a dowry, there was no way the girls would ever find a husband. Faced with starvation, their only option would be prostitution.

Nicholas, wishing to remain anonymous, one night tossed a bag of gold through the window of their house. When the man awoke the next morning, there it was! He thanked God for his good fortune. Thus, the oldest daughter was able to marry. A little while later, Holy Nicholas repeated the act for the second daughter.

By now the father wanted to know who was behind this magnificent act. The night he heard the third bag of gold hit the floor beneath his window, he rushed out and caught up with the fleeing Nicholas. The saint swore him to secrecy, but eventually the story got out.

He was born in 280 and he was a Bishop on the Mediterranean coast, in an area where Saint Paul had first brought the gospel a few hundred years earlier. The busy seaport of Myra, in the Asia Minor province of Lycea, is present-day Demre, Turkey. He was such a devoted and holy bishop that the people immediately recognized him as a saint. Thus, the Church kept careful track of his remains after he died in about 342.

A church was built to house these revered remains by Emperor Constantine, who had freed Christians, including Nicholas, from prison and torture under the Diocletian persecution. More than 500 years later, at the time when the Muslim Turks took possession of the area, his remains were removed for safekeeping across the waters to Bari, Italy, where they remain today.

The very name Nicholas derives from two Greek words, Niki (“victory”) and laos (“people”). Thus, Nicholas means one who is victorious with the people. He was victorious through his saintly life characterized by the virtues of charity and zeal.

Saint Nicholas was a man who suffered for his faith. He lived in the awful time of Christian persecution at the hands of Roman emperors. He survived torture in prison to live through the incredibly challenging years of the newly freed Church defining its doctrines.

When Emperor Constantine brought Christianity out of hiding and prison in the fourth century, the Church faced an empire-wide debate between the Egyptian theologians Arius and Athanasius over the divinity of Jesus. Followers of these two literally rioted in the streets against each other. The issue, brewing for some time, was supposedly settled in 325 at the Council of Nicaea, source of the Nicene Creed prayed at Mass today. But the struggle over this doctrine of Jesus’ divinity continued for another 125 years.

We can thank Saint Nicholas, and others like him, that the acceptance of Jesus’ full divinity carried the day as the Church grew.

St. Nicholas embodied in his life the theme of our readings for today. He heard the call of God, as did Isaiah and was sent by him, as were the seventy to extend the merciful saving grace of Jesus.

Nicholas reminds us that to live as disciples of Jesus is to live as dedicated witnesses to the Kingdom that came with the birth of Jesus that will come fully at the end of the age and comes into our lives now when we with Isaiah say: "Here am I, send me".