

St Nicholas, Santa Claus, and Receiving the Greatest Gift

On December 6, the Church celebrates the memorial of St. Nicholas, who lived in the 300's and served as the Bishop of Myra, an ancient city in what is today Turkey. St. Nicholas had a great zeal for God and his love of God was manifested in his actions. As one example, Catholicism was not yet legalized in the Roman Empire when Nicholas was a young man, and he in fact experienced firsthand one of the last great persecutions of the early Church, bearing with imprisonment and possible execution rather than denying our Lord. Catholicism was legalized in the Roman Empire in 313 A.D., while St Nicholas was still alive. Once legalized, Catholicism began to spread more rapidly, along with schools of theology. However, with the growth in numbers and theological thought also came a growth in heresy (false teaching). The Arian heresy, which denied the Divinity of Christ, was rampant during Nicholas' lifetime. The Council of Nicaea was called to address this heresy and since he was a bishop, St. Nicholas attended. Tradition has it that Bishop Nicholas was so appalled at this outrage against Christ that he actually slapped Arius (the progenitor of this heresy) in the face. Now maybe it is that St. Nicholas sinned venially here but at the same time, it brings to mind our Lord's cleansing of the Temple, which led the Apostle's to recall a prophecy about the Messiah: zeal for his Father's house will consume him. While I'm not suggesting that people go around slapping heretics in the face, at the same time a good point of self-reflection is: do *I* have that kind of zeal for my Father's house – for the Church, for Christ Himself – so much so that I cannot tolerate it being corrupted? If not, why not? You only have zeal for what you love. You can, of course, ask our Lord to inspire you with the “spirit” that Nicholas had. Spend time with Him in the Blessed Sacrament, outside of Mass, and you will grow in this zeal, in real interior life. Is it not good to have something substantial, something that will never pass away, to live for, even to die for?

There is also, of course, a popular or common sentiment that connects St. Nicholas to Santa Claus, and this is not entirely without foundation. St. Nicholas' love of God led him to a genuine love of others, especially for their eternal well-being. This too, however, was not just a sentiment or good feeling but was lived out in his actions as well. There was a man in his diocese that had lost all of his money. This man had 3 daughters and when the oldest reached marrying age, the father could not find her a husband because he had no dowry to give. So, apparently at his wits end as to what to do with her (and her sisters too, for that matter), he decided to (basically) sell her into prostitution. Bishop Nicholas heard of his plan to commit his daughter to an immoral life and so he went to the man's house at night and threw a bag of gold (from an inheritance he had received) through one of the man's windows – gold that could be (and was) used for a dowry. He did the same for the next 2 daughters as well.

There was another event in the life of St. Nicholas that contributed even more directly to his link to Santa Claus. The governor of his territory had been bribed to condemn 3 innocent men to death. Bishop Nicholas, knowing of the whole ordeal, went to the governor on the day they were to be executed and reproved him so strongly that the governor admitted his wrong doing and released the men. Now there happened to be 3 imperial guards who witnessed the whole affair and who themselves were arrested just a short time later on false charges of treason and sentenced to death. Remembering what they had seen Bishop Nicholas do for the other young men, they prayed to God for his intercession. That night Constantine (the Emperor of Rome who legalized Catholicism, and whose mother was St Helena) had a dream in which Bishop Nicholas ordered him to release the 3 officers. It turns out that the prefect who arrested them had the same dream and he spoke with Constantine about it. The 3 officers were released...and sent, by Constantine himself, to the bishop to ask him to pray for peace in the world.

Well the 3 young officers who were saved through the intercession of Bishop Nicholas “became” 3 *boys* in popular folklore. In Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, then, gifts were bestowed on children at Christmas time in the name of St. Nicholas. The Dutch Protestant settlers of New Amsterdam made the custom popular in the U.S., and the Eastern saint was converted into a Nordic magician (St Nicholas—Sint Klaes—Santa Claus).

What about the giving of gifts at Christmas time? Does it commercialize Christmas and rob it of its true meaning? Certainly these things can and do happen. Yet at the same time, giving gifts is a tangible way to

express one's interior disposition toward another and as such is something good to do; it need not be unlike St. Nicholas tossing bags of gold through the poor man's window. *Receiving* the gift of another is also akin to accepting their good will. Giving and receiving gifts, then, reflects the way man is meant to interact with God and even reflects the very inner life of the Trinity. Now of course like most good things, gift giving at Christmas time can be corrupted (commercialized, lead a person to forget about the coming of Christ, become glamorous or even self-centered). Nonetheless, the giving and receiving of gifts can (and hopefully does) also especially remind us of the great gift that God has given to you and to me, namely the person of Jesus; this is infinitely greater than any other gift that a person could ever receive. That gift, just like the gifts you might give this Christmas, expresses His love for us. As you give and receive gifts and also contemplate that, it hopefully inspires within you the desire to reciprocate His love by giving Him a gift. But what can man possibly give to God? The only thing he has that even God will not touch – our free will, surrendering ourselves freely and fully to Him and His Divine will. Denying ourselves by choosing to go to Confession this Advent season would be one, and a good, example. Sacrifice of self is the one gift you can give to God and it means more to Him than all the gold in world would mean to a miser. The first sacrifice is your sins; then you can make your whole life a sacrifice, a gift, starting with following His commands. Maybe my Mass attendance, for example, is not what it should be (at least every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation) or maybe it's been years since my last, humble, contrite, sincere Confession. I can start by remedying that.

As we contemplate if or how much we accept and appreciate the great gift of our Lord Himself, His Incarnation/birth, and His continued presence in the Eucharist, it can be helpful to consider one of the prophecies of Isaiah. Ahaz was the reigning king of Judah during this prophecy and Judah (the southern part of Israel), was facing dire times, in part because Ahaz himself was an impious idolater, as St Thomas Aquinas put it. So God, in His great mercy, sent Isaiah to Ahaz. God's message to Ahaz, delivered through Isaiah, was basically this: believe in Me, trust in Me, return to Me, and I will deliver you from the enemies now threatening you. God even condescended to Ahaz so far as to tell him to ask for a sign – anything – so that Ahaz could have no doubt as to the promise. Ahaz refused. He feigned devotion by saying he would not tempt God but in reality he chose to refuse God, he chose not to believe and trust in Him, choosing instead to believe in his own cunning ways instead; he chose to believe in human power rather than Divine power. How often do we do the same, especially if facing severe difficulty, or perhaps even just inconvenience or some lack of comfort? Upon Ahaz's refusal, God said through Isaiah: "Hear Me oh House of David" – notice that He is now no longer speaking to Ahaz personally but to all the future kings of Israel and thus to all of Israel – "I Myself will give you a sign, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and He shall be called Emmanuel." Emmanuel means: God is with us; so in other words, God was saying (which the Israelites would have understood): this Son that will be born of a virgin will be God Himself. As pointed out by St Thomas Aquinas, what God is saying is that if He is willing to do something that stupendous, Ahaz should have believed Him when He said that He would do something so simple as bring about victory over an enemy.

Mankind, today, is not in such different circumstances as the Israelites of Ahaz's time. "The Great Reset" is a hot topic of the day but *The Great Reset* has already occurred – God became man, suffered, died, and rose again. Any other "great reset" is a phony imitation, a false god being offered, a product of human pride. The question is whether or not mankind is willing to receive God's gift. Will you, I, mankind as a whole – will we choose to be like Ahaz and feign piety while rejecting God, believing only in human power, which can only end in our own demise as it did for Judah centuries ago? Or will we choose to be like the great Virgin of Israel, the Mother of God, and say to our Lord: let it be done according to Your Will? Nothing less than your eternal fate hinges on your answer to that question.

God bless you,

Fr Kuhn.