

### Celebrate St. Nicholas' Day!

A simple St. Nicholas Day celebration adds a bit of welcome festivity in the early days of Advent. It provides an opportunity to tell St. Nicholas' story as a man of faith whose goodness and generosity grew out of his love for God. It enriches our understanding of Santa Claus by showing the real historical person who inspired the familiar legend and traditions.

Tell St. Nicholas' story. Have children fill their shoes with pieces of carrot or bits of hay for his white horse. Place shoes outside bedroom doors or on the hearth. See that a candy treat and simple gift appears by morning on December 6<sup>th</sup>.

Or have a party. Serve some Dutch specialties: *erwtensoep* (pea soup), *roode kool* (red cabbage), *saucijzebroodjes* (pigs in a blanket), *speculaas koekjes* (spice or windmill cookies), *banketstaven* (almond roll), or *olliebollen* (fritters). Give simple gifts in the Dutch way: accompany them with elaborate riddles and/or wrap in fantastically deceiving ways, such as a pen inside a hollowed out carrot, inside of multiple boxes and wrappings.

Living in Holland, Michigan, it was easy to have Dutch touches in our St. Nicholas observance. When our children were young, and not so young, they placed their wooden shoes, with pieces of carrots, by the fireplace on the evening of December 5<sup>th</sup>. In the morning the boys would find two matchbox cars and a gold mesh bag of Dutch chocolate coins. Our daughter might find a piece of jewelry or special barrettes. Over the years, Dutch chocolate initial letters found their way into the shoes and the cars and toys gave way to a tape, a book, or earrings. In such ways St. Nicholas Day helped us connect faith and giving and have a bit of fun early in the waiting weeks of Advent.



## WHO IS SANTA CLAUS—REALLY?

Santa Claus, the jolly man in a red suit with a long white beard—was he real? Or did he first appear in Coca-Cola ads? At department stores? Illustrating the poem, "Twas the Night Before Christmas?"

The true story of Santa Claus begins with Nicholas, who was born to a wealthy family during the third century in Asia Minor, now Turkey. His parents, who raised him to be a devout Christian, died in an epidemic. Obeying Jesus' words, Nicholas gave all that he had to the poor, the sick, and the suffering. Later when he was Bishop of Myra he became famous for these saintly deeds. He also suffered for his faith and was exiled and imprisoned under the Roman Emperor Diocletian, who ruthlessly persecuted Christians. After his release, Bishop Nicholas attended the Council of Nicea in AD 325. The anniversary of his death, December 6<sup>th</sup>, became a feast day of celebration.

When a person lived as long ago as St. Nicholas, it is sometimes difficult to separate fact from legend. All the stories, however, tell us about his character and help us understand why he has always been so popular.

One is about a poor man with three daughters. In those days, for a young woman to marry, a father must give money to help set up the new household—a dowry. The larger the dowry, the better the chance for a young woman to find a husband. Without a dowry, a woman could not marry. These three sisters, without dowries, were destined to be sold into slavery. Mysteriously, on three different occasions, a bag of gold appeared in their

home—providing the needed dowries. The bags of gold, tossed through an open window, are said to have landed in stockings, or shoes, left before the fire to dry. So began the custom of children hanging stockings or putting out shoes, eagerly awaiting gifts from Saint Nicholas. Sometimes the story is told with gold balls instead of bags of gold. That is why three gold balls, or oranges, are a symbol for St. Nicholas.

St. Nicholas did many kind and generous acts. He did them in secret, expecting nothing in return. Stories tell of his rescuing sailors, relieving famine, sparing the lives of children, and protecting the innocent. Within a century of his death he was named a saint and came to be regarded as the special friend of children, bakers, sailors, merchants, and many others. He quickly became most beloved and is the patron saint of Greece, Russia, Sicily, and Lorraine, as well as many cities in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy and the Netherlands, including Amsterdam. During the 12<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries more than 1,200 churches were named for Nicholas—twenty-three in the Netherlands and nearly four hundred in England.

St. Nicholas' December 6<sup>th</sup> feast day came to be celebrated in many European countries. This kept alive stories of St. Nicholas' goodness and generosity. In Germany and Poland boys dressed as bishops and begged alms for the poor—and sometimes for themselves! In mid-November St. Nicholas arrives in the Netherlands on a steamship from Spain to ride a white horse while making his rounds to check on children's behavior. During these weeks children put out their shoes, filled with carrots and hay for the horse, hoping to find small gifts and treats left by St. Nicholas.

The Eve of St. Nicholas Day, December 5<sup>th</sup>, is still celebrated in the Netherlands with the sharing of candies and pepernoten (thrown in the door by the unseen good saint or his helper), chocolate initial letters, and elaborately wrapped riddles. In many European countries December 6<sup>th</sup> is still the day for gift giving and merrymaking. Such celebration early in Advent helps keep the Christ Child the focus of Christmas Day.

Waves of European immigrants brought St. Nicholas and his beloved traditions to the New World. Colonial Germans in Pennsylvania, for example, celebrated the St. Nicholas Feast. Santa Claus is a natural phonetic alteration from the German *Sankt Niklaus* and the Dutch *Sinterklaas*. Americans merged St. Nicholas with the English Father Christmas as part of Christmas celebrations on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

In 1809 Washington Irving created a jolly St. Nicholas character in his *Knickerbocker's History of New York*. This image of a jolly elf was

strengthened in 1823 by the highly popular "A Visit from St. Nicholas" poem now better known as "Twas the Night Before Christmas." Thomas Nast's *Harper's Magazine* Santa illustrations continued the shift of St. Nicholas from a bishop to a secular symbol of seasonal cheer. The 1930s completed the transformation into the Santa we know today through Coca-Cola and Pepsi advertisements by artists Haddon Sundblom and Norman Rockwell.

Along with the name change, St. Nicholas' image was also transformed. Originally dressed in bishops' robes with a tall miter and carrying a crozier (shepherd's staff), he came to be dressed in a red suit with white fur trim. As Santa he then began turning up in department stores and on street corners as a benign source of seasonal beneficence.

Such commercial success has led the North American Santa Claus back to Europe where he enjoys increasing popularity. In some areas of the Netherlands, however, Santa Claus is legally prohibited from appearing until after *Sinterklaasavond*, December 5<sup>th</sup>. In this way the Dutch hope to preserve their own unique national tradition.

It is a long journey from the fourth century Bishop of Myra, St. Nicholas, whose devotion to God led to extraordinary kindness and generosity, to today's jolly Santa Claus who is frequently thought to be encouraging consumption rather than compassion.

Who is Santa Claus? He is Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, whose caring surprises continue to model true giving. If we focus on Nicholas, rather than Santa, we will emphasize giving more than receiving—need more than greed. It was out of Christian love that Nicholas shared what he had with those who had less. We can do the same.

—Carol Peterkin Myers

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