

Nativity Homily 3 / St. Nicholas

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As we draw closer to the feast of the Nativity of Christ, we are gradually prepared and made ready for what is about to occur. What are we preparing for? We are preparing for the event that changed everything. Before the Incarnation, the birth in the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, the people of God waited in eager anticipation of the time when God would dwell among his people. The prophets waited patiently for this day—and we remember many of the prophets during the weeks leading up to the Nativity. During this time of preparation we also celebrate the memory of certain special saints. This past week we had the feast-day of St. Andrew the first called. St. Andrew was the first to recognize Christ as the Messiah—that is, as the Anointed One, the one prophesized by the prophets.

Tomorrow we remember another important saint, Saint Nicholas, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia. The saints, we should remember, serve as both intercessors and guides. They pray to God for us. And, by their examples, we see how it is indeed possible— with the help of God— to live according to the Gospel. The saints were humans like us, faced with various trials and temptations. Yet we see in them how God works through his creation; we see how God is glorified by those who follow the commandments and teachings of the Gospel. In St. Nicholas we see Christ’s teachings put into practice. There are many things we can learn from St. Nicholas, but let’s focus on just a few.

The Gospels tell us to ‘lay up our treasures in heaven.’ St. Nicholas was born into a family that had great earthly treasures. His parents were eminent and wealthy. Yet they were also Christians, and the saint was raised in the faith by his pious parents, even though this was a time when Christians were still being fiercely persecuted. When his parents departed

this life, Nicholas inherited a large sum. And what did he do with this wealth? He distributed every last cent of it to the poor and needy, keeping nothing for himself. St. Nicholas desired a life of solitude; but the Lord had other plans. From a heavenly voice St. Nicholas heard that he should go about his work among the people. Soon after this he was elected archbishop of Myra. Following the true shepherd, Christ, St. Nicholas fulfilled his role as archbishop with great love, care and compassion.

St. Nicholas was especially known for his mercy. He showed tender mercy, when he saved three men from undeserved sentences of death. He displayed humility and meekness by always helping those in need in secret; he was charitable and helped the poor, but he never made a show of it. He gave thanks to God and took no credit for himself.

There is a story of how St. Nicholas heard of a poor and destitute man who had three lovely daughters. This man was at the end of his rope and had decided to send his daughters out to work in a disreputable industry. When St. Nicholas heard of this, he placed gold coins into a stocking, and tossed the stocking through a window. In the morning the father and his daughters woke to delight when they found this stocking full of gold. The man's daughters were rescued from a wretched life through the charity of the saint. Displaying great humility and meekness, St. Nicholas did this great act of mercy in secret.

This story contains elements that sound familiar. In our contemporary world, there is the custom of hanging stockings for Santa Claus to fill. But has the meaning of this custom been eroded? Throughout Europe St. Nicholas was honored and various customs emerged— in some places, one would leave shoes out for St. Nicholas, in other places one would hang stockings. Over the course of time the remembrance of who St. Nicholas was and why these customs arose has faded. Instead we have stories, of rather recent origin, of a

Santa Claus who distributes gifts flying by night on a sleigh. This time of year we are inundated with ads displaying the latest Christmas toys and gifts; there is great pressure to spend our time and money shopping; the news reports on whether this will be a good or bad year for retail, all based on holiday sales. It would be easy to be judgmental and criticize these contemporary practices. And there certainly are excesses that should be criticized. The Church has always taught that where there is something true, something good, something noble, it is of the Lord, and these traces of Divine goodness should be returned to their proper use. During this time of year there remains this sense that we should give gifts; there remains this sense that something special is about to occur. We should endeavor to restore the fullness behind these symbols. We should recall that Santa Claus is none other than St. Nicholas. The name Santa Claus derives from the Dutch word for St. Nicholas, which is ultimately derived from the Greek, Nikolaos. We have in our contemporary world the notion that this is a season of gift-giving. Let us recall why the great saint gave gifts— he did not give gifts because it was expected of him, or because he felt an obligation or hoped to get gifts in return. No, he gave gifts out of his love of God and his fellow man, whom he saw, as we all should, as made in the image and likeness of God. Out of his imitation of the great mercy and love of God did St. Nicholas give gifts. Moreover, when St. Nicholas gave gifts, he gave them to help those in need, and he kept his identity a secret, since he wanted the glory to be given to God, not to him.

In addition to his renown for charity and mercy, St. Nicholas is also remembered as a great defender of the faith. Although born at a time when the Roman Empire was pagan and persecuted Christians, St. Nicholas lived to see the day when St. Constantine converted and allowed Christianity to flourish. The state that once persecuted now called together the bishops from across the world to settle doctrinal disputes. At the 1st Ecumenical Council

in Nicaea in 325, St. Nicholas proved himself a stalwart defender of the faith when he confronted and challenged Arius. At this first council, the holy fathers set about to answer the question Christ asked his disciples when he asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Arius introduced the idea that the Son, Christ, was less than God. St. Nicholas, as well as the other fathers, maintained that no, Christ was not a created being inferior to God; rather, he is true God from true God, begotten not made, one in essence with the father. We honor St. Nicholas in the time of preparation for the Nativity of the Lord. The defense of who Christ is ensures that Christmas retains its meaning. For what do we celebrate at Christmas? We celebrate the great mystery of God becoming Man. The word became flesh and dwelt amongst us. The birth that took place in Bethlehem was no ordinary birth; the holy Virgin and Mother of God gave birth not a mere man, but one who was fully God and fully Man. St. Nicholas, by defending a proper understanding of who Christ is, ensured a proper understanding of the great mystery of the Incarnation.

As we prepare for the celebration of Christ’s nativity, let us follow the example of Nicholas, our heavenly intercessor. Let us learn to follow Christ’s instructions to ‘love one another.’ Let us be merciful, even as our heavenly father is merciful. May our gift giving be a sign of our love of our fellow man with the glory given to God. Let us restore, first in ourselves, and then for those around us, the deep mystery of the approaching feast, when we celebrate the event that forever changed the world. During the darkest days of the year, a great light shone forth. The people who had been in darkness saw a great light. For God, out of his great love and mercy, came to us a servant, as a mere child. By taking on our humanity, he brought restoration and healing to the human race.

May St. Nicholas watch over us and instruct us, both in this time of preparation for Christ's Nativity, and throughout all of our lives. May he especially guard and guide us in our journey toward our heavenly homeland. Amen.

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