



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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Visit stsymeon.com

December 4, 2016

Advent Season

Great-Martyr Barbara in Syria (306)

St. John of Damascus (760)

New Russian Hieromartyr, St. Alexander Hotovitsky (1937)

(Who labored in America)

O Glorious Nicholas,
the holy preacher of Christ!
Thou art the great and fervent
protector of those in danger:
Those on land and sea, far or
or near, for thou art a most
compassionate and mighty
intercessor!

Therefore, as we assemble,
we cry aloud:
Pray to the Lord that we may
be delivered from all danger!

~ Vespers Stikhera

- ✠ Monday, December 5, 6:30pm Great Vespers - St. Nicholas the Wonderworker
- ✠ Tuesday, December 6, 10:00am St. Nicholas Day Divine Liturgy
- ✠ Looking Ahead: Tuesday, December 13 - St. Herman Day - 6:00am Divine Liturgy

Saturday, December 10: Two Baptisms - 2:00pm Infant David Dill (DeBlock's are Godparents)
~ 4:00pm Adult Baptism - Constantine (Holden) Spain of Tuscaloosa (Rupert Cole)

Raising us up by Grace

✠ "What is the purpose of the Incarnation of the Divine Logos which is proclaimed throughout the Scriptures, about which we read and which yet we do not recognize? Surely it is that He has shared in what is ours so as to make us participants in what is His. For the Son of God became the Son of man in order to make us human beings sons of God, raising us up by grace to what He is by nature, giving us a new birth in the Holy Spirit and leading us directly into the kingdom of heaven. Or, rather, He gives us the grace to possess this kingdom within ourselves (cf. Luke 17:21), so that not merely do we hope to enter it but, being in full possession of it, we can affirm: 'Our life is hid with Christ in God' (Col. 3:3)."

~ St. Symeon the New Theologian

✠ "Mary, the Mother of God, being pre-ordained by the eternal prescient counsel of God and imaged forth and proclaimed in diverse images and discourses of the Prophets through the Holy Spirit, sprang at the pre-determined time from the root of David, according to the promises that were made to him. 'For the Lord hath sworn, He saith in truth to David, He will not turn from it: of the fruit of Thy body will I set upon Thy throne' (Ps. 132:11). And again, 'Once have I sworn by My holiness, that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure forever, and His throne as the sun before Me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven' (Ps. 139:35-37). And Isaiah says: 'And there shall come out a rod out of the stem of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots' (Isaiah 11:1)."

~ St. John of Damascus

"When you are in the temple, remember that you are in the living presence of the Lord God, that you stand before His face, before His eyes, in the living presence of the Mother of God, of the holy angels, and of the first-born of the Church - that is, our forefathers, the prophets, Apostles, hierarchs, martyrs, reverend Fathers, the righteous, and all the saints. Always have the remembrance and consciousness of this when you are in the temple, and stand with devotion, taking part willingly and with all your heart in the Divine service."

~ St. John of Kronstadt

This and That

The Consequences of Forgetfulness – The True Origins and Principles of Religious Freedom

➤ Our present circumstances in the law and politics of religious liberty can be traced to a common forgetting of the true origins and principles of religious freedom, and a radicalization of the secularist myth. First, we forge or mistake the nature of the human person. The truth about religious freedom begins with men and women a *imago Dei*, in the image of God. But what if man were just another piece of matter in motion, a bundle of passions and impulses? What if men and women were wills with no duties to any truth beyond themselves, making claims on their fellows for the protection and sheltering of their willful choices? Then religious claims would deserve no special or unique place, protected in law and sheltered from politics. All claims about human choices would be on an equal plane, to be honored or neglected according to how important or indifferent or harmless they seemed to others, or more precisely, to those others in a position of power to decide.

We can forget, too, that human beings are the makers of government, and turn instead to thinking of our relationship with the government as one in which we occupy the position of supplicant, of subject and not citizen. This can readily happen if we neglect the “unalienable rights” with which the founders said we were “endowed by [our] Creator.” Then we would be susceptible to granting a privileged place to claims of equality or to rights that are purely conventional, that are not rooted in our natural rights or liberties. And once we did that, we would probably start treating all rights as negotiable privileges, to be weighed and “balanced” against each other when they come into conflict.

Yet whatever comes in conflict with a fundamental right, properly understood, cannot itself be a fundamental right; it must either be a lesser or contingent right (as when my right to travel freely conflicts with authorities’ efforts to contain an epidemic) or no right at all (as when the phony “right” to abortion conflicts with a baby’s right to live).

When religious freedom is so reduced as to be one kind of right competing against other “rights” of presumptively equal standing, then naturally we empower government to adjudicate their alleged conflict with each other. Thus we commit a truly fatal mistake, of giving the government jurisdiction over questions of conscience. This may start with granting it jurisdiction over conduct that actually works harm to others or to the common good—a jurisdiction we would all accept...it can become in the end a jurisdiction that teaches belief itself. For remember, wherever the secularist myth fully takes hold, the relationship between religion and politics is invariably viewed as one in which religion is a threat to politics, rather than politics being a threat to religion— just the opposite of the view held by the framers of our Constitution and First Amendment. ~ Matthew Franck, *Touchstone*

“If all morality is relative, then who needs it? If truth is subjective, then men and women are completely free to define who they are, including a right of a man to claim he’s a woman in a court of law. The post-modern view of the world is boundless relativism and an utter lack of interest in history and in reality! It has opened the way for a new kind of radical individualism in which the only view that counts is the one that a single person believes or claims...” ~ Kim Holmes

The ideologue does not create things of beauty. Rather he is suspicious of a love for beauty; he calls it a neurological tic, or reactionary sentiment. Leo the Isaurian was the essential ideologue in that respect. He wanted to smash the icons, but the monk John of Damascus prevailed against him. Anthony Esolen

➤ "When we recall Christmas past, we usually find that the simplest things—not the great occasions—give off the greatest glow of happiness." ~ Bob Hope

THE HISTORICAL JESUS ~ Eugenia Constantinou, *Re-Introducing Christianity*

Today some popular political movements seem to look to Jesus for inspiration. Although he cared for the poor, outcasts and other marginalized people, Jesus' movement had no political objective or orientation. He preached repentance and spoke about the kingdom of God ("The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent"- Mark 1:15), but this was a call to inner conversion, not a call to arms or to create an earthly kingdom. "The kingdom of heaven is within you:" he said (Luke 17:21). Social problems such as poverty and oppression would be solved or changed by one's own inner transformation, by changing personal values, attitudes, interactions and relationships, not by violence or revolution which he consistently opposed. "Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matt 5:39) and "love your enemies" (Luke 6:35), he proclaimed. And yet, Jesus did not passively accept everyone regardless of their behavior. He did not condone sin, but he offered forgiveness to those who repented and changed their life.

People sometimes say that Jesus was a simply teacher or philosopher, or that Jesus considered himself to be merely a prophet. None of this is true. Jesus did not believe himself to be a prophet because Jewish prophets always preceded their statements with the words "Thus says the Lord" to show that their message was coming from God, not from the prophet (Isaiah 45:14; Amos 2:4). Jesus never said this phrase prior to offering his statements because he believed himself to be God, not a prophet or a teacher giving a message from God. He claimed for himself extraordinary authority: to forgive sins (Mark 2:10), change the Sabbath laws (Mark 2:28), to change the Law of Moses and even the Ten Commandments (Matt 5:22), and he promised that he would return to judge the world (Matt 25:31-46).

Jesus often criticized wealthy and powerful Jews, including religious leaders, for their greed, hypocrisy, pride, corruption, and self-righteousness (Luke 16:14; Matt 23). They in turn rejected Jesus' actions and statements as "blasphemy" (words or actions dishonoring or insulting to God. Mark 2:8). They were alarmed by his great popularity among the masses and feared his growing influence. They had him arrested, hastily put on trial in the middle of the night and sentenced to death (Matt. 26:65-66) the day before Passover, the second most important religious holiday of the year. However, because Judea was under Roman rule at that time, the Jewish leaders did not have the legal right to carry out the death penalty. Only the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, could pronounce a death sentence and execute someone. But blasphemy was not a crime under Roman law and would not have warranted the death penalty by the Romans. The Jewish leaders believed that Jesus deserved death, so his "crime" was changed from "blasphemy" to "treason:" a capital offense under Roman law (John 18:29-33). They told Pilate that Jesus claimed to be "King of the Jews" (Matt 27:11). In fact, Jesus had no political aspirations and when a crowd had tried to proclaim him king, he fled from them into the mountains (John 6:15).

Pontius Pilate sentenced Jesus to death by crucifixion, which was the most common form of execution at that time. The Roman world regarded crucifixion as the most painful, humiliating and degrading form of death. Jews assumed that any crucified person was rejected and cursed by God, and thus an additional motivation for having Jesus crucified was accomplished by the Jewish leaders: to completely discredit Jesus and his ideas. To this day, the primary reason why Jews reject Jesus as the Messiah is because he died on the Cross. Jesus died on a Friday afternoon and most of his followers had gone into hiding upon his arrest. He was quickly buried because the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday at sunset and no work, including a burial, can be performed on the Sabbath. Three days later, on Sunday morning, some female disciples returned to the tomb to finish the burial process only to find an empty tomb. Jesus appeared to them that morning alive in the flesh (Matt 28:1-10) and subsequently he appeared alive over the course of forty days to hundreds of disciples, not merely a handful (1 Cor 15:5-7). This is what Christians call the "Resurrection" and they celebrate this event at Pascha, also known as Easter. These eyewitnesses to the Resurrection were called "Apostles" in the early Church and they are the foundational source of information about the person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Today the term "apostle" is usually used only for the twelve

closest disciples, but in the early Church hundreds of people were eyewitnesses to the Resurrection and were referred to as "apostles."

The Birth of Jesus and the "Lost Years"

One popular area of modern speculation about the life of Jesus concerns his so-called "lost years." Nothing is recorded about his life between his infancy and the start of his public ministry at age thirty, except for one incident when he was twelve years old (Luke 2:41-52). Jesus was born to a virgin mother, Mary. She was engaged to be married to a carpenter, Joseph, but while she was awaiting their marriage, she received a visit from an angel who told her that she would conceive a child who would be the Messiah and the Son of God. She asked how this was possible since she was a virgin and she was told that the child would be conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. She accepted this as the will of God (Luke 1:26-31). Christian teaching is that Jesus has no human father. This is called the "virgin birth" even though it is really about the conception of Jesus. Joseph was also told about this remarkable conception in a dream and, being a devout and holy man, he accepted this as the will of God and he married Mary (Matt 1:18-24). Everyone assumed that Joseph was Jesus' biological father. Joseph helped to raise Jesus and provided a home and support for him and Mary. For Jews in those days, "marriage" was not a ceremony but consisted simply of the groom escorting the bride to his home. According to ancient Christian tradition, Joseph was much older than Mary, and was a widower with his own children, one of whom was James, called in the early Church the "brother of the Lord." Mary and Joseph did not have their own children together but Mary remained a virgin dedicated to God.

Because nothing else is known about Jesus' early years, many people love to speculate about where he was or what he was doing during this time. Among the more popular proposals is that he travelled, perhaps to India, Persia or Egypt, to study philosophy or spirituality. And yet, absolutely no evidence exists that he ever left Palestine and no hint of influence from other cultures or religions are found in his teachings. As a rabbi, Jesus stood squarely within the Jewish tradition, even though he challenged it.

So why was nothing written about those years and what was Jesus doing then? First, we must realize the primary source of information about Jesus, writings called "the Gospels," are not biographies. They were never intended to cover his entire life. They only tell us about his public ministry because this is the important period of Jesus' life and contain his teachings, his miracles, his crucifixion and resurrection. Nothing unusual or extraordinary occurred during Jesus' youth. He was growing up and preparing for his future ministry. He was raised by Mary and Joseph, worked as a carpenter and waited until the age of thirty to begin his ministry, the age at which one was considered a fully mature adult.

He performed no miracles, and gave no sermons during his youth. There was nothing unusual or extraordinary about him. He lived a very ordinary life in a small village. We know this because when he began his ministry the people of his village were shocked and surprised by his profound teaching, charismatic preaching and surprising healing powers. They had known him for nearly his entire life. They knew his family and extended relatives. How was it possible that he had these extraordinary abilities (Mark 6:2-3)? This is also how we can be certain that the speculation that he went to "study abroad," so to speak, is incorrect and baseless. If he had gone away for a period of time, everyone in the village would know that. They would point to his absence from the village and say that he got his "powers" during those years that he was "missing." But Jesus never travelled outside of Palestine, which was why the sudden manifestation of his abilities was so unexplainable to the villagers.

How else do we know that he never studied in Egypt or India or elsewhere? Jesus was a Jew who ministered to other Jews. What he studied was the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and other Jewish writings and teachings. This was what was important to him as a rabbi. What would he possibly learn from idol worshippers? No Jew would ever go to places of idolatry to study and in fact, anyone who did so would have been shunned by other Jews.

The Winter Feasts and the Temple

There is a wonderful symmetry in the winter celebrations of our Church. At the exact center of the season is the Nativity of our Lord. This feast is preceded by a forty-day fast (beginning on November 15), and the whole season is concluded forty days after the Nativity with the observance of the Meeting of our Lord in the Temple (February 2).

The significance of the number 40 is multiple. In the case of the forty-day fast it signifies a time of probation and trial — a person or a people given the opportunity of proving themselves worthy. Thus the forty-day period becomes a time of preparation for a new situation or era. The other meaning of forty, that represented by the period after Christ's birth, is derived from the combination of four times ten. Four is the symbol of creation, of material completeness. Multiplied by ten (which represents the perfection of order, as the basis of the whole numerical system is a calculation by 10), the number forty here stands for a whole new epoch, an era of fulfillment and perfection. In this case it is the New Dispensation brought about by the birth of Christ God in the flesh. The whole dual symbolism of the number forty before and after a decisive event is manifested again in the days preceding and following our Lord's glorious Resurrection.

The number symbolism, interesting and suggestive as it is, gives way to an even more instructive feature of the winter feasts. Six days after the beginning of the Nativity Fast, a Great Feast occurs: the Entrance of the Most Holy Theotokos into the Temple. The child Mary is brought to the Temple in Jerusalem not simply to be dedicated, as Jewish law prescribed, but to remain there, to be brought up there, to be taught by the elders and nourished by an angel. So the beginning of the winter cycle is marked by a Feast of the Temple. At the end of



the cycle also the Feast takes place in the Temple. The young maiden who was raised in that most sacred place returns now with her forty-day old child to offer Him in thanksgiving and to offer the sacrifice associated with a first-born son. She who became the living Temple comes to the Temple to offer her child, the Incarnate God to God. At the beginning, then, and at the end of winter the center of activity is the Temple of Jerusalem, the center of worship for the people of God, Israel, in the midst of the world and in the middle of the ages of humanity.

What is the meaning of this Temple theme now for us who are the New Israel, living in the New Dispensation? We know that after our Lord's death, resurrection, and ascension and the beginning of the Apostolic mission to baptize the nations, the Temple was utterly destroyed by the Romans, so that not one stone was left upon another, as our Lord prophesied (Matt. 24:2 and parallel texts). The fragment called the "West-

ern Wall" which survived and still stands today was in fact not part of the Temple itself, but an outer wall which surrounded the Temple mount. This wall, *Kotel ha-ma'aravi* in Hebrew, has taken on great emotional significance for those who remain Jewish in the New Dispensation, but it has little or no meaning for the Christian. What then does this Temple theme in our Christian usage signify, as it stands at the gateway to our winter celebrations and at the conclusion?

The answer to this question lies in the answer to another question: what was the primary and overriding purpose of the Temple to the Jewish people? It was the place of celebration of the Jewish festivals; it was a place of teaching and learning — illustrated by the account of our Lord at the age of twelve "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions" (Luke 2:41-51). But far above all other functions, the Temple was the place of *sacrifice*. Enormous effort went on there each day, year after year, as offerings were made to God in

elaborate ritual sacrifice. There were daily offerings, special offerings for Shabbat and Festivals, as well as voluntary offerings for special occasions — offerings made, for example, by a man and wife in thanksgiving for the birth of a child. Our Lord's family and He Himself throughout His earthly life made journeys again and again for all such occasions.

The Temple, therefore, was synonymous with *sacrifice*. In this we see the logic of the beginning and end of the winter celebrations of our Church.

On the Eve of the Nativity, at the Ninth Hour, a portion of the Epistle to the Hebrews is read: "as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He (Christ) also Himself likewise took part of the same; that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14-15). Here is the theme which is revealed explicitly and implicitly throughout our winter observances: that Christ comes not merely to teach and heal and to provide an example for us, but to die, to offer Himself as the ultimate sacrifice, and in this act to set free the sons and daughters of Adam from the prison of sin and death. As the whole history of Israel, from Adam and Eve to the Virgin Mary, is a foreshadowing of the coming of Christ in the flesh, so that Coming which is unfolded in the winter festivals, is itself a foreshadowing of Christ's battle and triumph over sin and death through His passion, death, burial, and Resurrection in the springtime.

In the prayer of the Litany of Supplication in St. Basil's Liturgy the celebrant asks God to receive this sacrifice "as Thou didst receive the gifts of Abel, the sacrifices of Noah, the whole burnt offerings of Abraham, the priestly offices of Moses and Aaron, and the peace-offerings of Samuel; even as Thou didst receive from Thy Holy Apostles this true worship . . ." One cannot read the Old Testament without noticing that the core of Jewish worship was always the offering of sacrifice: during the time of the Temple; prior to that, the Tabernacle in the wilderness; and prior to that the various altars of the righteous heroes of Israel. And the core of the worship in the New Era is also sacrifice; in this case, the sacrifice of Christ presented through-

out all time on the altars of every Church where the Divine Liturgy is celebrated.

If the act of sacrifice, then, is of highest importance in both the Old Israel and New, what is its precise logic? Why is it so necessary? What does it do? Everyone on earth knows — though not everyone acknowledges it — that God is the creator and giver of all life. If God creates and sustains all things, and we humans are His product, then for us to lift up the things of the earth which sustain us, which keep us alive, to lift them up in grateful offering, we, as it were, give back to God what is His. And this is the highest worship, since it is the acknowledgment of not only the true source of things but also their true nature and destiny. As all things come from God's hand, so all things are destined to return to Him. In short, the act of sacrifice acknowledges the truth of things.

Now when God created all things, He saw that they were good, and they were also perfect and sacred, since He is perfect and holy. But through the beguiling of Satan, Adam, who is both a man and humanity, disobeyed God's will. The natural sacredness became distorted, the harmony of creation became broken and fragmented and turned away from its purpose. So the act of sacrifice acquired more meaning than it first had; it became restorative, reconstructive; it purified and conciliated; it became redemptive. As fallen man offers sacrifices to God, the gifts are received by Him, and He gives them back restored, renewed, perfected, and again sacred, thus showing both His acceptance of the gifts and forgiveness of the giver. The people of Israel offered animals and grain to show their desire for reconciliation and to secure again God's favor. They offered lavish sacrifices again and again, and they carefully chose animals and grain without spot or blemish. Yet with all this, they could not make the perfect and ultimate sacrifice which would renew and restore human nature and all creation. They dared not offer human sacrifice, and since it was flawed it would not have served the purpose anyway. When God commanded Abraham to put his beloved son on the altar, Abraham out of extreme faith and obedience set about to do this. But God stopped him at the last moment and provided instead an animal.

When finally the time appointed for the ultimate sacrifice came, God's Son

became at once the priest and victim on the altar of the Cross, and this time the Father in heaven did not stop the procedure but allowed it to take full course. Christ's sacrifice ended the brokenness caused by sin: the darkness of ignorance, the tyranny of Satan, and the dread and power of death, and ushered in a new creation. Such is the power of a true and perfect sacrifice. There is nothing conceivable equal to it.

At the beginning of the winter cycle we hear: "Let us, the Orthodox, all hasten together with our lamps and glorify the Mother of God, for today she is offered to the Lord as an acceptable sacrifice" (Second Canon at Matins, Ode 5). And: "Let us praise in hymns the child by nature who was shown forth as Mother beyond nature. For today she is offered to the Lord in the Temple of the Law as a sweet-smelling savor, the spiritual fruit of her righteous parents" (Second Canon at Matins, Ode 9).

With her sacrificial life, the Most Holy Virgin prepares for and begins her active role in the ultimate sacrifice of her Son to Whom she gave human nature.

In the midst of winter the offerings of the Magi from the East pre-announce our Lord's identity as king, priest, and sacrificial victim: "eagerly opening their treasures, they offered to Him precious gifts: refined gold, as to the King of the ages, and frankincense, as to the God of all; and myrrh they offered to the immortal, as to one three days dead" (Verse at the Vespers Apostikha, Nativity Eve).

The very cave of His birth foreshadows the cave of His burial, as the icons of these events reveal.

And at the end of winter we hear: "Today He Who once gave the Law to Moses on Sinai submits to the ordinances of the Law . . . and as God He is brought as an offering to Himself, setting us free from the curse of the Law and granting light to our souls" (from the Litya of the Meeting). And: "Simeon, having been granted the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning himself, blesses the Virgin and Theotokos Mary, and foretells in figures the Passion of her Son . . ." (from the Apostikha of the same feast).

All the feasts of winter look towards the coming season of our Lord's "hour," the final journey to Jerusalem, not to the Temple to sacrifice a lamb or two doves, but outside the city walls — to the Cross.

—Archpriest Theodore Heckman

St. Nicholas the Wonderworker of Myra



The true story of Santa Claus begins with Saint Nicholas, who was born during the third century in the village of Patara. At the time the area was Greek and Christian and is now on the southern coast of Turkey. His wealthy parents, who raised him to be a devout Christian, died in an epidemic while Nicholas was still young. Obeying Jesus' words to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor," Nicholas used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He dedicated his life to serving God and was made Bishop of Myra while still a young man. Bishop Nicholas became known throughout the land for his generosity to those in need, his love for children, and his concern for sailors and ships.

Under the Roman Emperor Diocletian, who ruthlessly persecuted Christians, Bishop Nicholas suffered for his faith, was exiled and imprisoned. The prisons were so full of bishops, priests, and deacons, there was no room for the real criminals—murderers, thieves and robbers. After his release, St. Nicholas attended the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. He died December 6, AD 343 in Myra and was buried in his cathedral church, where myrrh poured from his relics. This myrrh, said to have healing powers, fostered the growth of devotion to St. Nicholas. The anniversary of his death became a day of celebration, St. Nicholas Day, December 6th (December 19 on the Julian Calendar).

Through the centuries many stories and legends have been told of St. Nicholas' life and deeds. These accounts help us understand his extraordinary character and why he is so beloved and revered as protector and helper of those in need.

One story tells of a poor man with three daughters. In those days a young woman's father had to offer prospective husbands something of value—a dowry. The larger the dowry, the better the chance that a young woman would find a good husband. Without a dowry, a woman was unlikely to marry. This poor man's daughters, without dowries, were therefore 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. This led to 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, sometimes represented as oranges, are one of the symbols for St. Nicholas. And so St. Nicholas is a gift-giver.

One of the oldest stories showing St. Nicholas as a protector of children takes place long after his death. The townspeople of Myra were celebrating the good Saint on the eve of his feast day when a band of Arab pirates from Crete came into the district. They stole treasures from the Church of Saint Nicholas to take away as booty. As they were leaving town, they snatched a young boy, Basilios, to make into a slave. The emir, or ruler, selected Basilios to be his personal cupbearer, as not knowing the language, Basilios would not understand what the king said to those around him. So, for the next year Basilios waited on the king, bringing his wine in a beautiful golden cup. For Basilios' parents, devastated at the loss of their only child, the year passed slowly, filled with grief. As the next St. Nicholas' feast day approached, Basilios' mother would not join in the festivity, as it was now a day of tragedy. However, she was persuaded to have a simple observance at home—with quiet prayers for Basilios' safekeeping. Meanwhile, as Basilios was fulfilling his tasks serving the emir, he was suddenly whisked up and away. St. Nicholas appeared to the terrified boy, blessed him, and set him down at his home back in Myra. Imagine the joy and wonderment when Basilios amazingly appeared before his parents, still holding the king's golden cup. This is the first story told of St. Nicholas protecting children—which became his primary role in the West.

Another story tells of three theological students, traveling on their way to study in Athens. A wicked innkeeper robbed and murdered them, hiding their remains in a large pickling tub. It so happened that Bishop Nicholas, traveling along the same route, stopped at this very inn. In the night he dreamed of the crime, got up, and summoned the innkeeper. As Nicholas prayed earnestly to God the three boys were restored to life and wholeness. In France the story is told of three small children, wandering in their play until lost, lured, and captured by an evil butcher. St. Nicholas appears and appeals to God to return them to life and to their families. And so St. Nicholas is the Patron and protector of children. Several stories tell of St. Nicholas and the sea. When he was young, St. Nicholas sought the holy by making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. There as he walked where Jesus walked, he sought to more deeply experience Jesus' life, Passion, and Resurrection. Returning by sea, a mighty storm threatened to wreck the ship. St. Nicholas calmly prayed. The terrified sailors were amazed when the wind and waves suddenly calmed, sparing them all. And so St. Nicholas is the Patron of sailors and voyagers.

Other stories tell of Nicholas saving his people from famine, sparing the lives of those innocently accused, and much more. He did many kind and generous deeds in secret, expecting nothing in return. Within a century of his death he was celebrated as a Saint. Today he is venerated in the East and West as a wonderworker and as a Patron of a great variety of persons - children, sailors, bankers, pawn-brokers, scholars, orphans, laborers, travelers, merchants, judges, paupers, marriageable maidens, students, victims of judicial mistakes, captives, perfumers, even thieves and murderers! He is known as the friend and protector of all in trouble or need.

Sailors, claiming St. Nicholas as Patron, carried stories of his favor and protection far and wide. St. Nicholas chapels were built in many seaports. As his popularity spread during the Middle Ages, he became the Patron Saint of Apulia (Italy), Sicily, Greece, and Lorraine (France), and many cities in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Russia, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Following his Baptism, Grand Prince Vladimir brought stories of and devotion to St. Nicholas to his homeland where St. Nicholas became the most beloved Saint of Holy Russia. St. Nicholas was so widely revered that thousands of churches were named for him.

St. Nicholas' tomb in Myra became a popular place of pilgrimage. Because of the many wars and attacks in the region, some Christians were concerned that access to the tomb might become difficult. For both the religious and commercial advantages of a major pilgrimage site, the Italian cities of Venice and Bari vied to get St. Nicholas' relics. In the spring of 1087, sailors from Bari succeeded in spirited away the bones, bringing them to Bari, a seaport on the southeast coast of Italy. An impressive church was built over St. Nicholas' crypt and many faithful journeyed to honor the Saint who had rescued children, prisoners, sailors, famine victims, and many others through his compassion, generosity, and the countless miracles attributed to his intercession. The St. Nicholas shrine in Bari was one of medieval Europe's great pilgrimage centers. To this day pilgrims and tourists visit Bari's great Basilica di San Nicola.

Through the centuries St. Nicholas has continued to be venerated by Orthodox and Catholics and honored as well by Protestants. By his example of generosity to those in need, especially children, St. Nicholas continues to be a model for the compassionate life.

Widely celebrated in Europe, St. Nicholas' Feastday, December 6th, kept alive the stories of his goodness and generosity. In Germany and Poland, boys dressed as bishops begged alms for the poor—and sometimes for themselves! In the Netherlands and Belgium, St. Nicholas arrived on a steamship from Spain to ride a white horse on his gift-giving rounds. December 6th is still the main day for gift-giving and merrymaking in much of Europe. For example, in the Netherlands St. Nicholas is celebrated on the 5th, the eve of the day, by sharing candies (thrown in the door), chocolate initial letters, small gifts, and riddles. Dutch children leave carrots and hay in their shoes for the Saint's horse, hoping St. Nicholas will exchange them for small gifts.