

International Conversation Cafe

Lifestyle Topic: St. Nicholas/Santa Claus

Discussion

1. *What stories did you hear when you were growing up?*
2. *Looking at the advertising and traditions in the US, what do you know about Santa Claus?*
3. *Do you think it is a good idea to celebrate the holiday with this image of a fat man, dressed in red, who brings gifts to children by jumping down their chimneys?*

Read the following historical account, define words, and then answer the questions.

The Man Behind the Story of Father Christmas/Santa Claus

St. Nicholas was a Bishop who lived in the fourth century AD in a place called Myra in Asia Minor (now called Turkey). He was a very rich man because his parents died when he was young and left him a lot of money. He was also a very kind man and had a reputation for helping the poor and giving secret gifts to people who needed it. There are several legends about St. Nicholas, although we don't know if any of them are true!

The most famous story about St. Nicholas tells how the custom of hanging up stockings to get presents in first started! It goes like this:

There was a poor man who had three daughters. He was so poor, he did not have enough money for a dowry, so his daughters couldn't get married. (A dowry is a sum of money paid to the bridegroom by the bride's parents on the wedding day. This still happens in some countries, even today.)

One night, Nicholas secretly dropped a bag of gold down the chimney and into the house (This meant that the oldest daughter was then able to be married.). The bag fell into a stocking that had been hung by the fire to dry! This was repeated later with the second daughter. Finally, determined to discover the person who had given him the money, the father secretly hid by the fire every evening until he caught Nicholas dropping in a bag of gold. Nicholas begged the man to not tell anyone what he had done, because he did not want to bring attention to himself. But soon the news got out and when anyone received a secret gift, it was thought that maybe it was from Nicholas.

Because of his kindness Nicholas was made a Saint. St. Nicholas is not only the saint of children but also of sailors! One story tells of him helping some sailors that were caught in a dreadful storm off the coast of Turkey. The storm was raging around them and all the men were terrified that their ship would sink beneath the giant waves. They prayed to St. Nicholas to help them.

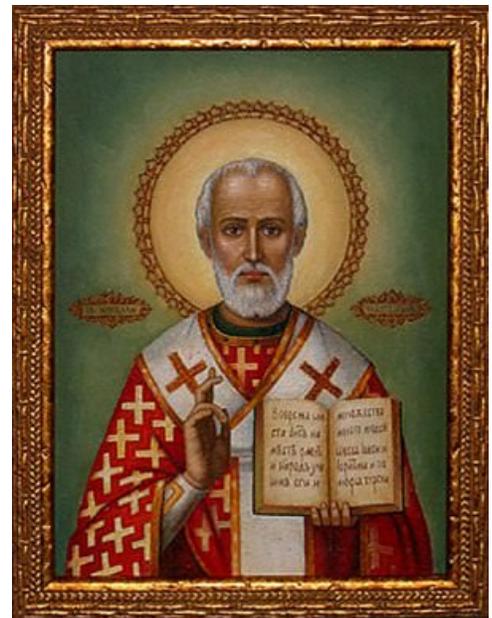


Image from the St. Nicholas Center
www.stnicholascenter.org

Suddenly, he was standing on the deck before them. He ordered the sea to be calm, the storm died away, and they were able to sail their ship safely to port.

St. Nicholas was exiled from Myra and later put in prison during the persecution by the Emperor Diocletian. No one is really knows when he died, but it was on 6th December in either 345 or 352 AD. In 1087, his bones were stolen from Turkey by some [Italian](#) merchant sailors. The bones are now kept in the Church named after him in the Italian port of Bari. On St. Nicholas feast day (6th December), the sailors of Bari still carry his statue from the Cathedral out to sea, so that he can bless the waters and so give them safe voyages throughout the year.

You can find out lots about about St Nicholas at [the St. Nicholas Center](#).

How St. Nicholas Became Santa Claus

In the 16th Century in Europe, the stories and traditions about St. Nicholas had become very unpopular. But someone had to deliver presents to children at Christmas, so in the [UK](#), he became 'Father Christmas', a character from old children's stories; in [France](#), he was then known as 'Père Noël'; in [Germany](#), the 'Christ Kind'. In the early [USA](#) his name was 'Kris Kringle'. Later, Dutch settlers in the USA took the old stories of St. Nicholas with them and Kris Kringle became 'Sinterklaas' or as we now say 'Santa Claus'!



Questions

1. *What surprised you about St. Nicholas?*
2. *What are your unanswered questions?*
3. *Are there any other Christmas meanings or traditions that seem important to you?*
4. *Will you celebrate Christmas? What activities will you participate in?*