

Question: Who was Saint Nicholas?

Answer: For one of the most universally venerated saints there is surprisingly little information known about his actual life. We do know that Saint Nicholas lived in the 4th century. Many things that have been attributed to the life of Nicholas are difficult to base historically. For example, Nicholas is often associated as a participant in the Council of Nicea which took place in 325 AD. In all the names ascribed to the work at Nicea, his is absent. This leads scholars to believe that he was not present at the event. It has also been said that Nicholas served prison time during the Roman Emperor Diocletian's Great Persecution of Christians. Similar to the lacking information at Nicea, data that supports Nicholas' involvement in the persecution is not verifiable and likewise leads most experts to conclude that there is no way to historically affirm his involvement. (Oxford Dictionary of Saints, *Nicholas*, 385) We do however know that Nicholas was the bishop of Myra sometime in the 4th century and died between 345 and 352 AD. Nicholas was a very popular early saint in the church and had a large cult following as early as the 6th century. The emperor Justinian I built a church to honor him at Constantinople. (New Advent, *Nicholas*)

Saint Nicholas is the patron saint of several vocations and peoples such as, mariners, merchants, bakers, travelers, children, unmarried girls, pawnbrokers, apothecaries, and perfumers. (New Advent, *Nicholas*) This expansive list of patronage prompts historians to believe that there was more to Nicholas' life than has been revealed historically. As already mentioned, a strong cult following had been established in relation to Nicholas by the 6th century. The universal popularity of Saint Nicholas spread in large part because of the glorified and fictitious biography of Methodius (died 847). Methodius wrote his life of the saint nearly five-hundred years after Nicholas' death. (Oxford Dictionary of Saints, *Nicholas*, 385)

Methodius' legend of Saint Nicholas begins with his life as an infant child. He notes the piety of the infant Nicholas, particularly in relation to eating regiments and quantity. He also writes that the fairly wealthy parents of Nicholas died when he was just a young man. This left Nicholas the ability to devote his wealth to works of charity. (catholic.org, *Nicholas*) According to Methodius, Nicholas' good works begin in the town of Patera where a father had lost all of his money to hard times. As a result of these hard times, the man was unable to pay the dowry for his three daughters to be able to take husbands. Due to this, the man would be forced to hand his daughters over to prostitution. Through word of mouth, Nicholas heard the fate of the good man's daughters. To keep this travesty from occurring, Nicholas secretly threw a bag of gold coins into the man's house at night, paying for the eldest daughter's dowry. He did this again for both the second and third daughters on separate nights allowing for all of the girls to get married and avoid the sinful and dismal life of prostitution. (catholic.org, *Nicholas*) Many more legends are attributed to Nicholas according to Methodius. He writes that Nicholas also saved three innocent men from execution by confronting the executioner and staying his hands. (catholic.org, *Nicholas*) Nicholas also appeared in a dream to the emperor Constantine regarding the future execution of another small group of men. Upon awakening from the dream, Constantine let the men go free. He also had the men whom he freed take a letter to Nicholas asking him to pray for world peace. (catholic.org, *Nicholas*) While none of Methodius' history of Nicholas is verifiable, it certainly aided in building legendary status for the Bishop of Myra. Even before the biography of Nicholas by Methodius, Nicholas had become a legendary and popular saint in all Christendom.

The modern day affiliation with children is probably rooted in an event that happened long after Saint Nicholas had died. On the eve of his feast day while people were celebrating the life of Saint Nicholas, a band of Arab pirates raided the town of Myra (where Nicholas in life was bishop). While the Arabs were looting the town, they also kidnapped a young boy named Basilios to put into slavery. (stnicholascenter.org) Basilios was successfully captured and thrown into slavery for a year. After much fervent prayer the following year's feast day for Saint Nicholas by Basilios' mother, Saint Nicholas appeared to the boy and miraculously whisked him away from his captors bringing him back safely to his parents in Myra.

The transition of Saint Nicholas from a 4th century bishop to a fat, jolly elf that wears red clothing is a new phenomenon based largely on a tradition practiced in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. As a long standing tradition on Nicholas' feast day, presents were given in his name by placing gifts in children's stocking that hung on the fireplace mantel to dry. (New Advent, *Nicholas*) The tradition of Nicholas as Santa Claus in its North American form comes largely from Dutch Protestants of New Amsterdam who combined a Nordic folklore legend of a magician that punished naughty children and rewarded good ones with Saint Nicholas' known patronage of children. (Oxford Dictionary of Saints, *Nicholas*, 386) Nicholas' traditional Bishop's garb including a mitre and cloak has been clearly changed into the modern red suit that he bears. The name Santa Claus comes from the Dutch *Sinter Claus* which is how children attempted to say Saint Nicholas from the Dutch. Saint Nicholas is the patron saint of Greece, Russia, the Kingdom of Naples, Sicily, Lorraine, the Diocese of Liège; many cities in Italy, Germany, Austria, and Belgium; Campen in the Netherlands; Corfu in Greece; Freiburg in Switzerland; and Moscow in Russia. (New Advent, *Nicholas*) Over 400 churches in England alone are named after him. His feast day is December 6.