

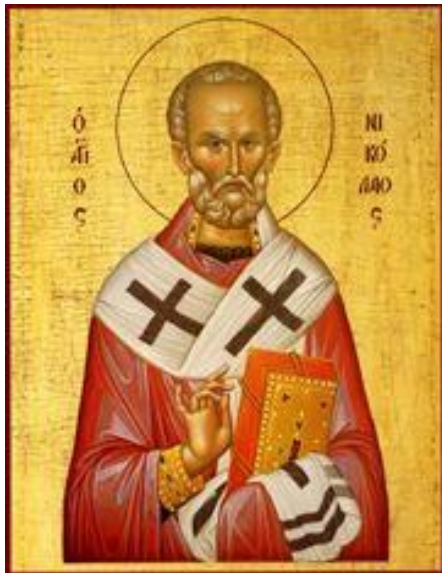
ADVENT #4 SANTA CLAUS & ST NICHOLAS

Today in order to understand our modern way of celebrating and preparing for Christmas, let's take a look at a basic figure in the popular Christmas culture: Santa Claus. We can trace the origins of the Santa Claus myth to the historical person of St Nicholas of Mira. So let's begin with him.

HISTORY

ST NICHOLAS: 15 March 270 – +6 December 343 – bishop

In the East they call him Nicholas de Mira, for the city where he was bishop, but in the West he is called Nicholas de Bari, because when the Muslims conquered Turkey, a group of Roman Catholics secretly removed the relics of the saint and took them to the port city of Bari, in Italy. In that city such admirable miracles were attributed to this great saint through prayer, that he became extremely popular throughout Europe. He is a Patron of Russia, Greece and Turkey.



After his death he became the first saint, not a martyr, to enjoy a special devotion in the East and West. Multitudes of miraculous stories were attributed to him, distorting, sometimes, his eminently practical and simple character. Here we have a simple bishop who dedicated himself to serving the poor in an extraordinary way.

Nicholas's reputation for generosity and kindness gave rise to legends of miracles he performed for the poor and unhappy. He was reputed to have given marriage dowries of gold to three girls whom poverty would otherwise have forced into lives of prostitution. In the Middle Ages, devotion to Nicholas extended to all parts of Europe. He became the patron saint of Russia and Greece; of charitable fraternities and guilds; of children, sailors, unmarried girls, merchants, and pawnbrokers; and of such cities as Fribourg, in Switzerland, and Moscow. Thousands of European churches were dedicated to him – one, built by the Roman emperor Justinian I at Constantinople (now Istanbul), as early as the 6th century. Nicholas's miracles were a favorite subject for medieval artists and liturgical plays, and his traditional feast day was the occasion for many traditions honoring children during the Christmas season.

After the Reformation, devotion to Nicholas disappeared in all the Protestant countries of Europe except Holland, where his legend persisted as Sinterklaas (a Dutch variant of the name St. Nicholas). His name and legend are also notable outside the Christian world because his figure has given rise to the myth of Santa Claus.

**ST NICHOLAS = GENOROSITY, KINDNESS,
SELF-SACRIFICE, PRACTICALITY,
SERVICE TO THE POOR, & SIMPLICITY**

MYTH

SANTA CLAUS & COKA COLA

It is believed that the origin of Santa Claus happened around the year 1624 when Dutch immigrants founded the city of New Amsterdam, later called New York. They brought with them their customs and myths, including that of Sinterklaas, their patron (whose festivity is celebrated in the Netherlands between the 5th and the 6th of December).

In 1809 the writer Washington Irving wrote a satire, *History of New York*, which deformed the Dutch saint, Sinterklaas, into the crude English-speaking pronunciation of Santa Claus.



Later the poet Clement Clarke Moore, in 1823, published a poem where he gave shape to the current myth of Santa Claus, based on the character of Irving. In that poem there is mention of a version of Santa Claus, dwarf and thin, like a goblin; but he gives toys to children on Christmas Eve and is transported in a sleigh pulled by nine reindeer, including Rudolph.

Later, around 1863, Santa Claus acquired the current appearance of a fat bearded gentleman for which he is best known. This was thanks to the German cartoonist Thomas Nast, who designed this character for his Christmas comic strips in *Harper's Weekly*. There Santa Claus acquired his clothes and it is believed that his creator relied on the clothes of the bishops of old times to create this false "St Nicholas", which by that time had nothing to do with St Nicholas de Mira.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the American Santa Claus went to England and from there to France, where he merged with Bonhomme Noël, who is the origin of our Santa Claus & who had a physical resemblance to Santa Claus. But he was dressed in white with bright gold.

In the early 1900s, in the USA an advertisement program launched by the **Lomen Company** further developed the modern Santa Claus myth. The Lomen Company invested in the purchase and sale of reindeer herds, and between 1920-1929, they set up large slaughterhouses, meat processing plants, and freezers. Here begins the modern tradition that Santa Claus who came from the North Pole with Christmas reindeer as Santa Claus' means of transportation. At Christmas 1926, together with the **Macy's** stores, the Lomen Company developed an ingenious marketing campaign to promote their main product: frozen reindeer meat. Santa Claus in a sleigh pulled by reindeer, was presented in several cities in the United States (such as Boston, San Francisco, Chicago and Seattle, among others). The Lomen Company published false letters in newspapers, supposedly written by children asking for Santa Claus and his reindeer to appear in their cities. It was from there that the sleigh pulled by reindeer became another of the traditions associated with American Christmas.

Then, at the beginning of the 20th century in 1902, in the children's book *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus* by L. Frank Baum, we have the origin of the story of how Claus earned immortality, as well as the title saint.

Also, at the same time in the twentieth century, the **Coca-Cola** company commissioned the painter Haddon Sundblom to remodel the figure of Santa Claus to make him more human and credible. This version dates from 1931. At this point, however, it must be clarified that it is only an urban legend, the belief that the red and white color of Santa Claus has its origin in the ads that the Coca-Cola brand began to make from 1931, even though it is true that they contributed to the popularization of these colors and of the myth itself. There are many illustrations and most reliable descriptions before the Coca-Cola ads, such as Thomas Nast (1869) or St. Nicholas Magazine (1926), among others; in addition there are the old



religious representations of the bishop San Nicolás de Mira or San Nicolás de Bari, in which the red and white color of religious clothing is common. Although it is true that from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s there was no a specific color assigned to Santa Claus, green was one of the most common colors before the Coke-Cola ads. Therefore, it is considered that the massive Coca-Cola ad campaign was one of the main reasons why Santa Claus ended up dressed in red and white, but the Coca-Cola publicists were not the first to represent him with these colors.

As for the home of Santa Claus, as the legend originated in the Northern Hemisphere, at the beginning of the 20th century the idea that he lived in the North Pole spread; however, since the North Pole is in the middle of the Arctic Ocean, we must remember that there are other nearby places postulated as their home, which are: Swedish Lapland, Finnish Lapland and Greenland.

**COCA-COLA + REFRIGERATION/REINDEER MEAT +
MACY'S DEPT STORES  SANTA CLAUS**

SANTA CLAUS = CONSUMERISM + SELFISHNESS

So now, after this look at myth and history, it is important to take care in how we transmit traditions and myths to our children.

peace & all that is good, friar Chris

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