

# St. Nicholas of Myra

Around the world, there is much legend and lore surrounding the figure of “Santa Claus.” Santa Claus is often referred to in the English-speaking world as “St. Nick,” and there is a real man behind the legend: a saint of the Catholic Church who was formative in the life of the early Church.

St. Nicholas was born in Patara, a town on the southern coast of what is now Turkey. St. Nicholas’s life spanned two prominent eras in Church history: he was born in the Roman Empire during a time when Christianity was illegal, and he died after Christianity had been legalized, at a time when theological dialogue among Christians was just beginning to flourish throughout the Mediterranean world.

Nicholas came from a wealthy family. His parents, who had raised him with devotion to the Catholic faith, died during an epidemic that swept through their town when Nicholas was still young. Nicholas inherited his parents’ wealth; however, rather than spend his money in self-serving pursuits, Nicholas took to heart Jesus’ command to “sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor. . . . Then come, follow me” (Lk 18:22b).

Beginning in his youth, Nicholas served the needy, the sick, and the elderly. He also had a special devotion to caring for children, especially orphans. Nicholas came to the city of Myra just as the local church was choosing a bishop; the people recognized Nicholas’s holiness and selected him as bishop.

During the reign of the ruthless Roman emperor Diocletian, Bishop Nicholas faced persecution leading to his exile and imprisonment. Nicholas suffered in prison alongside other members of the clergy and lay faithful who had been incarcerated for simply following Jesus Christ.

With the Edict of Milan in 313 came liberty for Christians from oppression by the Roman Empire. Thus, Nicholas was freed and once again able to serve as a bishop. Nicholas famously attended the First Council of Nicaea in 325. Tradition alleges that Nicholas was so offended by Arius’s heresy that he had a physical confrontation with and slapped Arius.

Nicholas died on December 6, 343, and was laid to rest in the cathedral church of Myra. Various legends have surrounded St. Nicholas over the course of the last millennium and a half. He was recognized as a saint by acclamation of the people (a practice before an official canonization process was instituted). He is the patron saint of Aquila, an ancient Roman city; Sicily; Greece; and Lorraine (France). His feast day is December 6.



## Reading Comprehension

1. What did Nicholas do with the money left to him by his parents?
2. What happened to Bishop Nicholas during the reign of Roman Emperor Diocletian?
3. According to tradition, how did Nicholas show his disdain for Arianism at the First Council of Nicaea?

## Writing Task

St. Nicholas of Myra's love for children likely led to the many traditional practices associated with gift giving on his feast day and at Christmas. Research one such tradition associated with St. Nicholas. Describe the practice, its origins, and where the practice takes place.

# Explaining the Faith

## What is the difference between Eastern Catholic Churches and Eastern Orthodox Churches?

After the Great Schism of 1054, Eastern Churches no longer in union with Rome came to be known as Eastern Orthodox, or simply Orthodox, Churches. Eastern Churches that remained in union with Rome are called Eastern Catholic Churches, or often “the Eastern Church.” An easy way to remember the difference between them is this: if the name of the Eastern Church has “Orthodox” in its title, it is not in union with Rome.

Eastern Catholic Churches accept the pope as the leader of the Church. Eastern Churches are fully Catholic. While all the Eastern Churches accept the authority of the pope, they also have a great deal of autonomy in Church life. They are governed by a separate code, called the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*. This code helps to preserve some Eastern traditions that differ from those of the Roman Catholic Church, including the ordination of married men to the priesthood. Eastern Churches worship with their own style of liturgy. The Byzantine, Alexandrian or Coptic, Armenian, Maronite, and Chaldean liturgical rites and certain other liturgical rites of local churches and religious orders have been recognized as authentic liturgical expressions within the Catholic Church. The three largest Eastern Churches are the Byzantine Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, and the Maronite Catholic Church.



### Further Research

Read paragraphs 1200–1209 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in order to learn about the different liturgical rites (the particular Eastern rites are mentioned in paragraph 1203). Also, read paragraphs 1–6 of the Second Vatican Council document *Orientalium Ecclesiarum: Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite*. Both sources can be found at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). After reading through these two documents, answer the following question in a well-developed paragraph: What are some features of the Eastern Catholic rites that show that they are Catholic, even though they incorporate somewhat different liturgical practices?

# Chapter 3 Teacher Resources

## *Faithful Disciple: St. Nicholas of Myra*

### Reading Comprehension

1. What did Nicholas do with the money left to him by his parents? *He gave it to the poor, and was particularly dedicated to caring for children, especially orphans.*
2. What happened to Bishop Nicholas during the reign of Roman Emperor Diocletian? *He was exiled and imprisoned, and he suffered in prison alongside other members of the clergy and lay faithful.*
3. According to tradition, how did Nicholas show his disdain for Arianism at the First Council of Nicaea? *He had a physical confrontation with and slapped Arius.*

### Writing Task

St. Nicholas of Myra's love for children likely led to the many traditional practices associated with gift giving on his feast day and at Christmas. Research one such tradition associated with St. Nicholas. Describe the practice, its origins, and where the practice takes place. *The St. Nicholas Center has a website that catalogs traditional celebrations from countries around the world and describes the geographical variation and historical roots of customs celebrated within the United States. Students might use this resource to jump-start their research: "Around the World," St. Nicholas Center, [www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/around-the-world](http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/around-the-world).*

### Additional Background Information

The St. Nicholas Center ([www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/home](http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/home)) provides extensive, well-organized background information about St. Nicholas, including the following:

- biographical information
- frequently asked questions
- historical background about his real appearance, including multiple images of historical artifacts used to reconstruct his real facial features
- the locations of his relics
- the process by which Nicholas became recognized as a saint, which predates the existence of the canonization process we know today
- the historical origin of Santa Claus as related to St. Nicholas
- traditions associated with St. Nicholas in countries around the world

## ***Explaining the Faith***

### **What is the difference between Eastern Catholic Churches and Eastern Orthodox Churches?**

#### **Further Research**

Read paragraphs 1200–1209 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in order to learn about the different liturgical rites (the particular Eastern rites are mentioned in paragraph 1203). Also, read paragraphs 1–6 of the Second Vatican Council document *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (*Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite*). Both documents can be found at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). After reading through these two documents, answer the following question in a well-developed paragraph: What are some features of the Eastern Catholic rites that show that they are Catholic, even though they incorporate somewhat different liturgical practices? *The Eastern Catholic rites are grounded in Sacred Tradition and apostolic succession. Amid the diversity of liturgical traditions, we find a unity in the communion of faith, in the sacraments received from the Apostles. The fidelity to apostolic succession includes recognition of the authority of the pope over the pastoral government of the Church.*

#### **Additional Background and Resources**

Students may be interested in locating, researching, contacting, or visiting Eastern Orthodox churches or churches that follow Eastern Catholic rites in your area. Such research and conversations can further inform students' understanding of our common practices and beliefs, as well as our key differences.

For nearby Eastern Catholic churches: The website [www.gcatholic.org](http://www.gcatholic.org) offers a map and hyperlinked list of all churches by (arch)diocese. Scroll down and click on “All Churches,” navigate to your diocese, and scroll to the bottom of the table for a list of “Other Churches within the Diocesan Territory” to find churches that follow Eastern Catholic rites.

For nearby Eastern Orthodox churches: The website Orthodoxy in America, [www.orthodoxyinamerica.org](http://www.orthodoxyinamerica.org), offers a database searchable by ZIP code, with contact information and links to church websites.