

Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, c.326

Nicholas, one of the most popular saints in both eastern and western Churches, is something of a mystery. All that can be said for certain is that he was Bishop of Myra, (Lycia in modern Turkey) at the beginning of the fourth century. He was buried outside his city, facing towards the sea. His legend says that he was imprisoned during the Diocletian persecution of 303–4, and was one of the signatories of the Council of Nicæa, although there is no record of his name on any of the lists of bishops at the Council.



Nicholas is the patron saint of sailors and of children. His legend speaks of him giving three girls a dowry to prevent them having to enter prostitution when their family fell on hard times. He delivered the gifts at night to avoid detection. He is also believed to have raised to life three drowned boys, and saved three unjustly convicted sailors from death.

Nicholas was honoured from early after his death, being buried in an artistic mausoleum, which became a place of pilgrimage. His legend can be traced back to the sixth century, and was embellished in the mid ninth century. His remains were translated to Bari in 1087, and his cult became popular in the West from that time onwards. His relics are still held in Bari.

He is especially popular in Russia. In Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands Nicholas is customarily known as the provider of gifts to children on 6 December (his feast day). Dutch settlers in North America merged this legend to Nordic folklore that tells of a magician who punished naughty children and rewarded good ones, to create the modern figure of Santa Claus (Dutch for Saint Nicholas).

Almighty Father, lover of souls, who chose your servant Nicholas to be a bishop in the Church, that he might give freely out of the treasures of your grace: make us mindful of the needs of others and, as we have received, so teach us also to give; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.