

Who is Santa Claus— Really?

The true story of Santa Claus begins with Nicholas, who was born to a wealthy family during the 3rd century in Turkey. His parents raised him to be a devout Christian. Nicholas had a great heart for the poor and courageously pursued justice. He gave all that he had to the poor, the sick, and the suffering. Later when he was Bishop of Myra he became famous for these saintly deeds. The anniversary of his death, December 6th, became a feast day of celebration. Nicholas is portrayed as a compassionate friend to children leaving fruits, nuts, cookies and sweets in shoes and stockings on the eve of Dec 6th. The shape of the candy cane is meant to reflect the bishop's crozier (shepherd's staff) which Nicholas carried.

Stories about Nicholas tell about his character and why he is so popular. One story is about a poor man with three daughters. These three sisters, had no dowries to marry, and were destined to be sold into slavery. Mysteriously, on three different occasions, bags of gold were tossed through an open window, are said to have landed in stockings, or shoes, left by the fire to dry. So began the custom of children hanging stockings or putting out shoes, eagerly awaiting gifts from Saint Nicholas. Sometimes the story is told with gold balls instead of bags of gold. That is why three gold balls, or oranges, are a symbol for St. Nicholas.

St. Nicholas did many kind and generous acts. He did them in secret, expecting nothing in return. Stories tell of his rescuing sailors, relieving famine, sparing the lives of children, and protecting the innocent. Within a century of his death he was named a saint and came to be regarded as the special friend of children, bakers, sailors, merchants, and many others. He quickly became most beloved and is the patron saint of in many European countries.

St. Nicholas, *Sviatyij Mykolai*, comes to Ukraine on December 6th (or the 19th in the Orthodox Julian calendar). It is a happy day with visiting and sleigh rides. Schools have plays telling Nicholas stories and the saint visits local churches. Dressed as a Byzantine, the good is often accompanied by angels. He quizzes children on their catechism before giving gifts. is the main day for gift-giving, though gifts are also becoming associated with Christmas Day. Today many Ukrainian churches have St. Nicholas celebrations to help children understand that the holy man Nicholas came long before Santa Claus.

In Germany and Poland boys dressed as bishops and begged alms for the poor. In the Netherlands St. Nicholas rides a white horse while making his rounds checking on children's behavior. During these weeks children put out their shoes, filled with carrots and hay for the horse, hoping to find small gifts and treats left by St. Nicholas or Father Christmas as part of December 25th Christmas celebrations. He inspired people to offer little gifts and acts of kindness to each other in secret, seeking nothing in return.

It is a long journey from the fourth century Bishop of Myra, St. Nicholas, whose devotion to God led to extraordinary kindness and generosity, to today's jolly Santa Claus who is frequently thought to be encouraging consumption rather than compassion.

Who is Santa Claus? He is Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, whose caring surprises continue to model true giving. If we focus on Nicholas, rather than Santa, we will emphasize giving more than receiving— need more than greed. It was out of love that Nicholas shared what he had with those who had less. We can do the same.

From the website of St. Nicholas Center, www.stnicholascenter.org. To learn more about St. Nicholas, visit the website.

"Ukrainians have [venerated] Saint Nicholas as the patron saint of children since olden days. He makes us believe our most cherished dreams will come true one day, endows our hearts with kind feelings and inspires us to do good."
President of Ukraine Victor Yushchenko — December 19, 2006



Saint Nicholas of Myra



Saint Nicholas Contest

MPUE is happy to announce our 1st annual St. Nicholas Contest, open to all EUBP students.

To Enter please carefully read the article "Who is Santa Claus-Really?" Then in your most creative way, cut out, color, paint, decorate his picture on this page.

On another piece of paper write down how you show kindness, compassion, and help others in your own special way.

Write your name, age, and school on both pages.

The winners will have their entries posted on the MPUE website, in our next newsletter, and be awarded a very special prize. Entries should be mailed to the office address on the front of the newsletter.

Contest ends January 16, 2009. Winners will be announced on January 31, 2009.