

December 6, 2014

St. Nicholas, 2014

Bishop of Myra (fourth century)

"So famous and renowned did he quickly become not only among the faithful but among many of the infidels as well that in all peoples' minds he was admired beyond the power of words."

It is hard to reconcile the extraordinary influence and appeal of St. Nicholas with the paucity of established facts about his life. He is the patron of Russia and Greece, as well as of many classes of people, including children, sailors, pawnbrokers, and prostitutes. Many hundreds of churches are named after him, and his feast day is an occasion for ardent celebration in many parts of the globe. But as for his biography, it may be summarized — with little danger of elision — in the simple statement that he served as bishop of Myra, a provincial capital in Asia Minor, sometime in the fourth century.

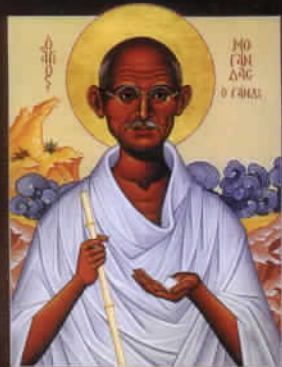
The most curious development in the cult of St. Nicholas has been the amalgamation of this fourth-century bishop with the features of a Scandinavian elf. The transfiguration of St. Nicholas into Santa Claus has been traced to Dutch Protestants living in New Amsterdam. As the story made its way back to England the familiar features of Father Christmas gradually took shape until he had achieved his eventual iconographic status.

In Holland it is still St. Nicholas himself who delivers presents to deserving children on his feast day. In America and England, where, on Christmas Eve, young ears are attentive for the sound of reindeers' hooves, we are at least several steps further removed from the original bishop of Myra. And yet in linking the hopes of children with the memory of St. Nicholas there is some faint echo of an ancient cult.

St. Nicholas was the hero of several legends involving children. To be sure, they reflect an image of childhood that has little to do with "sugar-plums." In one story Nicholas rescued three young girls whose father, for want of a dowry, was about to sell them into prostitution. Nicholas tossed three bags of gold through an open window, enough to pay the dowry of each of the sisters. In another story these three bags of gold (with which the saint is often depicted) became the heads of three little boys who were murdered by an evil maniac. The holy bishop not only uncovered the crime but restored the children to life.

It is common and appropriate to decry the commercialization of the Christmas season. There are fewer voices raised to mourn the trivialization of St. Nicholas. Well does he deserve to be the patron of children, and well might they delight in his name. But he might be remembered not only as the jolly source of toys and treats but also as the protector of those whose lives and innocence remain threatened today, as they were in the time of St. Nicholas, by violence, poverty, and exploitation.

See: The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine (London: Longman, Green, 1941).



BAHÁ'Í PROPHET 'ABDU'L-KARÍM QÁNU'NÍ RÁZVÍ



MARY, MOTHER OF JESUS

ALL SAINTS

DAILY REFLECTIONS ON SAINTS, PROPHETS, AND WITNESSES FOR OUR TIME

"A RICHLY IMAGINED COLLECTION OF MEDIATING FIGURES
IN A SPIRITUAL COMMUNION OF MANY FAITHS."

—Kenneth L. Woodward,
Religion Editor, *Newsweek*, and
author of *Making Saints*



SAHIBU'N-NABU'U MUHAMMAD



مَرْيَمُ مَوْلَاةُ رَبِّكَ

ROBERT ELLSBERG