

Medieval Theatre

Miracle Play

SAINT NICHOLAS (A.K.A. SANTA CLAUS)

The true story of Santa Claus begins with Nicholas, who was born during the third century in Patara, a village in what is now Turkey. His wealthy parents, who raised him to be a devout Christian, died in an epidemic while Nicholas was still young. Obeying Jesus' words to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor," Nicholas used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He dedicated his life to serving God and was made Bishop of Myra while still a young man. Bishop Nicholas became known throughout the land for his generosity to those in need, his love for children, and his concern for sailors and ships.



Under the Roman Emperor Diocletian, who ruthlessly persecuted Christians, Bishop Nicholas suffered for his faith, was exiled and imprisoned. The prisons were so full of bishops, priests, and deacons, there was no room for the real criminals—murderers, thieves and robbers.

After his release, Nicholas attended the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. He died December 6, AD 343 in Myra and was buried in his cathedral church, where a unique relic, called manna, formed in his grave. This liquid substance was said to have healing powers which fostered the growth of devotion to Nicholas. The anniversary of his death became a day of celebration, St. Nicholas Day.

Through the centuries many stories and legends have been told of St. Nicholas' life and deeds. These accounts help us understand his extraordinary character and why he is so beloved and revered as protector and helper of those in need.

One story tells of a poor man with three daughters. In those days a young woman's father had to offer prospective husbands something of value—a dowry. The larger the dowry, the better the chance that a young woman would find a good husband. Without a dowry, a woman was unlikely to marry.

This poor man's daughters, without dowries, were therefore destined to be sold into slavery. Mysteriously, on three different occasions, a bag of gold appeared in their home, providing the needed dowries. The bags of gold, tossed through an open window, are said to have landed in stockings or shoes left before the fire to dry. This led to 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, sometimes represented as oranges, are one of the symbols for St. Nicholas. And so St. Nicholas is a gift-giver.

Another story tells of three theological students, travelling on their way to study in Athens. A wicked innkeeper robbed and murdered them, hiding their remains in a large pickling tub. It so happened that Bishop Nicholas, travelling along the same route, stopped at this very inn. In the night he dreamt of the crime, got up, and summoned the innkeeper. As Nicholas prayed earnestly to God the three boys were restored to life and wholeness. In France the story is told of three small children, wandering in their play until lost, lured, and captured by an evil butcher. St. Nicholas appears and appeals to God to return them to life and to their families. And so St. Nicholas is the patron and protector of children.

Several stories tell of Nicholas and the sea. When he was young, Nicholas sought the holy by making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. There as he walked where Jesus walked, he sought to more deeply experience Jesus' life, passion, and resurrection. Returning by sea, a mighty storm threatened to wreck the ship. Nicholas calmly prayed. The terrified sailors were amazed when the wind and waves suddenly calmed, sparing them all. And so St. Nicholas is the patron of sailors and voyagers.

Other stories tell of Nicholas saving his people from famine, sparing the lives of those innocently accused, and much more. He did many kind and generous deeds in secret, expecting nothing in return. Within a century of his death he was celebrated as a saint. Today he is venerated in the East as wonder, or miracle worker and in the West as patron of a great variety of persons-children, mariners, bankers, pawn-brokers, scholars, orphans, labourers, travellers, merchants, judges, paupers, marriageable maidens, students, children, sailors, victims of judicial mistakes, captives, perfumers, even thieves and murderers! He is known as the friend and protector of all in trouble or need.

Sailors, claiming St. Nicholas as patron, carried stories of his favor and protection far and wide. St. Nicholas chapels were built in many seaports. As his popularity spread during the Middle Ages, he became the patron saint of Apulia (Italy), Sicily, Greece, and Lorraine (France), and many cities in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Russia, Belgium, and the Netherlands (See list). Following his baptism in Constantinople, Vladimir I of Russia brought St. Nicholas' stories and devotion to St. Nicholas to his homeland where Nicholas became the most beloved saint. Nicholas was so widely revered that more than 2,000 churches were named for him, including three hundred in Belgium, thirty-four in Rome, twenty-three in the Netherlands and more than four hundred in England.

Through the centuries St. Nicholas has continued to be venerated by Catholics and Orthodox and honoured by Protestants. By his example of generosity to those in need, especially children, St. Nicholas continues to be a model for the compassionate life.

Widely celebrated in Europe, St. Nicholas' feast day, December 6th, kept alive the stories of his goodness and generosity. In Germany and Poland, boys dressed as bishops begged alms for the poor—and sometimes for themselves! In the Netherlands and Belgium, St. Nicholas arrived on a steamship from Spain to ride a white horse on his gift-giving rounds.

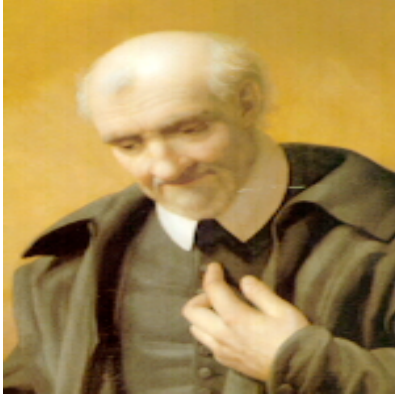
December 6th is still the main day for gift giving and merrymaking in much of Europe. For example, in the Netherlands St. Nicholas' Day is celebrated with the sharing of candies (thrown in the door), chocolate initial letters, small gifts, and riddles. Dutch children leave carrots and hay in their shoes for the horse, hoping St. Nicholas will exchange them for small gifts. Simple gift-giving in early Advent helps preserve a Christmas Day focus on the Christ Child.

Since the 1968 revision of the Roman Catholic calendar, some ask if Nicholas is still really regarded as a saint. It is helpful to remember the Feast of Our Holy Father, Nicholas, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia, the Wonder-worker, remains highly ranked and unchanged in Eastern Catholic and Orthodox churches.

The Roman Catholic calendar revision did remove forty saints, but not Nicholas. Commemoration of ninety saints was made optional, meaning, celebration of their feast days was no longer required for faithful Roman Catholics. Although Nicholas was in this group, it does not mean he and the others are not real saints in the Roman Catholic Church. In the case of Nicholas, it was even stressed that there was no doubt of his authenticity.

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SAINT VINCENT de PAUL

Vincent was born at Pouy in Gascony, in the south of France, in 1580 or 1581, the third child in a family of four sons and two daughters. His family was a solid peasant family capable of making ends meet only through hard work and frugality. His father encouraged and helped him toward the priesthood, to which he was ordained on September 23, 1600, at the age of nineteen or twenty. Among his chief reasons for becoming a priest was his desire to get an office in the Church from which he could obtain enough money to retire early, return home, and provide for his family.

His early hopes for advancement came to nothing (two trips to Rome, promises of a bishopric, money from a will). In 1608, Vincent moved to Paris, where he came under the influence of Father (later Cardinal) Pierre de Bérulle, whom he took as his spiritual director, and Father André Duval, a professor of the Sorbonne, who was to be his "wise man" for the next three decades. This marked a turning point in Vincent's spiritual journey: ambition was receding, and attention to God and vocation were advancing.

Accused of theft by his roommate, Vincent did not defend himself, showing himself to be more like the Lord and less interested in self-advancement and public image — the real thief confessed years later. In 1612, he was named pastor of Saint-Medard in Clichy, a poor rural parish just northwest of Paris. As pastor, he experienced the priesthood in a way unknown to him to that point, and told the bishop he was happier than the bishop himself, and even the pope.

However, in less than a year Bérulle recalled him to Paris to become chaplain to the Gondi family and tutor to their children. In January of 1617, Vincent was on the Gondi estates in Picardy, and heard the confession of a dying man, who told Madame de Gondi that he would have been damned without Vincent's ministry. She urged Vincent to preach a sermon on general confessions, which produced such a response that other priests were called to help hear all the confessions.

Now, very conscious that the poor were not being evangelized or helped, Vincent felt called to a more pastoral ministry. With Bérulle's help, he became the parish priest in Châtillon-les-Dombes in the southeast of France, helping his fellow priests to a more faithful way of life, as well as ministering to and teaching the people. In August 1617, as he was preparing for Sunday Mass, a parishioner brought news of the illness and destitution of an entire family in the parish. He preached on their need, and that afternoon the people responded in overwhelming numbers by carrying them food and supplies. Vincent then called a meeting of interested women, and urged them to put order into their generosity by taking turns. With rules drawn up by Vincent, they established a group which became the first Confraternity of Charity.

By December, 1617, Madame de Gondi prevailed in her request that Vincent return to their family by giving him freedom to preach missions in various towns and villages. In 1619, at the urging of Monsieur de Gondi, King Louis XIII, appointed Vincent chaplain general of the galleys with responsibility for the spiritual well-being of all the galley convicts of France.

During this period Vincent experienced a twofold conversion. First, he was being converted to the poor, who were becoming the center of his life. Second, he was also being converted to his priesthood, seeing it not as a career, but as a personal relationship with Jesus. However, his "conversion" does not seem to rest on one dramatic moment, but rather on a gradual opening to the power of God's grace working in him, and allowing him to see his world more clearly in the light of Christ.

Toward the end of 1618, the bishop of Geneva, Francis de Sales, arrived in Paris, and inspired Vincent with the power of humility and gentleness. Vincent reflected: "How good you must be, my God, if Francis de Sales, your creature, is so gentle and lovable." Vincent's disposition was naturally moody and melancholy, but he now decided that he could not simply say he was made that way and could not change. He went to Soissons to make a retreat, asking God to help him change. His prayer was answered, not immediately, but gradually as he came to understand the direction his priesthood should go and the beauty of serving others.

Vincent continued giving local missions to the people. Madame de Gondi, seeing the effect of these missions, set aside money for a community to preach such missions on a wider scale, and asked Vincent to find a community able and willing to do so. Vincent asked the Jesuits and several other communities, but none were able to accept this additional apostolate. Vincent went to his old mentor, Father Duval, to share his concern and ask for advice. Duval told him that God was clearly calling Vincent himself to do the work of the missions. Vincent accepted the call, and in April, 1625, founded the Congregation of the Mission to evangelize the poor people of the countryside.

The Archbishop of Paris approved the Congregation, giving them the Collège des Bons Enfants for a motherhouse. Members were secular priests who made simple vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and stability. In 1628, the Congregation gave its first retreat to candidates for the priesthood in preparation for their ordination. This gradually led to additional efforts to help priests in their vocation. In 1633, the motherhouse moved to the former priory of Saint-Lazare, north of the city. Beginning in 1635, additional houses were established, in France, in other European countries, and in Africa.

Vincent also served as spiritual director for a growing number of people, one of whom was a widow, Louise de Marillac, in whom Vincent saw leadership potential. The Ladies of Charity, a coalition of noblewomen Vincent had organized to serve poor people, had grown and spread, as had the Confraternities of Charity. Vincent found it impossible to oversee all these groups, so he turned to Louise. Despite frail health, Louise traveled from town to town, visiting, guiding and encouraging the fledgling organizations.

Vincent assumed direction of the Hôtel-Dieu, a large hospital in Paris. Both Vincent and Louise realized that greater commitment would be needed to give the necessary care with consistency and love. Young women from rural areas began to appear, ready to assist. In 1633, Louise welcomed several of them into her own home for training, and they became the nucleus of a new type of religious community, the Daughters of Charity. They lived in houses, not convents; their cloister was the city streets; their enclosure was their commitment to God and service. They gave their lives to visiting the sick in the homes, ministering in hospitals, caring for prisoners, orphans, the mentally ill, and the homeless of Paris. They also taught catechism to rural children.

In 1639, Lorraine was devastated by war. Vincent collected money and other forms of aid, sending members of his Congregation to distribute the aid and organize relief, and sending Daughters of Charity to minister to victims and refugees. This ministry continued during the 30 years war, and a brutal civil war called the Fronde.

In June of 1643, Vincent began serving on the Queen's Council of Ecclesiastical Affairs. There he exercised significant influence on the selection of good and worthy bishops, oversaw the renewal of monastic life, dealt with Jansenism, and was able to keep the plight of the people and the poor before the government of France.

Vincent continued his work until his death on September 27, 1660. A witness tells us, "At the moment of his death, he surrendered his beautiful soul into the hands of the Lord, and seated there, he was handsome, more majestic and venerable to look at than ever."

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SAINT BERNARD of CORLEONE

Bernard was born on 6th February, 1605 in the Sicilian town of Corleone. Corleone was a ferocious town that had succumbed to Spanish rule but not without a fierce fight. Bernard had been well instructed in the Christian faith and practice by his devout parents. But being strong and bold, like his town, he became a soldier and he joined the army fighting the many wars at that time. While in the army he developed a fiery temper and was quick to challenge men to a duel. His life was not noted for its moral content and he had quite a reputation in the company.

One day in a duel his opponent fell. Bernard fled thinking that he had killed him. The Capuchins gave the fugitive soldier hospitality. Here he had a chance to think over his past life. God rewarded his prayer by letting him have a real sorrow for his past life and a desire to do penance. The brotherhood in the Capuchins attracted him and he was received as a novice. True to his ideal, Bernard put aside his former life and moved by the Holy Spirit set about the Novitiate to make himself as meek as a lamb among his brothers. God showed him the value of penance.

To reform himself the brother began by taking only a little water and food. He drank only water that was bitter or hot and his scant rest was taken on a board. His habit and cell were the poorest in the house. He worked long hours and the sick were his special care. He kept regular fasts and it is said that it is doubtful if he ever ate a full meal in his 37 years that he was in religious life. He frequently ate only bread and water. Never would he wear a new habit or allow new furnishings in his cell. As a consequence he suffered greatly from rheumatism.

In time Bernard became gentle and sweet with all at home and out. He had the highest regard for his brothers and his superiors, he only spoke to them on bended knee. Prayer and fasting were his consolation and the Lord rewarded him abundantly. This holy brother became the pride and joy of all the friars. His virtue was a lesson to all. Poverty, simplicity, chastity, silence and love of recollection are lessons that Bernard gives us together with the value of penance. Bernard was beatified in 1768 and his feast is celebrated on January 19th.



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JOAN OF ARC

Joan of Arc (French, Jeanne d'Arc), b. c.1412, was a French peasant girl who led the French army against the English during the HUNDRED YEARS' WAR. Called the Maid of Orleans, she is a French national heroine and patron saint.

When Joan was about 13 years old she began to hear "voices" (which she later identified as those of Saint Catherine, Saint Margaret, and Saint Michael) that gave her the mission of liberating France from English domination.

She kept the messages secret for about 5 years, and only in 1429 did she leave her home in Domremy, Champagne, and travel with an escort to the court of the dauphin, later King CHARLES VII, who had been deprived of his rights as heir to the French throne by the Treaty of Troyes of 1420. At that time the English were besieging Orleans.

After a group of theologians tested her, Charles was persuaded to reassemble his troops and place them under Joan's command in an expedition to relieve the city. In 8 days during May 1429, she lifted the siege that had lain on Orleans for 8 months. In June 1429, Joan and her troops were able to break through to Reims, where she persuaded Charles to hold his coronation. The relief of Orleans and the crowning of the dauphin revived French hopes.

Against Joan's advice, a period of military inactivity followed, but in the spring of 1430, Joan resumed her campaigns. In May, while attempting to relieve Compiègne, she was captured by the Burgundians, who sold her to the English. The latter, who wanted her executed but were reluctant to accept the responsibility for such an action, turned her over to a church court in Rouen. There she was tried on charges of heresy and witchcraft, and the judges declared her visions diabolical.

After months of interrogation, Joan was tricked into admission of guilt. She soon retracted her confession, however, and was condemned as a relapsed heretic. On May 30, 1431, she was burned at the stake in Rouen. When French fortunes were finally restored, Joan was rehabilitated in a formal trial (1456) called for by Charles VII, who had done nothing to save her while she was alive.

Joan of Arc has been the subject of much art and literature. There are monuments to her memory in many French cities and towns. In Rouen, a statue stands on the spot in the marketplace where she was executed. She was canonized in 1920. Feast day: May 30.

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SAINT CHRISTOPHER -- PATRON SAINT OF TRAVELLERS

From the great mass of legendary material, often confused and contradictory, which is associated with the name of St. Christopher, there emerges one clear conception. It is that of a man who is strong, simple, kind, and completely dedicated to one thing: serving the Lord by serving his fellow men. Christopher, according to the ancient and very popular tradition, lived in the mountains of Lucania

This miracle brought about the conversion of many in those parts, but it aroused the wrath of the pagan king, who had Christopher imprisoned, tortured, and beheaded. In the Golden Legend are to be found other stories of the saint which were current in medieval times. Christopher is loved and honoured in the churches both of the East and the West. In addition to being the patron and protector of all travellers, he is also invoked against storms and sudden death. In art Christopher is usually shown with his emblems, the Christ Child, a tree in bloom, a torrent; the great artists Durer and Pollaiuolo are among those who have portrayed him in the act for which he is best known.

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SAINT PIUS X -- The First Pope to be Canonised in Modern Times

Giuseppe Melchore Sarto was born of humble parents on June 2, 1835, in the small village of Riese near Venice. His father, a village official, and his mother raised Giuseppe in a loving Christian home. It was this home situation which prompted Giuseppe, after his college days in Castelfranco, to enter the seminary in Padua. Giuseppe Sarto was ordained at the age of 23 on September 18, 1858.

His first assignment was as curate in the city of Trombolo. After nine years he was

Sacred Music dedicated to keeping alive the valuable treasures of Catholic liturgical music.

Pius was also instrumental in urging sound philosophical and Biblical scholarship warning against the errors of certain philosophical systems of the day and promoting the venerable tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas and Scholasticism. This devotion led him to found the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome which, to this day, is an important source of scholarship.

Pius was to witness the terrible beginnings of World War I. His sorrow over the international conflict added to his ill health, and sheer exhaustion led to his death on August 20, 1914, at the age of 79. He was canonized St. Pius X on May 31, 1954. The universal Church celebrates his holy life and example on August 21. He was the first pope in modern times to be canonized.

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SAINT VALENTINE -- Executed (beheaded) on February 14 for Performing Marriages

Valentine was a holy priest in Rome, who, with St. Marius and his family, assisted the martyrs in the persecution under Claudius II. He was apprehended, and sent by the emperor to the prefect of Rome, who, on finding all his promises to make him renounce his faith in effectual, commended him to be beaten with clubs, and afterwards, to be beheaded, which was executed on February 14.

About the year 270. Pope Julius I is said to have built a church near Ponte Mole to his memory, which for a long time gave name to the gate now called Porta del Popolo, formerly, Porta Valetini.

The greatest part of his relics are now in the church of St. Praxedes. His name is celebrated as that of an illustrious martyr in the sacramentary of St. Gregory, the Roman Missal of Thomasius, in the calendar of F. Fronto and that of Allatius, in Bede, Usuard, Ado, Notker and all other martyrologies on this day. To abolish the heathens' lewd superstitious custom of boys drawing the names of girls, in honour of their goddess Februata Juno, on the fifteenth of this month, several zealous pastors substituted the names of saints in billets given on this day.

The 14th was also a designated a feast day (until 1969, when it was dropped from the Roman Catholic calendar) to honor two Christian saints (at least one named Saint Valentine) martyred by the Roman Emperor Claudius II Gothicus. There is a little bit of love stuff in this part, though -- the reason Saint Valentine was killed (beheaded, actually) was that he continued to marry young couples even though Claudius forbade it. Apparently Claudius thought that married soldiers weren't as good as single soldiers.
