

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Nicholas of Myra

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 6

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IN BRIEF

Saint Nicholas of Myra

4th-century bishop of Myra in Lycia, famous for his secret charity, patron saint of children and sailors.

Feast day	December 6
Born	c. 270 (according to tradition), Patara, Lycia (present-day Turkey)
Died	December 6, c. 343 (according to tradition), Myra, Lycia (present-day Demre, Turkey)
Canonized	pre-congregation (venerated since the early Church)
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	children, schoolchildren, sailors, boatmen, prisoners, unmarried women, merchants, pawnbrokers, Russia, Greece, Bari

In this booklet

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Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Bari, Tomb of the Saint

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Nicholas of Myra

Saint Nicholas was a bishop of Myra, in Lycia (in present-day Turkey), in the 4th century. Very little is known about his life for certain, but his reputation for kindness and generosity has crossed centuries and continents. He is one of the most loved saints in the world, in the Catholic West as well as in the Orthodox East. Patron saint of children, sailors and many cities, he is celebrated on December 6, and the figure of Santa Claus descends from him by a long and winding road.

Who was Saint Nicholas?

According to tradition, Nicholas was born in Patara, a port of Lycia on the southern coast of Asia Minor, toward the end of the 3rd century. He became bishop of the nearby city of Myra and died on a December 6, around the middle of the 4th century. The oldest accounts of his life were written several centuries after his death. They mix memories, legends, and confusion with another Nicholas, abbot of Sion in Lycia in the 6th century.

Historians therefore hold on to one solid fact: by the 6th century, a bishop of Myra named Nicholas was venerated throughout the Christian East, and Emperor Justinian built a church in his honor in Constantinople. The rest belongs to tradition, but a tradition so rich that it shaped popular piety across all of Europe and, later, the whole world.

Key dates

- **c. 270**: Born in Patara, Lycia, according to tradition.
- **Early 4th century**: Becomes bishop of Myra.
- **325**: According to a later tradition, he takes part in the Council of Nicaea; his name does not appear in the oldest lists of bishops present.

- **December 6, c. 343**: Dies in Myra, according to tradition.
- **6th century**: His cult is firmly established; Justinian dedicates a church to him in Constantinople.
- **1087**: Sailors from Bari carry his relics from Myra to Italy, arriving on May 9.
- **1089**: Pope Urban II consecrates the crypt of the Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Bari.

The three daughters without a dowry

The oldest and best known story of Nicholas is that of the three daughters. According to tradition, a ruined man in his town could no longer provide dowries for his three daughters and was considering handing them over to prostitution. Nicholas, who had inherited wealth from his family, heard of it. At night, he threw a purse full of gold through the window, then a second, then a third. The father finally caught him in the act and wanted to thank him, but Nicholas asked him to keep the secret.

This story sums up the whole figure of Nicholas: a concrete, discreet charity that does not seek to be seen. It is the origin of the three golden balls, or three purses, that Saint Nicholas holds in icons and paintings.

Defender of the innocent

Another ancient account, known as the "story of the generals," tells how Nicholas obtained the release of three officers unjustly sentenced to death by Emperor Constantine, by appearing to the emperor in a dream. A related story shows him stopping the arm of the executioner who was about to behead three innocent men in Myra. These stories made him the protector of the falsely accused and of prisoners.

Tradition also says that he calmed a storm to save sailors in distress and that he obtained grain for his city during a famine. Seafarers all around the Mediterranean took him as their patron, and many harbors and sailors' churches bear his name.

The legend of the three children

In France, Belgium and the Rhineland, the most famous story is that of the three little children. According to a medieval Western legend, three lost children asked a butcher for shelter; he killed them and put them in a salting tub. Saint Nicholas, passing by, discovered the crime and brought the children back to life. This legend is absent from the Greek sources. It may have grown from a misunderstood image: the three officers or the three daughters, painted small to show that they were under his protection, would have been taken for children. It made Nicholas the patron saint of children and schoolboys, and gave rise to the custom of gifts on December 6.

The relics move to Bari

For centuries, the tomb of Nicholas in Myra drew pilgrims. In the 11th century, the region fell to the Seljuk Turks. In 1087, sailors from Bari, in southern Italy, landed at Myra, opened the tomb and carried the saint's bones back to their city, where they arrived on May 9. A great Romanesque basilica was built to receive them.

Since then, Bari has been the world center of devotion to Saint Nicholas and a meeting place between Catholics and Orthodox. Every year a clear liquid collected from the tomb, called the "manna" of Saint Nicholas, is given to the faithful. May 9, the feast of the translation of his relics, is widely celebrated in Bari and in the Eastern Churches.

From Saint Nicholas to Santa Claus

In the Netherlands, the feast of Sinterklaas on December 6 remained very much alive after the Reformation. Dutch settlers brought it to New Amsterdam, later New York, and in the 19th century the figure gradually became Santa Claus, the jolly gift-bringer of Christmas Eve. Santa Claus is therefore a distant descendant of the bishop of Myra. In the Netherlands, Belgium, eastern France, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, Saint Nicholas still wears his miter, carries his crozier and visits children on December 6. Many Catholic families in the United States and elsewhere have revived the custom of leaving shoes out on the evening of December 5.



Scenes from the life of Saint Nicholas, by Fra Angelico (predella of the Perugia altarpiece, c. 1437).

Why is Saint Nicholas the patron saint of children?

The stories of his secret generosity and the legend of the three children restored to life made him, from the Middle Ages, the patron saint of children and schoolchildren. He is also the patron of sailors and boatmen, prisoners, unmarried young women, merchants and pawnbrokers (whose three golden

balls recall his three purses). Several countries and regions claim him too: Russia, Greece and Lorraine in France, as well as the cities of Bari and Amsterdam.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Nicholas in art

Saint Nicholas is shown as a bishop: with a miter and crozier in Western art, or with the omophorion, a long stole embroidered with crosses, in Eastern icons, where he usually has a short white beard and a high forehead. His attributes are three golden balls or three purses, a book, an anchor or a ship, and, in Western art, a tub with three children standing in it.

Where to pray to Saint Nicholas

The great shrine is the Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Bari, Italy, where his body rests in the crypt. In France, the Basilica of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port, near Nancy, keeps a relic brought from Bari and holds a large candlelight procession every year in early December. In Demre, Turkey, the old Church of Saint Nicholas of Myra, where his tomb stood before 1087, can still be visited. Countless parishes in the English-speaking world are dedicated to him, often in port towns.

Praying to Saint Nicholas

Catholics pray to Saint Nicholas for children, for families in need, for sailors and travelers, and to learn to give without being seen. Read the prayer to Saint Nicholas and pray the novena to Saint Nicholas, beginning on November 27.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Nicholas for Children and Families

Many prayers to Saint Nicholas are in use, especially in the Eastern Churches, where he is remembered in the liturgy every Thursday. None of them comes from the bishop of Myra himself. The prayer below is an original text by Saintspedia, inspired by the traditional stories of his life: his secret generosity to the three daughters, his defense of the innocent, and his protection of sailors and children.

Prayer to Saint Nicholas

Saint Nicholas, bishop of Myra,
you who gave your gold in secret, at night,
to save three young women from poverty and shame,
teach me to give without being seen.

You who stood up for the innocent condemned to death,
watch over those who are falsely accused,
over prisoners, and over all who have no one to defend them.

You whom sailors call upon in the storm,
protect those who travel and those who work at sea,
and calm the storms within our hearts.

You whom children await each year,
keep them in joy and in innocence,
protect those who suffer, who are hungry or alone,
and give parents generous hearts.

Saint Nicholas, friend of the poor and the little ones, pray for us. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal, family and parish prayer.

A short prayer for a child

Saint Nicholas, protector of children, I entrust (name) to you. Keep him (her) from all harm, help him (her) grow in trust and goodness, and teach him (her) to share what he (she) receives. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

When to pray this prayer

You can pray to Saint Nicholas at any time, and especially on December 6, his feast day, and on May 9, the feast of the translation of his relics to Bari. Many families pray to him with their children at the beginning of Advent, telling them the story of the three bags of gold to teach them the joy of giving, before leaving shoes or stockings out on the evening of December 5. It is also a good prayer for anyone traveling by sea, for a child going through a hard time, or for a family facing money worries.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Nicholas, from November 27 to December 5, and read the life of Saint Nicholas.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Nicholas

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the traditional stories of the life of Saint Nicholas, bishop of Myra. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on November 27; it ends on December 5, the day before the feast of December 6. It is a beautiful way for a family to enter Advent together. You can also pray it at any time of the year, especially for children or for a family in need.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life, and most of them can be done with children. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off. A novena is not a formula that obliges God to answer; it is nine days of perseverance in the company of a saint who loved quietly and generously.

Opening prayer for each day

Lord God, source of every good gift, you gave Saint Nicholas a generous heart and hands quick to help the poor, the innocent and the little ones. As I begin this day of my novena, I place before you my intention (name it in silence). Teach me, like Saint Nicholas, to see the needs around me and to give without counting the cost or seeking thanks. Saint Nicholas, friend of children and protector of all in danger, pray for me and for those I love. Amen.

Day 1: A servant of God

We know very little for certain about Nicholas, except that he was bishop of Myra and that Christian people never forgot him. Holiness is not measured by what history remembers about us, but by the love we leave behind.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust my intention to you for these nine days. Make my life, even if hidden, a place where your goodness can be seen.

Today: Write down your intention and place it near an image of Saint Nicholas or a crucifix.

Day 2: Giving in secret

According to tradition, Nicholas threw three purses of gold by night into the house of a ruined father, then asked that his gift be kept secret. Jesus says: "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matthew 6:3).

Prayer: Lord, purify my intentions. Teach me to give without waiting for thanks.

Today: Make a gift or do a favor without telling anyone.

Day 3: Seeing the distress of others

Nicholas saw what others did not see: the silent shame of a poor family. Before we can give, we must learn to look.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to the needs of those around me, especially those who do not dare to ask for anything.

Today: Call or visit someone who is going through a difficult time.

Day 4: Defending the innocent

Tradition tells that Nicholas stopped the arm of an executioner about to put three innocent men to death. A Christian cannot remain indifferent to injustice.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, protect those who are falsely accused, prisoners, and all who have no one to defend them.

Today: Speak up for someone who is criticized when they are not there.

Day 5: In the storm

Sailors on the Mediterranean called upon Nicholas in the middle of storms. Our lives too have contrary winds, times when we feel we are about to go under.

Prayer: Lord, you who command the wind and the sea, calm the storms in my life and in the lives of those I love.

Today: Pray for sailors, fishermen, and migrants crossing the sea.

Day 6: Bread for the hungry

According to tradition, Nicholas obtained grain for his city during a famine. A good shepherd does not only speak; he cares about the bread of his people.

Prayer: Lord, give each person their daily bread, and make me someone who shares.

Today: Give to a food bank or a charity that feeds the poor.

Day 7: Protector of children

For centuries, children have waited for Saint Nicholas. Jesus said: "Let the children come to me" (Mark 10:14). To protect childhood is to protect what is most precious to God.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, watch over children, especially those who are sick, abandoned, abused, or caught up in war.

Today: Tell a child the story of Saint Nicholas, or pray for a child in difficulty.

Day 8: A faithful shepherd

As bishop of Myra, Nicholas kept the faith of his people in a time of persecution, then of great debates about the divinity of Christ. He reminds us that charity and faith belong together.

Prayer: Lord, keep your Church in the true faith, and give her shepherds after your own heart.

Today: Pray for the bishop of your diocese and for the priests of your parish.

Day 9: The joy of giving

On December 6, Saint Nicholas brings gifts to children. Behind this custom lies a truth of the Gospel: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, friend of the poor and the little ones, present to God the intention I have entrusted to you. Obtain for me a generous and joyful heart.

Today: Prepare a small surprise for someone, in secret, for December 6.

Closing prayer

Lord our God, you gave your servant Nicholas a heart open to the poor, the innocent and the little ones. Through his prayers, grant what I ask of you in these nine days, if it is your will, and make me, like him, a quiet witness of your generosity. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Read also the prayer to Saint Nicholas and the life of Saint Nicholas.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Bari, Tomb of the Saint

The Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Bari, in Apulia in southern Italy, has housed the relics of Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, since 1087. It is one of the great shrines of Christendom and a unique meeting place for Catholics and Orthodox: Russian, Greek, Serbian and Ukrainian pilgrims come here in great numbers to pray at the tomb of one of the most beloved saints of the East.



The Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Bari, in Apulia.

Relics from Myra

Saint Nicholas died in Myra, in Lycia, in the 4th century, and his tomb drew pilgrims there for centuries. In the 11th century, the region came under the rule of the Seljuk Turks. In 1087, an expedition of sailors from Bari landed at Myra, opened the tomb and brought the saint's bones back to Italy. They reached Bari on May 9, 1087, a date still celebrated every year.

The people of Bari immediately decided to build a church worthy of the saint. In 1089, Pope Urban II consecrated the crypt and placed the relics there. The basilica, completed the following century, is one of the models of Apulian Romanesque art.

What to see in the basilica

- **The crypt**, supported by a forest of columns, where the tomb of Saint Nicholas lies beneath the altar. A chapel there is reserved for Orthodox liturgy.
- **The Romanesque facade**, plain and powerful, with its portal decorated with sculpture.
- **The throne of Abbot Elias**, a bishop's seat of carved marble from the late 11th century.
- **The ciborium** of carved stone that crowns the high altar.
- **The basilica museum**, which preserves goldsmith's work and gifts offered to the saint over the centuries.

The manna of Saint Nicholas

Since the Middle Ages, a clear liquid has formed in the saint's tomb. It is called the "manna" of Saint Nicholas. Each year it is collected in a ceremony, then diluted and distributed to the faithful in small vials. Pilgrims receive it as a sign of the saint's blessing and keep it carefully.

Tips for the pilgrimage

The basilica is in the old town of Bari, Bari Vecchia, a few minutes' walk from the port. Entry is free. Modest dress is required. The major festivities take place from May 7 to 9, with a procession at sea recalling the arrival of the relics, and on December 6. During these days the city is very lively, so it is best to book lodging in advance.

Other places connected with Saint Nicholas

At Demre, ancient Myra, in Turkey, you can visit the Byzantine Church of Saint Nicholas, where his tomb was located before 1087. In France, the Basilica of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port, in Lorraine, a great late-medieval Gothic building, keeps a relic of the saint and hosts a torchlight procession each year in early December. Venice also claims relics, kept at the Church of San Nicolò on the Lido.

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