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WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING OUT (No. 2 in a Series: St. Nicholas)

If you were asked to state your idea of what a Saint is, what would you say? Perhaps the image most often evoked is that of a poor, deluded person, a mere dreamer, a pale solitary figure, a hermit, or a person who finding the world to be too much, lived in seclusion.

Thus, all too often Saints are pictured as impractical idealists who are not able to get along in the everyday world.

But such is not the case. If we look carefully at the large number of persons who over the years have been classified as saints, we find that contrary to popular opinion, the main characteristics of saints are a high level of efficiency in what they did, and a larger amount than usual of serenity, good human relationships, zest, peace, fun and joy.

More than that the Saints have been the saviors among us. In times of crisis, we need saints, and the Christian faith has often provided them. W1nerever and whenever an · evil has existed, from slave-trading to the miseries of famine and war, Saints have sprung up to mitigate those evils. They may well be rising among us now.

But how does one recognize a Saint? Often, they are unrecognized while alive. Sometimes they even appear to us to be enemies of the establishment and they may be. And of course, there are saintly people who are never officially recognized as being Saints.

In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church set up an elaborate system for designating a person a saint. A dossier is built, and a “devil’s advocate” appointed to pick flaws in the case at issue. A few years ago, a bestselling novel by Morris West was entitled the “Devil’s Advocate,” and the story was about a person who had been assigned that role and his job was to dig up all the bad things he could find about the person who was being recommended to be a saint. It made a fascinating story.

Even before the investigation of a person who was to be called a Saint was institutionalized, sometimes the methods used to discover things about possible candidates were devious.

In one case the subject under investigation was Francis de Sales and his arrogantly curious observer was Jean Pierre Camus, a Bishop. What he did was to drill a hole in the wall of his bedroom so that he could spy on Francis in the adjoining bedroom when Francis thought he was alone. The bishop wanted to see if Francis was as saintly in private as he was in public.

He discovered that Francis got out of bed early and quietly so as not to wake anyone else. Then he prayed, wrote, answered his letters. The beautiful manners, the unruffled compassion, the courtesy, and humility which were on display through the peephole were the same as they were in public. There was no secret man. As we know this is not so with many of us or with many of our leaders as some of the Watergate tapes show.

And that’s part of what it means to be a saint — to be the same good person in secret as well as in public. The Saints do not mind whether or not their good works are appreciated. Most of us like to receive thanks for our efforts. Saints squander their love on the undeserving and the ungrateful. They ask nothing, not even appreciation in return.

Because saintly people so often do their good works in secret without seeking recognition, many have gone unrecognized. Thus, in the 7th century the church set apart a day of All Saints, on which to remember the unremembered, a day in honor equally of the known and unknown saints.

Also, because saintly people have so often done much of their best work in secret, legends have grown up about them following their death. And legends only come into existence when the real facts are not available, however good legends do not grow up around bad people. So even though all legends may not be exactly true in fact, they do testify to a person's abundant goodness.

Such is the case with St. Nicholas! It has been said that if we could collect all the stories and legends which have grown up around St. Nicholas and gather in one place all his effigies and pictures, we should have the material for a complete history of the arts, manners, morals and 3. customs of common people for a thousand years. In years past, everyone knew St. Nicholas. He was every lost person's friend, and every orphan's father. Boys and girls, destitute maidens, travelers, merchants, and seamen, all claimed him as their particular friend. All self-respecting towns and seaports took care to place him among their pat-ron saints and honored him accordingly. He was invoked to settle all descriptions of problems, from infant welfare to shipwreck, from marriage to insurance. No bargain of buying or selling could be settled without consulting him.

There are few towns and cities in Europe that can be found without a church or at least a shrine dedicated to him. In England, nearly 500 churches are dedicated to him, and he stands 7th in order of popularity, higher even than St. Paul and many of the Apostles. •

Although St. Nicholas is well known, he is at the same time very much unknown. We have very few facts about his life, although legends abound. He was born about 290 A.D. and as an adult became Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor.

It is believed that his parents were Christian people who were childless for many years. Thus, from infancy the long prayed for Nicholas was dedicated to God. Tradition also holds that his parents died when he was but a child and at their death, he inherited a considerable fortune.

While a Bishop, he was cast into exile during the persecution of Christians. He wanted to die as a martyr, but when Emperor Diocletian left his throne and the First Christian Emperor, Constantine ruled the Roman lands, all Christians who had suffered in prison because of their faith, were released. Among them was St. Nicholas, who was able to return to Myra, where he lived for many years. It is believed he died about 350 A.D.

As early as 450 A.D. churches were being built in his honor and by the year 1200, this much-loved saint had captured the hearts and imaginations of all European nations. He is the patron saint of Greece, Russia, Sicily, and Lorraine, of many cities in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Holland, and Italy. Merchants, bakers; and mariners among others, have made him their patron. His emblem is three golden balls, representing three bags of gold and he is also the patron saint of pawnbrokers, the sign over their shops being derived from this emblem

Here are some of the stories which are part of the tradition of St. Nicholas.

After Nicholas had grown to young manhood, he decided to devote his life entirely to the service of God, doing good works for people everywhere. Obeying the words of Christ, he

distributed all of his possessions to the poor, the sick and the suffering. He is said to have secretly helped very poor people by putting gifts of money through their windows during the night, when no one could see him.

Because of this, children throughout Europe, have for years put notes in the windows of their homes addressed to the Dear little Christ Child, believing that St. Nicholas would take these notes and see to it that they were properly delivered.

St. Nicholas also used his money to rescue others from sin and bondage. And here is where the story of the three bags of gold had its beginning and thereafter became his emblem. Nicholas became aware of three young girls who were being held against their will in order to be made prostitutes. They had no money and no means of escape. St. Nicholas watched the house where the girls were imprisoned. Three times he succeeded in throwing a little bag of gold coins through the open window into their room. With the aid of the money the girls were able to escape.

His love for Christ inspired him to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and offer prayers in those historical and holy places. On this trip a terrible storm arose, but by his prayers, he miraculously saved the already sinking ship as it tossed and turned in the rough seas. That is the reason he is now venerated as a patron of mariners in many parts of the world.

At the time he was Bishop, one story goes, there was a great famine in the land. One day, a poor widow sent her three little boys out for something to eat, lest they all die of hunger. The children ran to the baker's and pleaded with him for a piece of bread, but he had none. They went to the marketplace, but it was empty, and some hungry rats scared the children. In their fear they knocked at the door of a tavern and asked to be let in. "I have nothing to eat," said the innkeeper, who still looked well fed somehow. "But come in anyway. It's getting dark, you can sleep here. The poor widow waited in vain for her little ones. When a week, had passed and the children could not be found, she went to the church. in despair, to tell God of her sorrow. Later that day, a man wrapped in a dark cloak entered the tavern. As the innkeeper came for-ward to greet the guest, he shrugged and pleaded the famine as an excuse for not being able to give him more than a bed. But the guest shook his head." Give me some of the pickled meat in your jars, "he said.

The innkeeper turned pale. He tried to escape, but the man grabbed him and led him to the hidden cupboard where three large jars of pickled meat stood in a row. Trembling all over, the innkeeper fell on his knees. The stranger dropped his cloak. He was St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra. He made the sign of the cross and spoke in a clear ringing voice, "Suffer the little children to come up to me," said the Son of God. He raised his fingers and touched the jars, and the boys came out of them, alive and well.

These are but a few of the stories told about St. Nicholas.

In early times, Christians believed that on December 6, St. Nicholas revisited the earth, and, on that day, people began to prepare for the Christmas festival.

After the Reformation in the 16th century, the feast of St. Nicholas faded in many countries. However, when the Dutch came to America and established the colony of New Amsterdam, their children kept the tradition of the visit of St. Nicholas on December 5.

Later when England took over the colony and it became New York, the kindly figure of St. Nicholas, pronounced by the Dutch as Sinterklaas, soon aroused among the English children the desire of having such a heavenly visitor come to their homes too.

However, to many of the English Protestants, the idea of having a Roman Catholic Saint and Bishop be their symbol was not acceptable. The dilemma was solved by transferring the visit of the mysterious person whom the Dutch called Santa Claus, from December 5 to December 25, and the figure was changed from a Saint and a Bishop to a jolly stout man with a long white beard. Behind this description also stands the figure of a pagan Germanic god named Thor.

However, the idea of St. Nicholas, a patron Saint and protector and lover of children and of all people, continued on in the figure of Santa Claus and to this day Santa is sometimes called “old St. Nick.”

The important thing is that the life and legend of St. Nicholas reminds us that the God we worship and who is often best represented by Saintly persons like St. Nicholas, is a God who offers special help to those in need, in trouble, or who hurt in any way. Almost all the legends about St. Nicholas are those which tell of his being of help to people with unique and difficult problems.

Also, the lives of the Saints and particularly those like Nicholas speak to us of the joy and fun of being a Christian. The religion of Jesus is a life affirming faith. It is a religion filled with a love which shakes the poison out of all of our lives and leads to the abundant life. The Saints are people who go singing through the world, even in the darkest times, cheered by an abiding vision of the unseen which tells them there’s much more to life than we ordinarily see.

Look around you. There are Saints at work in the world even now. They are often unrecognized. They like to do their good works in secret. And when you do good works in secret, you too are a Saint like Nicholas.