

MORAVIAN MOMENT #96

Who was Saint Nicholas or Santa Claus?

Saint Nicholas, the 4th century saint who inspired our modern figure of Santa Claus, was born near Myra, a port on the Mediterranean Sea serving the busy sea lanes that linked the seaports of Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Ships sailing these waters, laden with grain and all kinds of goods, found safety in the port from raging storms and menacing pirates.

Nicholas came from one of the city's wealthy merchant families. One day, by chance, Nicholas heard about a rich man in Myra who lost all his money when his business failed. The man had three lovely daughters, all wishing to get married, but he had no money for their marriage. Besides, who would marry them, he thought, since their father is such a failure? With nothing to eat, the man in desperation decided to sell one of his daughters into slavery. At least then the rest of them might survive. That night before the first daughter was to be sold, Nicholas, with a small bag of gold in his hand, softly approached their house, and, tossing the gold through an open window, quickly vanished into the darkness. The next morning, the father found a bag of gold lying on the floor next to his bed. He had no idea where it came from. The poor man fell to his knees and great tears came to his eyes. He thanked God for this beautiful gift. His spirits rose higher than they had been for a long time because someone had been so unexpectedly good to him. He arranged for his first daughter's wedding and there was enough money left for the rest of them to live for almost a year. Often he wondered: who gave them the gold? By the end of the year, the family again had nothing, and the father, again desperate and seeing no other way open, decided his second daughter must be sold. But Nicholas, hearing about it, came by night to their window and tossed in another bag of gold as before. The next morning the father rejoiced, and, thanking God begged His pardon for losing hope. Who, though, was the mysterious stranger giving them such a gift?

Each night afterwards the father watched by the window. As the year passed their money ran out. In the dead of one night he heard quiet steps approaching his house and suddenly a bag of gold fell onto the floor. The father quickly ran out to catch the one who threw it there. He caught up with Nicholas some distance away and recognized him, for the young man came from a well-known family in the city. "Why did you give us the gold?" the father asked. "Because you needed it," Nicholas answered. "But why didn't you let us know who you were?" the man asked again. "Because it's good to give and have only God know about it."

When the bishop of Myra died, the priests and leading people of the city along with the neighboring bishops came together in their cathedral to select a new bishop. They prayed and asked God to point out who it would be. In a dream, God said to one of them that they should all pray together the next morning. Someone would come through the cathedral door as they prayed. He should be their choice.

It was Nicholas who entered the cathedral the next morning. Immediately, the people of the city named him their bishop, for they knew that this unassuming person, whose good deeds they had learned about, was meant by God to lead them. He was especially interested, that families had enough to eat and a good place to live, that children got ahead in life, and that old people lived out their lives with dignity and respect. Every Moravian should be a type of St. Nicholas.

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