

MEDIEVAL POPULAR RELIGION,  
1000-1500

A READER

SECOND EDITION

edited by

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## 2. Saint Nicholas

The name Nicholas comes from *nikos*, which means victory, and *laos*, people; so Nicholas may be interpreted as meaning victory over a people, that is, either victory over vices, which are many and mean, or as victory in the full sense, because Nicholas, by his way of life and his doctrine, taught the peoples to conquer sin and vice. Or the name is formed from *nikos*, victory, and *laos*, praise – so, victorious praise – or from *nikos*, shining whiteness, and *laos*, people, as meaning the bright cleanness of the people. Nicholas had in him that which makes for shining cleanness, since, according to Ambrose, “the word of God makes clean, as do true confession, holy thoughts, and good works.”

The life of Saint Nicholas was written by learned men of Argos, called Argolics, Argos being, according to Isidore [of Seville], a town in Greece, so the Greeks are also called Argolics. Elsewhere we read that his legend was written in Greek by the patriarch Methodius and translated into Latin by John the Deacon, who added much to it.

Nicholas, a citizen of Patara, was born of rich and pious parents. His father was named Epiphaneas, his mother, Johanna. When, in the flower of their youth, they had brought him into the world, they adopted the celibate life thenceforth. While the infant was being bathed on the first day of his life, he stood straight up in the bath. From then on he took the breast only once on Wednesdays and Fridays. As a youth he avoided the dissolute pleasures of his peers, preferring to spend time in churches; and whatever he could understand of the Holy Scriptures he committed to memory.

After the death of his parents he began to consider how he might make use of his great wealth, not in order to win men's praise but to give glory to God. At the time a certain fellow townsman of his, a man of noble origin but very poor, was thinking of prostituting his three virgin daughters in order to make a living out of this vile transaction. When the saint learned of this, abhorring the crime he wrapped a quantity of gold in a cloth and, under cover of darkness, threw it through a window of the other man's house and withdrew unseen. Rising in the morning, the man found the gold, gave thanks to God, and celebrated the wedding of his eldest daughter. Not long thereafter the servant of God did the same thing again. This time the man, finding the gold and bursting into loud praises, determined to be on the watch so as to find out who had come to the relief of his penury. Some little time later Nicholas threw a double sum of gold into the house. The noise awakened the man and he pursued the fleeing figure, calling out, “Stop! Stop! Don't hide from me!” and ran faster and faster until he saw that it was Nicholas. Falling to the ground he wanted to kiss his benefactor's feet, but

the saint drew away and exacted a promise that the secret would be kept until after his death.

Some time later the bishop of Myra died, and all the bishops of the region gathered to choose a successor. Among them was one bishop of great authority, upon whose opinion the decision of the others would depend. This prelate exhorted the others to fast and pray; and that very night he heard a voice telling him to post himself at the doors of the church in the morning, and to consecrate as bishop the first man he saw coming in, whose name would be Nicholas. In the morning he made this known to his colleagues and went outside the church to wait. Meanwhile Nicholas, miraculously guided by God, went early to the church and was the first to enter. The bishop, coming up to him, asked his name; and he, filled with the simplicity of a dove, bowed his head and answered, “Nicholas, the servant of your holiness.” Then all the bishops led him in and installed him on the episcopal throne. But he, amidst his honors, always preserved his former humility and gravity of manner. He passed the night in prayer, mortified his body, and shunned the society of women. He was humble in his attitude toward others, persuasive in speech, forceful in counsel, and strict when reprimands were called for. A chronicle also states that Nicholas took part in the Council of Nicea.

One day some seamen, threatened by a violent storm at sea, shed tears and prayed as follows: “Nicholas, servant of God, if what we have heard about you is true, let us experience your help now.” At once there appeared before them a figure resembling the saint, who said to them: “You called me, here I am!” And he began to assist them with the sails and ropes and other rigging of the ship, and the storm died down immediately. The sailors eventually came to the church where Nicholas was and recognized him instantly, although they had never seen him in the flesh. They thanked him then for their deliverance, but he told them to thank God, since their rescue was due not to his merits, but only to the divine mercy and their own faith.

There came a time when Saint Nicholas's province was beset by a famine so severe that no one had anything to eat. The man of God learned that several ships laden with grain were anchored in the harbor. He hastened there promptly and begged the ships' people to come to the aid of those who were starving, if only by allowing them a hundred measures of wheat from each ship. But they replied: “Father, we dare not, because our cargo was measured at Alexandria and we must deliver it whole and entire to the emperor's granaries.” The saint answered: “Do what I tell you, and I promise you in God's power that the imperial customsmen will not find your cargo short.” The men did so, and when they arrived at their destination, they turned over to the imperial granaries the same quantity of grain that had been measured out at Alexandria. They spread news of the miracle and glorified God in his

saint. Meanwhile the grain they had relinquished was distributed by Nicholas to each according to his needs, and so miraculously that not only did it suffice to feed the whole region for two years but supplied enough for the sowing.

In the past this region had worshiped idols; and even in Saint Nicholas's time there were rustics who practiced pagan rites under a tree dedicated to the wicked goddess Diana. To put a stop to this idolatry the saint ordered the tree cut down. This infuriated the ancient enemy, who concocted an unnatural oil that had the property of burning on water or on stone. Then, assuming the form of a nun, he came alongside a ship carrying people on their way to visit the saint and called to them: "I wanted so much to come with you to the holy man of God, but I cannot. May I ask you to offer this oil at his church and to paint the walls with it in memory of me." And forthwith he vanished. Then they saw another craft nearing them with honest people aboard, including one person who bore a striking likeness to Saint Nicholas, and this one asked them: "What did that woman say to you and what did she bring to you?" The people gave a full account of what had taken place. "That was the shameless Diana herself," he replied, "and if you want proof of it, throw that oil out over the water." They did so, and a huge fire flared up on the sea and, contrary to nature, burned for hours. When the travelers finally came to the servant of God, they said: "Truly you are the one who appeared to us at sea and delivered us from the wiles of the devil."

About that time there was a tribe that had risen in rebellion against the Roman Empire, and the emperor sent three princes, Nepotian, Ursus, and Apilion, to put them down. The three were forced by adverse winds to put in at an Adriatic port, and Nicholas, anxious to have them restrain their men from robbing his people on market days – something that happened regularly – invited them to his house. Meanwhile, during the saint's absence, the Roman consul, corrupted by a bribe, had ordered three innocent soldiers to be beheaded. As soon as the holy man heard of this, he asked his guests to accompany him, and they hurried to the spot where the execution was to take place. There he found the condemned men already on their knees, their faces veiled, and the executioner brandishing his sword over their heads. Nicholas, aflame with zeal, threw himself upon the headsmen, snatched his sword from his hand, unbound the innocent men, and led them away safe and sound.

The saint then hastened to the consul's headquarters and forced the door, which was locked. The consul came hurriedly to greet him, but Nicholas spurned him and said: "You enemy of God, you perverter of the law, how dare you look us in the eye with so great a crime on your conscience?" And he heaped reproaches upon him, but the princes pleaded for him, and the saint, seeing the man repentant, forgave him kindly. Thereupon the imperial emissaries, having received the bishop's blessing, continued their journey

and put down the rebels without bloodshed; and when they returned to the emperor, he gave them a splendid reception.

Some other courtiers, however, envying their good fortune, bribed the imperial prefect to go to the emperor and accuse the princes of lese majesty. The emperor was beside himself with anger at the charge, and ordered the accused to be thrown into jail immediately and to be put to death without trial that very night. When the three heard this from their jailer, they tore their garments and wept bitterly. Then one of them, Nepotian, recalled that the blessed Nicholas had lately, in their presence, saved three innocent men from death, and exhorted his companions to invoke the holy man's aid. The result of their prayer was that Saint Nicholas appeared that night to Emperor Constantine and said: "Why have you had these princes arrested unjustly and condemned them to death when they are innocent? Hurry, get up and order them to be set free at once! Otherwise I shall pray God to stir up a war in which you will go down to defeat and be fed to the beasts." "Who are you," the emperor asked, "to come into my palace at night and talk to me this way?" Nicholas answered: "I am Nicholas, bishop of the city of Myra." The saint also appeared that night to the prefect, whom he terrified by saying: "Mindless and senseless man, why did you agree to the killing of innocent men? Go at once and see that they are set free. If you don't, your body will be devoured by worms and your house swiftly destroyed." The prefect retorted: "Who are you, to face us with such threats?" "Know," the holy man replied, "that I am Nicholas, bishop of the city of Myra."

The emperor and the prefect rose from sleep, told each other their dreams, and lost no time summoning the three princes. "Are you sorcerers," the emperor demanded, "to delude us with such visions?" They replied that they were not sorcerers, and that they had done nothing to deserve the sentence of death. Then said the emperor: "Do you know a man named Nicholas?" At the mention of the name they raised their hands to heaven and prayed God to save them, by the merits of Saint Nicholas, from the peril in which they found themselves. And when the emperor had heard from them about the life and miracles of the saint, he said: "Go, and thank God, who has saved you at the prayer of this Nicholas. But also bring gifts to Nicholas in my name and ask him not to threaten us anymore, but to pray the Lord for me and my reign."

Some days later the princes went to visit the servant of God. They threw themselves at his feet saying: "Truly you are a servant of God, truly you love and worship Christ." Then they told him everything that had happened; and he, raising his hands to heaven, offered heartfelt praise to God and sent the princes home after instructing them thoroughly in the truths of the faith.

When the Lord wished to call Nicholas to himself, the saint prayed that

he would send his angels. And when he saw them coming, he bowed his head and recited the Psalm *In te Domine speravi* [Ps. 30]; and coming to the words *In manus tuas Domine commendo spiritum meum*, which mean "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit," he breathed forth his soul to the sound of heavenly music. This was in the year 343. He was buried in a marble tomb, and a fountain of oil began to flow from his head and a fountain of water from his feet. Even today a holy oil issues from his members and brings health to many.

One day this oil stopped flowing. This happened when the successor of Saint Nicholas, a worthy man, was driven from his see by jealous rivals. As soon as the bishop was restored, however, the oil flowed again. Long afterward, the Turks razed the city of Myra. Forty-seven soldiers from the town of Bari happened to be passing through, and four monks opened the tomb of Saint Nicholas to them: they removed his bones, which were immersed in oil, and carried them to Bari, in the year of the Lord 1087.

A man had borrowed some money from a Jew, giving him his oath on the altar of Saint Nicholas that he would repay it as soon as possible. As he was slow in paying, the Jew demanded his money, but the man declared that he had repaid it. He was summoned before the judge, who ordered him to swear that he had paid his debt. However, the man had put the money in a hollow staff, and before giving his oath he asked the Jew to hold the staff for him. He then swore that he had returned the money and more besides, and took back his staff; the Jew handed it over all unaware of the ruse. On his way home the dishonest fellow fell asleep by the roadside, and a coach, coming along at high speed, ran over him and killed him, also breaking open the staff and spilling the money. Being informed of this, the Jew hurried to the spot and saw through the trick; but, though the bystanders urged him to pick up his money, he refused unless the dead man were restored to life by the merits of Saint Nicholas, in which case he himself would become a Christian and accept baptism. At once the dead man was revived, and the Jew was baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Another Jew, seeing the miraculous power of Saint Nicholas, ordered a statue of the saint and placed it in his house. Whenever he had to be away for a long time, he addressed the statue in these or similar words: "Nicholas, I leave you in charge of my goods, and if you do not watch over them as I demand, I shall avenge myself by beating you." Then, one time when he was absent, thieves broke in and carried off all they found, leaving only the statue. When the Jew came home and saw that he had been robbed, he said to the statue: "Sir Nicholas, did I not put you in my house to guard my goods? Why then did you not do so and keep the thieves away? Well, then, you will pay the penalty! I shall make up for my loss and cool my anger by smashing

you to bits!" And he did indeed beat the statue. But then a wondrous thing happened! The saint appeared to the robbers as they were dividing their spoils and said to them: "See how I have been beaten on your account! My body is still black and blue! Quick! Go and give back what you have taken, or the anger of God will fall upon you, your crime will become common knowledge, and you will every one of you be hanged." "And who are you," the thieves answered, "to talk this way to us?" "I am Nicholas, the servant of Jesus Christ," he replied, "and the Jew whom you robbed has beaten me in revenge!" Terrified, they ran to the Jew's house, told him of their vision, learned from him what he had done to the statue, restored all his property, and returned the to path of righteousness. The Jew, for his part, embraced the faith of the Savior.

A certain man, for love of his son who was learning his letters at school, annually celebrated the feast of Saint Nicholas in solemn fashion. On one particular occasion the boy's father laid on a sumptuous feast, to which he invited many clerks. During the meal the devil, dressed as a pilgrim, knocked at the door and asked for alms. The father ordered his son to take alms to the pilgrim, and the youth, not finding him at the door, pursued him to a crossroad, where the demon waylaid and strangled him. Hearing this, the father moaned with grief, carried the body back to the house and laid it on a bed, and cried: "O dearest son, how could this have happened to you? And, Saint Nicholas, is this my reward for the honor I have paid you all this time?" And while he was saying these things, the lad opened his eyes as if he were just waking up, and rose from the bed.

A nobleman had asked Saint Nicholas to pray the Lord to grant him a son, and promised that he would go with his son to the saint's tomb and would offer him a gold cup. His prayer was answered and he ordered the cup to be made, but he was so pleased with it that he kept it for himself and ordered another of like value. Then he took ship with the boy, to travel to the saint's tomb. On the way the father told his son to fetch him some water in the first cup. The boy tried to fill the cup with water, but fell into the sea and disappeared. Though stricken with grief, the father pursued his journey in order to fulfill his vow. He came to the church of Saint Nicholas and placed the second cup on the altar, whereupon an unseen hand thrust him back with the cup and threw him to the ground. He picked himself up, returned to the altar, and again was thrown down. And then, to the astonishment of all, the boy arrived whole and unharmed, carrying the first cup in his hands. He told how, the minute he had fallen into the water, Saint Nicholas had plucked him out and kept him hale and hearty. At this the father rejoiced and offered both cups to the blessed Nicholas.

A rich man had obtained a son through the intercession of Saint Nicholas

and called him Adeodatus [given by God]. He also built a chapel in his house in honor of the saint and there solemnly celebrated his feast every year. The place was close to the territory of the Agarenes, and it happened that Adeodatus was captured by the Agarenes and carried off to serve their king as a slave. The following year, while the father was devoutly celebrating the feast of Saint Nicholas, the boy, serving the king with a precious cup in his hands, thought of his capture, his parents' grief, and the joy that used to be theirs on the feast day, and began to sigh and weep. The king demanded the reason for his tears and said: "Your Nicholas can do as he likes, but you are going to stay right here." Suddenly a mighty wind blew up, demolished the king's palace, snatched up the boy and the cup, and carried him to the threshold of the chapel where the parents were celebrating, to the great joy of all. Other sources would have it, however, that the aforesaid youth was of Norman origin and was on his way to the Holy Land when he was captured by the sultan, who had him whipped on the feast of Saint Nicholas and threw him into prison. There the boy fell asleep and woke to find himself in the chapel his father had built.

*What aspects of these lives would have popular appeal? What model of Christian living do they offer to lay people?*

### 33. A PILGRIM'S GUIDE TO THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHER (c. 1350)

*This excerpt describing the shrines in Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher comes from an anonymous pilgrim's guidebook to the Holy Land written around the middle of the fourteenth century and based on an earlier travelogue by the Franciscan Filippo Brunserio of Savona. The emperor Constantine built the first church on the supposed site of Jesus' tomb in Jerusalem and dedicated it in 335. This Church of the Anastasis (the Greek word for resurrection) was destroyed by Persians in 614, rebuilt, destroyed by Muslims in 1009, and again rebuilt on a smaller scale in the mid-eleventh century. After the crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099, they renovated and expanded the church in the Romanesque style, consecrating it in 1149. This large basilica now enclosed most of the traditional sites medieval Christians associated with the Passion: along its east end was the court where Jesus appeared before Pontius Pilate, the column where he was scourged, the place where he was crowned with thorns, and — at the extreme southeast — Golgotha or the hill of Calvary where he was crucified. At the basilica's west end was Christianity's holiest spot, the literal center of the world for Christians: a domed chapel called the aedicula ("little house") over the tomb where Jesus was buried and rose from the dead. By the time this anonymous pilgrim wrote his travelogue, Jerusalem*

*had been under Muslim control since 1188 when Saladin reconquered it. Entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was by a door on its south wall, the keys to which were kept since 1246, when it was re-opened to Christian pilgrims, by two Muslim families (as they still are today). These guards admitted pilgrims to the church usually in the middle of one day and allowed them to stay overnight visiting its many shrines until they were evicted, usually the next morning. The guidebook also describes some of the rival Christian sects who controlled other shrines in and around Jerusalem. Western Christians had to be cautioned not to drop coins inadvertently in the alms-boxes of what were considered to be heretical Christian sects.*

Source: J.H. Bernard (trans.), *Guide-Book to Palestine*, Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society (London, 1894), v. 6, pp. 1-10. Latin.

First, when you have entered the church, you shall find a black marble stone upon which Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus washed the body of Christ, and sprinkled it with spices, when they took it down from the cross [John 19:38-41]. And there is [plenary] absolution from pain and guilt [i.e., an indulgence gained from visiting this site].

Thence you shall come to Mount Calvary, where Jesus was crucified, where the blood issuing from his side penetrated through that dense and hard rock, and left the color of blood there to this day. And there is [plenary] absolution from pain and guilt.

For the blood sank in under Mount Calvary, in that part which is called Golgotha, where was found the head of Adam the first man; even up to the mouth of the aforesaid head did it penetrate through the rock. There is absolution for seven years and seven Lenten seasons.

Thence you shall come to the glorious sepulcher of the Lord, which up to the time of the Emperor Aelius Hadrian was outside the [city] gate. This emperor enlarged the city so much that he enclosed the place of the Lord's sepulcher within the circuit of the [city] walls, in which place afterwards the Christians, for the reverence they had to the Lord's sepulcher, built the glorious church of the Lord's Resurrection within the city, with elaborate workmanship, of suitable shape, and round in form, with one window opened in the roof. This not undeservedly holds the chief place among the holy and memorable sites. In this place the precious body of the Lord was honorably buried with spices, and here he rested until the third day, but on the third day he rose again as he had said, "On the third day I shall rise again." And there is [plenary] absolution from pain and guilt.

Thence you shall come to the place [on the northwest wall] where our Lord rising from the dead appeared first to Mary Magdalene when she thought that he was the gardener, and said, "Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell