

St. Nicholas and a Renewal of Generosity

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December 6 is the feast day of St. Nicholas. This day resonates deeply with me; it was a very important day for Dutch immigrants when I was a child. I remember a large part of the Dutch immigrant community gathering in an auditorium to witness the arrival of “Sinterklaas” on a magnificent white horse, along with his sidekick, “Zwarte Piet” (Black Peter, in those less politically correct days).

The hall was buzzing with the excitement of us kids. Sinterklaas was coming! He would reward all the good boys and girls, while his sidekick would take away the bad ones. Of course, we all thought that we would be rewarded; but at the same time, we harboured a small fear in our hearts that we might be taken away. Gulp! It’s the classic story from the song, “Santa Claus is coming to town”— he’s checking a list twice to find out who’s naughty and who’s nice.

This really was the official beginning of the Christmas season for my Dutch immigrant family. We would open a small gift on this night, including the candy and marzipan from Sinterklaas, and the excitement would build until Christmas Eve, when the family all went to church together, and then came home to feast and open gifts and have a grand old party.

I’ve written about St. Nicholas before, but it’s always good to hear stories about people for whom living a life of love and compassion seems to be such a natural thing.

People in northern and eastern Europe still celebrate December 6 as St. Nicholas’ Day by giving gifts and celebrating with great festivity. In Holland, where I was born, it is called Sint Nicolaas Day or Sinterklaas Day.

We don’t know much about St. Nicholas. Pete Enns, an Old Testament scholar, talks about getting a card from his priest with an icon of St. Nicholas. On the back of the card, he read, “Nicholas was born in the 3rd century in Asia Minor. He used his entire inheritance to help the poor, sick, and children in need. He gave in secret, expecting nothing in return. He attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. He is greatly loved for his faith, compassion, and care, and is venerated in both East and West.”

Beyond those bare details, we know that he was a priest and later became a bishop. He seems to have been quite well off, and travelled around the country helping people, giving gifts of money and other presents, and doing so anonymously.

A famous story about St. Nicholas is how he helped a poor man who had no money to give to his three daughters on their wedding day. St Nick dropped bags of gold into the stockings which the girls had left to dry by the fire. Although this story is most likely to be legendary, it does capture the spirit of generosity and wisdom displayed by this ancient bishop.

Enns continues, “OK, that’s pretty cool. He gave away his entire inheritance to those in need. I never knew that. I thought he had elves helping him or something, but I guess I got that part wrong. Nicholas saved young women from slavery, protected sailors, spared innocents from execution, provided grain in a famine, and rescued a kidnapped boy. That really hit me and made me feel stupid and cheated for never having been taught this as a child.”

Over time, St. Nicholas has become the modern-day Santa Claus. The sad thing is that St. Nicholas would never recognize himself in this fat, jolly man with a white beard. As Enns puts it, “He probably had better things on his mind than making sure nice children get an X-Box or an iPad.”

In a very funny monologue on Saturday Night Live several years ago, Chris Rock notices that “there are no sacred days anymore. We commercialize everything. Look what we did to

Christmas! This is Jesus's birthday! Now I don't know Jesus, but from what I've read, Jesus is the least materialistic person to ever roam the earth. No bling on Jesus! He kept a low profile, and we turned his birthday into the most materialistic day of the year. As a matter of fact, we've turned it into a whole season of materialism."

Indeed! We could use some of the spirit of St. Nicholas at this time of year. We are swamped by consumerism, from Black Friday to Cyber Monday to Boxing Day sales. We spend money we don't have on stuff we don't need. We have lost our way.

St. Nicholas shows us again the grace which is found in giving freely and generously to people who are truly in need. We don't find joy in a pile of presents stacked under the Christmas tree. Rather, we discover that kind of deep joy and hope in giving of ourselves to other people in community.

There are so many ways in which we can do that this season. Find a charity dear to your heart, and give generously to them, whether it's the Salvation Army Red Kettle appeal, or research into various diseases, or giving trees and angel trees, or the food bank. For me, I give to the Canadian Association for Mental Health and Dying with Dignity Canada. There are countless other opportunities to give to charities in the name of a friend or family member.

But we can do more than just give money. Every community needs people who give time and energy as volunteers to meet various kinds of needs in our communities. These volunteers make life better for all of us. Without the spirit of volunteerism and giving, so much of what we take for granted simply wouldn't exist.

St. Nicholas exemplified this spirit of giving. So let me wish you Happy St. Nicholas' Day today! May the spirit of the good bishop fill your lives in this season and throughout the year.