

# THE REAL SAINT NICHOLAS

When Christmas displays are erected on public grounds across the nation, they typically must include a secular element in order to achieve legal requirements. In effect, a manger scene must include a depiction of Santa Claus or Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer before it passes constitutional muster. While I believe this is a nonsensical requirement, it is where the seemingly unending ACLU lawsuits against public religious displays have brought us in terms of social policy.

However, Christians can utilize this regulation to bring about a positive result. I encourage parents and grandparents to tell children the true story of Saint Nicholas - Santa's namesake - whenever they see a manger scene that includes a portrayal of Santa in the setting.

Saint Nicholas was born into a wealthy family about 350 miles northwest of Bethlehem in the fourth century. He was a man who loved children and his neighbors; he spent his life privately giving gifts to the unfortunate. These acts of Christian charity - usually made secretly - probably led to the policy of exchanging gifts during the Christmas season.

The history of Nicholas is blurry but there are many legends associated with the man. Apparently after his parents died, he inherited their fortune and chose to distribute it to the needy. Most famously, he lobbed bags of gold through the windows and down the chimneys of three sisters who had no dowry to allow them to marry.

Soon, Nicholas became Bishop of Myra, the city where he preached.

Ted Olsen, assistant editor of Christian History at Christianity Today, wrote that "it wasn't long before Diocletian and Maximian began their persecutions of Christians, and the new bishop was imprisoned." However, when Constantine assumed emperorship, Nicholas was released with many other persecuted believers and he returned to preaching.

After his release, Nicholas became a defender of the faith against Arianism, a heretical doctrine which asserted that Christ was not the Son of God, but a being nurtured by God the Father to the position of Son of God. Saint Nicholas reportedly traveled to the Council of Nicea and actually slapped Arius in the face in defense of the Gospel of Christ.

There are also dubious and debated elements to the ambiguous legend of Nicholas, but it appears to be quite clear that this was a man who attempted to convey the love of Christ in his life.

Mr. Olsen added, "When the Reformation came along, his following disappeared in all the Protestant countries except Holland, where his legend continued as Sinterklass. Martin Luther, for example, replaced this bearer of gifts with the Christ Child, or, in German, Christkindl. Over the years, that became re-pronounced Kriss Kringle, and ironically is now considered another name for Santa Claus."

This Christmas, if you see a public creche that includes a depiction of Santa, I encourage parents and grandparents to share the story of Saint Nicholas with young children. This is a way in which to use a disagreeable situation for good.

And you can rest assured that if enough people start recounting the story of Saint Nicholas, the ACLU will probably panic and start bringing cases to ban Santa from the public square.

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