

The **T** ruth about **S** anta **C** laus

Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra

The real story of 'Santa' goes back to a fourth century Christian saint named Nicholas. Nicholas was Bishop of Myra. He had a great heart for the poor and courageously pursued justice. One story tells how Nicholas heard that three innocent men had been handed over to some soldiers to be executed. He ran to the site, grabbed the executioner's sword and freed the men. Another story tells how, when Myra was in the grip of famine, Nicholas convinced sailors on route to Egypt to share their wheat cargoes with the people. Not only were the people fed, but the wheat cargoes were miraculously replenished. Nicholas was not the shy, retiring type. When confronted by the notorious heretic Arius, Nicholas slapped him in the face! Offended by this breach of decorum the emperor threw Nicholas into prison. It is said that in prison Nicholas was visited by Jesus and the Virgin Mary who brought him the Book of the Gospels and his bishop's stole. Many icons in the Eastern Church depict this scene.

From the Bishop to 'St Nick'

Over the centuries, as 'Nicholas' stories and devotions spread, the saint's image became more gentle and benign. He was portrayed as a compassionate friend to children, leaving fruits, nuts, cookies and sweets in shoes and stockings on the eve of St Nicholas' Feast Day which is December 6th. In fact, the shape of the candy cane is meant to reflect the bishop's crozier (shepherd's staff) which Nicholas carried. In the middle ages the figure of

Nicholas was often accompanied by a devil-like character to symbolise the choice between good and evil. Like Nicholas, people were inspired to offer little gifts and acts of kindness to each other in secret, seeking nothing in return. The practice of giving Christmas baskets to those in need is also a St Nicholas custom.

From St Nick to the American 'Santa'

In nineteenth century New York a number of popular writers and artists began depicting St Nicholas as an elfin Dutch figure who smoked a clay pipe and brought gifts down the chimney. However it took a 1930s Coca Cola advertising gimmick to give the American Santa image the mass appeal we are so familiar with today. For 35 years Coca Cola was sold using the life-size, plump, jolly, red-suited, cherry-faced, white-bearded, Santa figure. He appeared in magazines, posters and shops all over the country encouraging Americans to enjoy Coke to quench 'a thirst for all seasons'. Santa was now an icon of contemporary commercial culture!

So there you have it. 'Santa Claus' as we know him evolved from a fourth century Bishop, a courageous man of faith and a friend of the poor. Today the original saint is increasingly attracting attention from people in search of the spiritual dimension of the festive season.

Source: St Nicholas Center. www.stnicholascenter.org
This is a delightful website for rediscovering the 'Real' Santa Claus, including Nicholas stories, prayers, recipes and children's activities. Worth a visit this Christmas!