

## The Life of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker

### Part 1 – The Childless Couple

“The saints were people of this kind. They were totally severed from the ways of the world, and by keeping the vision of heaven unsullied in themselves they made its light shine by observing the divine laws. And having mortified their earthly aspects (Col. 3:5) through self-control and through awe and love for God, they were radiant with holy words and actions.” (A Discourse on Abba Philimon, Philokalia, Book Two)



Prayers aren't always answered right away, and when they are answered, there may be a responsibility that comes with the answer. In this chapter, we see how this took place in the lives of two Greek Christians and how they responded to the challenge...

Fifteen years had passed since the persecutions that had been instigated by the Roman emperor Valerian.<sup>1</sup> In the year 257 AD, he had issued edicts of persecution against the Christians, initially just attacking the clergy and the corporate life of the Church. Valerian confiscated their property and denied them the right of assembly. In time, however, he initiated actual physical persecution.

This surely came as a surprise to the Christians, whom he had befriended only a few years earlier. According to Eusebius:<sup>2</sup>

“Both phases of Valerian's rule are astonishing, the first being especially remarkable in character: he was so wonderfully friendly and gentle to the people of God. Not one of the emperors before him – not even those who were supposed to have been avowed Christians – was so kindly and sympathetic in his attitude to them as was Valerian at first, when he received them publicly with all friendship and affection and filled his whole palace with God-fearing people, making it a church of God. But what a change when he was induced to get rid of them by the teacher and guild-leader of the magicians from Egypt, who urged him to kill or

<sup>1</sup> **Valerian** (emperor): in Latin, Publius Licinius Valerianus (died after AD 260), Roman emperor (253-60). Upon the murder of Emperor Gaius Vibius Trebonianus Gallus and the death of Gallus's rival, the provincial governor Aemilianus, Valerian was proclaimed emperor by his troops. He appointed his son Publius Licinius Valerianus Egnatius Gallienus to rule jointly with him.

<sup>2</sup> **Eusebius of Caesarea** (260?-340?): theologian, church historian, and scholar, probably born in Palestine. Called Eusebius Pamphili, he took the name Pamphili from his friend and teacher Pamphilus of Caesarea, whose extensive library furnished much of the historical materials for Eusebius's later literary work. Eusebius also collaborated with Pamphilus on an edition of the Septuagint from the text in the Hexapla of the early Christian writer Origen, and in the preparation of an apology (five books, now lost) for Origen's teachings. About 314 he became bishop of Caesarea. Eusebius stood in high favor with Constantine the Great, emperor of Rome, and was one of the most learned men of his time. Eusebius was a prolific writer, producing mostly apologetics, but also a history of the world until 303 and a history of the Christian church until 324.

persecute pure and saintly men as rivals who hindered his own foul, disgusting incantations! For they are and were able, by being present and seen, and simply by breathing on them and speaking boldly, to frustrate the schemes of the wicked demons. He also induced him to perform devilish rites, loathsome tricks, and unholy sacrifices, to cut the throats of unfortunate boys, use the children of unhappy parents as sacrificial victims, and tear out the vitals of newborn babies, cutting up and mincing God's handiwork, as if these things would bring them happiness." (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, p. 226)

Those who survived looked back with a sigh of relief, hoping that the hostilities against them were over. They weren't.

During this relatively tranquil period between persecutions, our attention is drawn to the home of Theophanes and Nonna.<sup>3</sup> According to the *Vita Compilata*, they were Greek Christians. Theophanes was a bishop and Nonna an extremely holy woman.

According to the *Vita Per Metaphrasten* by St. Simeon Metaphrastes,<sup>4</sup>

"The home of his admirable father was Patara, the foremost famous city of Lycia. His parents were of substantial lineage, holding property enough without superfluity."

Married for many years (some say a full thirty years!), they were content with their lives except for their lack of a child. Nonna had long prayed for a child and, like Hannah in the Hebrew Scriptures, she had promised God that her firstborn would be dedicated to His service.

Finally their prayers were answered and, in roughly the year 275 AD, a son was born. They named him Nicholas, which means "victory for the people." And he – by the blessing of God – truly appeared as a conqueror of evil, for the good of the entire world.

***According to legend, when the midwife wanted to bathe him after his birth, Nicholas stood upright in the tub – for two hours, as some versions will have it! – and raised his hands over his head in an effort to praise the Lord. Soon thereafter, the infant – while still in the***

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<sup>3</sup> Or Epiphanes and Johane, according to some sources.

<sup>4</sup> **Simeon Logotheta Metaphrastes** (tenth century): The principal compiler of the legends of Saints in the Menologia of the Byzantine Church. Simeon collected the lives of the Saints from oral tradition and written collections. He copied some lives as written and rewrote others. He arranged the lives in the order of the Saints' feast days, and his work became so popular that many earlier hagiographies have been lost. His *Vita Per Metaphrasten* was the last classical Greek text on the life of St. Nicholas. It drew upon the *Vita Per Michaëlem* and the *Laudatioi Sancti Nicolai* by Methodius. This biography was the most widely read and, in fact, became the generally accepted and, so to speak, *canonical* text on St. Nicholas. Through the importance of this collection his name has become one of the most famous among those of Medieval Greek writers. Michael Psellus (1018-78) tells us that Symeon was a favorite of the emperor, at whose command he made his collection of legends. He has often been compared to the great Western compiler of legends, Jacobus de Voragine (d. 1298).

***baptismal font – stood on his feet three times, without support from anyone, giving honor to the Holy Trinity.***

From his infancy, Nicholas began a life of fasting, and on Wednesdays and Fridays he accepted milk from his mother only once a day, after the evening prayers of his parents.

According to the *Vita Per Metaphrasten*,

“When it came time to nurse the infant and he was placed at the maternal breast, God signified to all what kind of man Nicholas was to be when he should come to the age of discretion. For it is a fact that though throughout the rest of the week he would nurse at the breast like any infant when Wednesday and Friday came he would take milk but once on each of them. Thus from the earliest moment, self-disciplined by rigid rule even before boyhood and from the very beginning, Nicholas showed how abstinence was a familiar token. And so grew, the model of good behavior – in part reflecting the habits of his parents, but also in part developing a goodness from within.”

And again in the *Vita Per Metaphrasten*,

“When they ‘had planted near the running waters and brought forth fruit in due season,’ the divine Nicholas, the mother ceased to bear; sterile from that day producing no more children, as if Nature, having lavished such bounty, could give no more. When the mother brought him into the light as at once the purest and the last noble offspring, a fruit of true spiritual union, the parents endowed the world with the acme of the virtues, that truly beautiful and bounteous issue – Nicholas [I repeat], the admirable!

“Although their son typified with his conception that of the Baptist, whose mother, though sterile, brought him forth, yet John, when he was brought into the world, unlocked his mother’s womb, but Nicholas conversely closed his.”

***Thought to Discuss around the Dinner Table:*** It’s never too early to teach a child to praise the Lord and be thankful for all His blessings. Make a list of specific ways that you can do this for your children. How can *you* be an example to them as well?

***The Legend in Art:*** In England there are two important iconographical cycles of his life, on the font at Winchester Cathedral and on an ivory crosier-head at the Victoria and Albert Museum, both of the twelfth century. The latter, a masterpiece of fine carving, include several scenes, one of which is a lively depiction of the infant Nicholas refusing his mother’s breast on Wednesdays and Fridays, as the legend states.

## The Early Years of St. Nicholas



Nicholas was exceedingly well brought up by his parents and walked piously in their footsteps. He then strove to live according to the Christian principles he'd learned from them.

His mother and father taught him to be generous to others, especially to those in need.

According to the *Vita Per Metaphrasten*,

“To be sure they had had more than a taste of worldly pomp and circumstance. But they nobly exemplified for their son how he should want nothing for his own selfish purposes by devoting themselves wholly to that which is good and following it in all ways.”

Nicholas learned that helping others makes one richer in life than anything else.

St. Simeon Metaphrastes wrote that young *Nicholas showed from the beginning that he wanted to please God*. According to his *Vita Per Metaphrasten*,

“Then, like some good and fertile soil, when he reached the proper age he was sent to the gramaticus for schooling. Under him and from his keen and subtle genius, in a short time Nicholas mastered the many disciplines although all those of political and mercantile nature he rejected. He avoided immoderate companions and consorting and conversing with women. Refusing even so much as to turn his eyes in their direction, he bade them goodbye. Taking leave of worldly ways, he spent all his time in holy churches, according to the saying of the divine David preferring to be abject to them [Ps 83].”

Nicholas was nine years old when a plague swept through his village. Both his father and mother died. Although Nicholas moved in with friends of his parents, he felt lost without the two people he'd loved so dearly. The seed that they had planted in him, however, continued to grow.

Young Nicholas often visited his Uncle Nicholas, who was bishop over Patara, and helped him with the Divine Liturgy there. Nicholas assisted the older men at the church so that he'd benefit from their example and guidance. Under Uncle Nicholas' guardianship, the young boy learned the texts of prayers, details of rituals, and showed a remarkably quick mind and sincere devotion.

*Nicholas passed entire days and nights in church lifting up his heart to God in prayer and reading the Holy Scriptures and other Christian books. He meditated on spiritual knowledge,*

*enriching himself in the divine grace of the Holy Spirit and creating within himself a worthy dwelling for Him*, in accordance with the words of Holy Scripture:

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (I Corinthians 3:16 NKJV)

St. Simeon Metaphrastes wrote that,

“Being humble, the Saint sought to avoid men’s praises, but once again he could not hide his virtues, as they were God-given and served all those who followed his guidance.”

His uncle rejoiced at the spiritual success and deep piety of his nephew. He ordained Nicholas a reader in the church, and then elevated him to the dignity of presbyter, making him his assistant and entrusting him to speak, instructing the flock. *In serving the Lord, young Nicholas was fervent of spirit, and in his proficiency with questions of faith, he was like an elder, which aroused the wonder and deep respect of believers.*

Constantly at work and in prayer, Presbyter Nicholas displayed great kind-heartedness towards the flock, and towards the afflicted who came to him for help.

Because he lived such an ascetic and righteous life, Nicholas was ordained into the priesthood at New Zion when he was nineteen years old. His uncle – addressing him as he took his vows – prophesied:

“I see, brethren, a new sun rising above the Earth and manifesting in himself a gracious consolation for the afflicted. Blessed is the flock that will be worthy to have him as its pastor, because this one will shepherd well the souls of those who have gone astray, will nourish them on the pasturage of piety, and will be a merciful helper in misfortune and tribulation.”

This prophecy was indeed later fulfilled. Nicholas wasn’t just a diligent young man and student, but an exceptional priest as well. *God gave him the gift to work signs and wonders and to heal the sick.*

Nicholas added labors to labors; keeping vigil and remaining in unceasing prayer and fasting, he, being mortal, strove to imitate the bodiless ones. Merciful, trustworthy and loving what is right, he walked among the people like an angel of God.

His parents had left him an inheritance, which enabled him to buy food for the hungry, to dress the naked and care for orphans and widows. Nicholas was careful to remain anonymous with his charities. Usually he preferred to receive no credit for his gifts, desiring rather to make his visits to the homes of the poor and unfortunate under the cloak of darkness so that no one would know who he was. One story claims that he would dress up in a disguise and go out into the streets and give gifts to poor children. *Nicholas felt that if anyone should receive the praise and glory, it should be God, and not himself.*

“But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.” (Matthew 6:3-4 NKJV)

***Thought to Ponder:*** In this story, we saw the effect that Nicholas’ parents had on him. He was exceedingly well brought up by them and walked piously in their footsteps. They taught him to be generous to others, especially to those in need. Nicholas learned that helping others makes one richer in life than anything else.

***Thought to Discuss around the Dinner Table:*** Our children are an awesome responsibility. What kind of example are we setting for them? What values are we nurturing in them? How can we do better?

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine your children ten years from now. What qualities would you like to see in them? How are you helping them achieve those qualities? Where could you improve?