

The Life of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker

Part 3 – The Trip to the Holy Land & Nicholas is Chosen Bishop

“The Saints are those who by their active faith and love have become like God, and show forth the image of God in its power, those who have obtained for themselves abundant grace. In this purification of the heart by an heroic effort of mind and body lies the road to salvation for every man in which Christ abides: ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Gal. 2:20).” (Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 120)



What does God want us to do with our lives? Have we ever asked Him? When people look at us, what image (icon) do they see in our lives? Is it the image of Christ or of some worldly hero? These were questions that were extremely important to St. Nicholas, as we shall see in this chapter.

St. Nicholas Saves the Ship on His Trip to the Holy Land

From the minute Nicholas became a priest, one could hardly keep count of the virtue and goodness he spread around him, of the nights spent at his devotions, days of fasting, his steadfast good will, and his prayers for all.

St. Simeon Metaphrastes¹ recorded that,

“Observing this, his Uncle, the Bishop Nicholas, found the young man’s eagerness admirable. And when he went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the Bishop left Nicholas as his deputy, to oversee the monastery he had built, and which he

¹ **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).

had called New Zion. The Saint administered both the Bishopric and the Monastery as competently as if he had been the Bishop himself.”

During that time a paralytic, who was so ill that he couldn't even raise his hand to his head, was carried by his friends to the monastery. Nicholas anointed the paralytic with oil and prayed over him. The sick man was healed at once.

When the bishop returned from the Holy Land, Nicholas, in turn, asked for his blessing for a pilgrimage. To prepare himself for this visit in an atmosphere of serenity, he decided to travel on an Egyptian boat where no one would know him.

During the first night of the trip, Nicholas dreamed that the devil had come on board the boat and was cutting the ropes that held the main mast. He interpreted this to mean that they'd run into a severe storm. In the morning he told the sailors of this vision and warned that there was trouble ahead. He also reassured them:

“Don't be afraid. Trust in God because He will protect you from death.”

Nicholas had hardly finished speaking when dark storm clouds covered the sky and the sea around the boat became turbulent. Although they were close to the coast, the wind and water grew so violent that it was impossible to steer it into calmer waters. Having lost control, they pulled down all the sails.

When the main mast itself threatened to crash across the ship, one sailor climbed it to tighten the ropes. Having finished his dangerous task, he began his descent to the deck. The ship, however, was rocking so forcefully back and forth in the storm that the sailor lost his footing, fell to the deck and was killed. His shipmates sadly took his lifeless body below.

The wind continued to batter the boat unmercifully and the sailors were frightened to death, literally in fear of perishing. They begged Nicholas to pray that they might escape the storm unharmed:

“If you, O servant of God, don't help us by your prayers to the Lord, then we'll immediately perish!”

Commanding them to have courage, to place their hope in God and without any doubts to expect a speedy deliverance, Nicholas began to pray fervently to the Lord. Immediately the sea became peaceful and a great calm set in. The joyful sailors rendered thanksgiving to God and His servant Nicholas and were doubly astonished – both at his predicting of the storm and the cessation of distress.

Their relief and gratitude were muted, however, by the fate of the fellow sailor whose lifeless body they had taken below. Nicholas, hoping to wipe out the memory of their trial completely, prayed over the dead sailor. Quickly, and miraculously, the man revived as if he had only been asleep, and awakened without any pain whatever.

After this, the travelers hoisted all their sails and happily continued their voyage under favorable winds, and peacefully put in to shore at Alexandria.

When the boat reached port, many sick people approached Nicholas who asked him to pray for their recovery. Following the example of St. Peter,² *Nicholas was able to restore all of them by the power of God to health before moving onward.*

Having reached the ancient city of Jerusalem and having come to Golgotha, Nicholas offered up thanksgiving to our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ and began the rounds of all the holy places so he could pray at each one.

One story tells us that when he wanted to enter a church for prayer, the closed doors of the church swung open by themselves, disclosing an unhindered entry to him for whom the heavenly gates were also opened.

The Miraculous Trip Back from the Holy Land

Nicholas hoped to withdraw into the wilderness, but he was stopped by God's voice, urging him to return to his native country. He went from ship to ship in the port asking to be taken back right away. One boat was just being loaded, and the captain said, "We'll go wherever our fare asks us to go." Nicholas answered that he'd pay to be taken directly to Patara in Lycia. Their agreement was a pretense; they planned on stopping over at their own homeport on the way, where they could sell Nicholas into slavery.

There was a fair wind, and they set sail, but not directly toward Patara. St. Simeon Metaphrastes wrote that God "did not want to have the Saint suffer any delay or disappointment, and so He raised a violent storm that caused the ship's rudder to be damaged beyond repair."

The frightened sailors pleaded with Nicholas to pray for their safety. He agreed and knelt on the deck to pray as the storm tossed the ship. When he extended his arms in prayer, the sea became calm.

As a result of the damage, the boat drifted rudderless across the sea, seemingly at the mercy of every wave and every gust of wind. The sailors feared that they'd just drift until they died from lack of food and water.

Unknown to the sailors, the Lord had the boat drifting quite purposefully in a specific direction. On and on for many miles it moved. At last, they saw land, and the boat moved closer to shore. The captain and crew were awed to discover that the ship, far from drifting aimlessly, had taken them directly to Patara where Nicholas had wanted them to go in the first place!

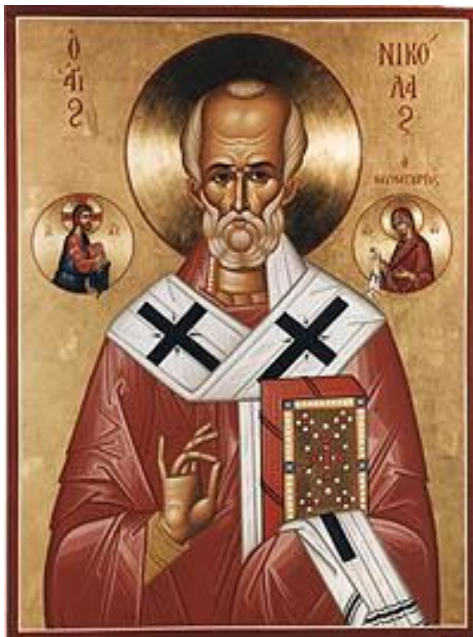
² "Then Peter said, 'Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.'" (Acts 3:6 NKJV)

Overwhelmed by the dual miracle of their own survival and the safe arrival at Nicholas' destination, they asked his forgiveness. He told them kindly but firmly, "From now on, don't try to fool anyone." Then he asked them to repair their boat's rudder, be on their way, and have a good journey home.

St. Simeon Metaphrastes ended his account of this eventful pilgrimage as follows:

"And thus the Saint returned to his homeland. I cannot tell you with what joy his fellow countrymen greeted him, how pleased they were to see him again. Young and old, men and women, everyone came to meet him. Among them were the monks of the monastery of New Zion which his uncle had earlier let him administer. *The Saint met them, speaking the words of the Lord and teaching the way of salvation for Christian souls.*

"In this manner, the Saint was respected and loved by all. *As people observed his goodness, many followed his example and teachings. They scorned a material, transient existence and placed their trust in the Eternal.* 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."³



The pilgrimage, the miraculous events on the two sea journeys, and the welcome Nicholas received upon returning home, marked the end of his young manhood. Yearning for a life of quietude, Nicholas returned to the brotherhood of his uncle's monastery.

God, however, had other plans in mind.

To make sure that Nicholas got the point, the Lord spoke to him in a vision. Nicholas saw Jesus Christ standing before him in all His glory and giving him a Gospel ornamented with gold and pearls. On his other side Nicholas saw the Virgin Mary who placed on his shoulders the *omophorion*. The Lord told Nicholas that not the monastery but another pathway was awaiting him: "Nicholas, this is not the field on which you ought to await My harvest, but rather turn round and go into the world, and there My Name shall be glorified in you."

³ Emphasis mine.

Thought to Ponder: Adam of St. Victor⁴ wrote a hymn in honor of St. Nicholas. It alluded to his miraculously calming the storm, and went on to *ask the Saint to lead us to the harbor of salvation in Jesus Christ, and save us from shipwreck in this world of sin.*

Did You Know? The Normans were great sailors, and on their voyages they invoked the Saint who had appeared to sailors in danger and saved them from shipwreck. The habit of praying to him spread all along the coasts of Northern Europe. William the Conqueror⁵ prayed to him during a storm that arose while he was crossing the English Channel.

Nicholas is Chosen Bishop

After this vision a few days passed and Archbishop John of Myra died. All the bishops in the region gathered in Myra in order to choose a worthy one to succeed him. Many respected and prudent men were nominated as successors, but consensus couldn't be reached, no matter who was suggested.

According to the *Vita Per Metaphrasten* by St. Simeon Metaphrastes,

“After the incumbent bishop of Myra had in a single instant yielded up both his see and his life and had set out on the path to God, a holy desire suffused all the bishops and the most eminent clergy subject to him to discover the one man most worthy to be appointed to that charge. When all of them had assembled in the church, one urged that the matter be entrusted in prayer to the will and wisdom of God. All concurred as warmly as if each had presented the idea himself. Then God, Who fulfills the desire of those fearing Him and hears their prayers, revealed to one of them who would lead the church in the future, for in due course He appeared to him in a holy vision enjoining him to go stand at the entrance of the temple, there to greet the first man to enter. That man would be the one who was inspired to his action by His own Divine Spirit. Then the clergy should receive him [his name would be Nicholas] and ordain him bishop, as the one predestined for the post. When the holy man had experienced the mysterious vision, he communicated it to the clergy and synod.

“While all the rest devoutly prayed, he to whom this great revelation had been vouchsafed went to the stipulated place. At about the hour of Matins our estimable Nicholas, impelled by the Holy Spirit, came to the church. In its

⁴ **Adam of St. Victor:** A prominent and prolific writer of Latin Hymns, born in the latter part of the twelfth century, probably at Paris; died in the Abbey of Saint Victor then in the suburbs of Paris by included in it subsequently through the city's growth, some time between 1172 and 1192. Adam of Saint Victor is the most illustrious exponent of the revival of liturgical poetry which the twelfth century affords. Archbishop Trench characterizes him as “the foremost among the sacred Latin poets of the Middle Ages.” Of his hymns and sequences some thirty-seven were published in the “*Elucidatorium Ecclesiasticum*” of Clichtoveus, a Catholic theologian of the sixteenth century. Author of the famous “Sequences.”

⁵ **William I** (of England), called The Conqueror (1027-1087): first Norman king of England (1066-1087), who has been called one of the first modern kings and is generally regarded as one of the outstanding figures in western European history.

vestibule the man deemed worthy of the vision received him. ‘What do people call you, my son?’ he earnestly inquired. ‘Nicholas the sinner,’ he simply and unaffectedly answered, ‘and I am the servant of Your Sanctity.’

“At these humble and courteous words of our exemplary man, to be sure partly because of the name of Nicholas which had been foretold when it appeared, but partly also because of the extraordinary, unmistakable modesty [for the holy man knew the saying, ‘Whom does God look to here below, except the meek and the peaceable?'], he knew that this was the man whom God was signifying.

“At that, joy suffused him, just as if he had stumbled on some precious treasure. He thought of this disclosure as pure wealth. ‘Follow me, son,’ he directed. Taking him by the hand, he led him to the bishops, who recognized at once what had already been foretold to them by their colleague. They, too, filled with holy joy, recognized that the virtue of the man was in accord with the will of God.

“Then they immediately conducted the Saint to the sanctuary of the temple. When news of this affair had spread about [for it is natural for news to circulate in such important matters and to employ swift wings], uncounted masses poured in the church. In a loud voice the bishops proclaimed: ‘Accept, our sons, this man as your shepherd, whom the Holy Spirit has anointed for you and to whom he has submitted your souls for guidance and instruction. He has been made our leader not by human but by divine determination. He whom we have been longing for we have: whom we were seeking for, now we receive. As long as we may truly be shepherded and protected by him, we need not lack hope that in the day of the Coming and the Revelation we may stand firm as a people beloved of God.’

“To these words the people added their own expression of gratitude, and addressed God those jubilees which cannot be expressed in words. Then the holy synod of bishops together with the clergy, at once invested him with what belonged to the office by law and what by custom. They appointed him pontiff, though he was slow and hesitant to accept that pontifical honor. Because of a truly praiseworthy sense of constraint, he could hardly ascend the bishop’s throne to assume the prefecture and presidency of Myra, the proper dissemination of the Word of Truth and Piety adherence to orthodoxy, and the right teaching of it.”

The account in *The Golden Legend* is quite similar:

“After this the bishop of Mirea died and other bishops assembled for to purvey to this church a bishop. And there was, among the others, a bishop of great authority, and all the election was in him. And when he had warned all for to be in fastings and in prayers, this bishop heard that night a voice which said to him that, at the hour of matins, he should take heed to the doors of the church, and him that should come first to the church and have the name of Nicholas they should declare him bishop. And he showed this to the other bishops and admonished them for to be all in prayers; and he kept the doors. And this was a marvellous

thing, for at the hour of matins, like as he had been sent from God, Nicholas arose before all others. And the bishop took him when he was come and demanded of him his name. And he, which was simple as a dove, inclined his head, and said: ‘I have to name Nicholas.’ then the bishop said to him: ‘Nicholas, servant and friend of God, for your holiness ye shall be bishop of this place.’ And when they brought him to the church, howbeit that he refused it strongly, yet they set him in the chair. And he followed, as he did before in all things, in humility and honesty of manners. He woke in prayer and made his body lean, he eschewed company of woman, he was humble in receiving all things, profitable in speaking, joyous in admonishing, and cruel in correcting.” (**Jacobus de Voragine**,⁶ “**The Golden Legend: Lives of the Saints**,” translated by William Caxton, pp. 63-64)

By this means the Church received a bright lamp which did not remain under a bushel, but was set in the pastoral place proper to him. By his good deeds Nicholas was like a mirror for his flock and, according to the word of the apostle, was “... an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity.” (**I Timothy 4:12 NKJV**)

To assist him in the ruling of the church he chose two virtuous and prudent counselors who were invested with priestly rank. These were men well known in all of Greece – Paul of Rhodes and Theodore of Ascalon.⁷

The Saint brought his church peace and blessings, sowing the word of Truth, nipping in the bud defective and spurious claims of wisdom, uprooting heresy and healing the fallen and those led astray through ignorance. He was indeed a light in the world and the salt of the Earth, wherein his life did shine and his word was mixed with the salt of wisdom.

The ancient writers stressed Bishop Nicholas’ zeal and his virtues that became even more outstanding in his new position. He practiced the severest asceticism, eating only once a day, in the evening.

In his new post as bishop, Nicholas was known as an image of gentleness, kindness and love towards all people. He spent his nights in prayer.

⁶ **Jacobus de Voragine** (1230? – 1298?): Archbishop of Genoa and medieval hagiologist. In 1244 he entered the Order of St. Dominic, and soon became famous for his piety, learning, and zeal in the care of souls. His fame as a preacher spread throughout Italy, and he was called upon to preach from the most celebrated pulpits of Lombardy. Jacopo de Voragine is best known as the author of a collection of legendary lives of the saints, which was entitled “*Legenda Sanctorum*” by the author, but soon became universally known as “*Legenda Aurea*” (*The Golden Legend*), because the people of those times considered it worth its weight in gold. *The Golden Legend* was the most popular collection of lives of the Saints during the Middle Ages, and from 1470 to 1530 it was also the most often printed book in Europe. In 1500 as many as seventy-four Latin editions of it had been published, not counting the three translations into English, five French, eight Italian, fourteen Low German, and three Bohemian. About 900 manuscripts of his *Golden Legend* survive.

⁷ According to the following web site: <http://home.attbi.com/~histotech2/stnich.html>

Bishop Nicholas earned a reputation as a person of compassion and conscience, maintaining his firm witness for the Lord Jesus Christ, especially during the time of persecution of Christians under the emperor Diocletian.⁸

He earned a reputation as a person of gentleness, compassion and conscience. To orphans he was a father, to the poor a merciful giver, to the weeping a comforter, to the wronged a helper, and to all a great benefactor. He would appear all over the city on a white horse offering help to anyone in difficulty, then quietly disappear without waiting for thanks.

He was especially concerned that families had enough to eat and a good place to live, that children got ahead in life, and that old people lived out their lives with dignity and respect. For example, Bishop Nicholas purchased a rug from a poor street vendor for an inflated price and then gave the rug to the vendor's wife as a gift. Thus, the couple gained financial help and retained their property. This act shows his sensitivity to human dignity.

All day long he spent in labor proper to his office, listening to the requests and needs of those who came to him. The doors of his house were open to all and he gave a kind welcome to everyone who came to him. According to Robert Wace,⁹ Bishop Nicholas healed great numbers of the sick from serious infirmities and freed many from evil spirits.

He always loved the sailors who lived so dangerously on the sea. Without their ships, people everywhere would be without food and other goods they carried for trade.

Such are the works of God with which the Lord magnified His servant. The fame of them spread everywhere, as on wings, it reached across the sea and spread throughout the world, so that *there was no place where people didn't know of the great and wonderful miracles of Bishop Nicholas, which he wrought by the grace given him by the Almighty Lord.*

In character Nicholas was meek and forgiving, humble of spirit, and shunned all publicity. Still, his reputation as a holy man grew and grew, even spreading to distant cities that had never seen him.

⁸ **Diocletian** (245-313): emperor of Rome (284-305), who reformed the administrative machinery of the empire, introducing the two-tiered system of *augusti* and *caesars*.

⁹ **Robert Wace (or Guace)** (1100 – 1174): Poet. When very young, as he was destined to the Church, he was sent to Caen to make his studies, and afterwards to Paris. Between 1130 and 1135 he returned to Caen, where he was appointed *clerc lisant* (reader) to King Henry I. Being in straitened circumstances, he began to write to increase his resources. Wace wrote a very early, and perhaps, the *earliest* life of Nicholas written in French. The nautical vocabulary employed by Wace in his life of St. Nicholas, his descriptions of storms at sea, and the many journeys to which references are made, journeys in almost every instance by ship, must have had an uncommon interest to people familiar with the sea. His great importance is due to the fact that instead of writing in Latin like the other educated men of his day, he was among the first and ablest to introduce the vernacular. This gained for him a much larger audience. The evidence points clearly to the fact that Johannes Diaconus, rather than Methodius, was the chief source from which Wace drew his material for the life of St. Nicholas.

Did You Know? Myra was a seaport, and Nicholas' first church there seems to have been built over an old temple of Poseidon.¹⁰ This aspect made him a favorite of sailors, who would often throw three loaves of bread overboard in his honor when they felt a storm brewing. Because Byzantium was an empire built on sea trade, he became a favorite in Constantinople as well.

Thought to Ponder: St. Nicholas is referred to as a bright lamp that doesn't remain under a bushel. Jesus said Himself, "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14-16 NKJV)

Let's pause for a moment and consider the light of his life, and the Light of the World – Jesus Christ. Ephrem the Syrian¹¹ wrote about Him,

“The star of light that shone forth suddenly beyond its nature is smaller than the sun yet greater than the sun; it was smaller in visible light; it was greater in hidden power because of its symbol. The morning star shed its rays among the dark ones and led them like blind men. They came and received a great light. They gave offerings and received life and worshipped and returned.” (Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns, Hymn 6:7-8*)

Thought to Discuss around the Dinner Table: How can we follow the example of St. Nicholas, so that our entire lives are one continuous witness to our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God that reaches out to all? How do we hear His leading, and do we wholeheartedly follow it?

Day by day, how can we let His light shine before our friends, neighbors and co-workers so that they'll glorify our Father in Heaven? In our dealings with others, do they see us as remote, aloof, or too pious to get our hands dirty? Or do they feel comfortable approaching us for help, that we might help where we can and point them to Jesus?

Let us pray: Let your continual mercy, O Lord, enkindle in Your church the never-failing gift of charity, that, following the example of Your servant Nicholas of Myra, we may have grace to deal in generosity and love with children and with all who are poor and distressed, and to uphold the cause of those who have no helper; for the sake of Him Who gave His life for us, Your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and ever.

¹⁰ **Poseidon:** in Greek mythology, god of the sea, the son of the Titans Cronus and Rhea, and the brother of Zeus and Hades. Poseidon was the husband of Amphitrite, one of the Nereids, by whom he had a son, Triton. Poseidon had numerous other love affairs, however, especially with nymphs of springs and fountains, and was the father of several children famed for their wildness and cruelty, among them the giant Orion and the Cyclops Polyphemus. Poseidon and the Gorgon Medusa were the parents of Pegasus, the famous winged horse.

¹¹ **Ephrem the Syrian** (306 – 373): Deacon. Founded a theological school. Writer. Preacher. Fought Gnosticism and Arianism by his writings, which included poems and hymns.

Almighty God, Who in Your love gave to Your servant Nicholas of Myra a perpetual name for deeds of kindness on land and sea: Grant, we pray, that Your Church may never cease to work for the happiness of children, the safety of sailors, the relief of the poor, and the help of those tossed by tempests of doubt or grief; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.