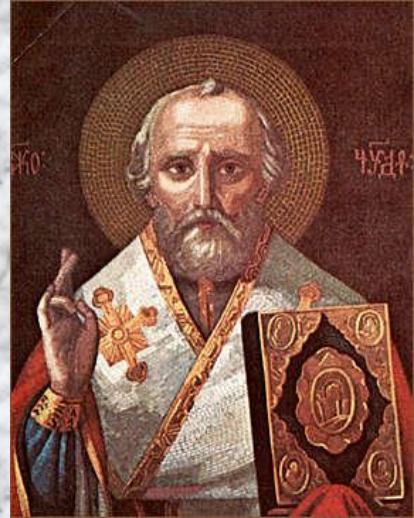


The Life of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker

Part 4 – Nicholas vs. Artemis

“The saints, however, do not wither in the face of trials. Their ability to discern has been trained by practice (Heb. 5:14), and they understand the Word and are strong in faith. Although the trials may sometimes be greater as time goes on, they remain faithful. ‘Awakening’ the Lord, who is with them, they are delivered.” (St. Athanasius, as quoted in *The Resurrection Letters*, by Fr. Jack N. Sparks, p. 195)



There are some who think that salvation is a free ticket to Heaven and so sit back and enjoy the train ride. There are others who believe that these are troop trains and we're destined for spiritual warfare before we arrive Home. Indeed, St. Paul states in the Scriptures:

“Now I, Paul, myself am pleading with you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ--who in presence am lowly among you, but being absent am bold toward you. But I beg you that when I am present I may not be bold with that confidence by which I intend to be bold against some, who think of us as if we walked according to the flesh. For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.” (II Corinthians 10:1-6 NKJV)

As we shall see in this chapter, St. Nicholas knew which side he was on, and fought unceasingly against Satan. In particular, his wrath was against the pagan temple of Artemis in Myra.

The continued presence and influence of the Temple of Artemis frustrated Nicholas, who had to keep the members of his church from sliding back into pagan habits of ritual and allegiance. No doubt, some of them – although nominally Christian – secretly visited Myra’s Temple of Artemis for sacrifice and prayer to benefit from the goddess’ supposed healing power.



Artist's Rendition of the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus

The temple of Artemis is described as “a great pagan altar, bigger than all others in height and width.” “I have seen the walls and Hanging Gardens of ancient Babylon,” wrote Philon of Byzantium,¹ “the statue of Olympian Zeus, the Colossus of Rhodes, the mighty work of the high Pyramids and the tomb of Mausolus. But when I saw the temple at Ephesus rising to the clouds, all these other wonders were put in the shade.”

If it followed the pattern of numerous temples dedicated to this goddess all over the Middle East, it consisted of large grounds, complete with plants designed to keep the earth fresh; an inner court surrounded by columns; an altar and a statue of Artemis.

Greek mythology speaks of Artemis, a daughter of Zeus and Leto, as gifted with numerous powers. She was Apollo’s twin sister, and one of the three maiden goddesses of Olympus:



Artemis with Bow

¹ **Philon of Byzantium** (280 – 220 BC): a lesser known Greek engineer and mathematician. He worked on pneumatics, clepsydras, automata, incredible instruments, and war machines. His research into the nature of air, how it interacts with water and vacuum, the equilibrium of liquids in communicating vessels, and siphons, led him to create some extraordinary objects with neither screws nor springs, just levers and skillfully drilled tubes.

“Golden Aphrodite who stirs with love
all creation,
Cannot end nor ensnare three hearts:
the pure maiden Vesta,
Gray-eyed Athena who cares but for war
and the arts of the craftsmen,
Artemis, lover of woods
and the wild chase over the mountain.”

She was the Lady of Wild Things, and Hunter-in-Chief to the gods. Like a good hunter, she was careful to preserve the young; she was the “protectress of dewy youth” everywhere. The cypress was sacred to her; as were all wild animals, especially the deer.

Nevertheless, with one of those startling contradictions so common in mythology, she kept the Greek fleet from sailing to Troy until they sacrificed a young woman to her. In many other stories, too, she was fierce and revengeful. On the other hand, when a woman died a swift and painless death, people said that she had been slain by her poisonous silver arrows.



*St. Nicholas Multiplying Grain
During a Famine*

Rivalry between Nicholas and Artemis, at least in a symbolic sense, was inevitable. Artemis was – among other things – the goddess of seafarers, bestower of fair weather and successful sea voyages.

She was also mentioned as the goddess of the harvest and the protector of grain. In addition to several stories that speak of St. Nicholas as the guardian of sailors, there is also the legend that credits him with the power to multiply grain for the people during a period of famine.

The *Vita Compilata* says that Nicholas was so infuriated by the presence of the Temple of Artemis in Myra that he destroyed it with his own hands. As the temple was inhabited by a demon whose allegiance was to Artemis, and who sought to prevent the bishop from carrying out his plan, the account suggests virtual physical combat between Nicholas and the resident demon.

According to the *Vita Per Metaphrasten* by St. Simeon Metaphrastes,²

“Now when he discovered that many of the shrines of the idols still existed and that the great broods of demons dwelt therein and were disturbing some of the citizens of Myra, incensed in mind he set out with force and holy zeal to rage through the whole infested region. Wherever he found such a shrine, he tore it down, reducing it to dust. In this way he drove the mass of demons away and brought about tranquillity for the folk to enjoy. Understand, when the Saint as adversary of the Evil Spirit thus waged war, it was the inspiration of the Supreme Being and more divine Intelligence that effected these results for him. Eventually he did not even abstain from the temple of Artemis, but attacked it also, doing with it as he had done with the others.

“The temple was outstanding – remarkably beautiful and unsurpassed in magnitude. It had been a most felicitous resort for demons. But when Nicholas launched his attack against the temple, an attack both vigorous and devastating, he not only destroyed everything that towered aloft, and hurled that to earth, but he uprooted the whole from its foundations. Indeed, what was highest, at the very pinnacle of the temple, was embedded in the earth, and what was in the earth was impelled into the air.

“The evil demons who had no way of withstanding the attacking Saint, fled shrieking aloud. And they protested that they had suffered great agony at his hands and were driven mercilessly from their possessions. Clearly, the Saint’s force in effecting this campaign, and the attack which he launched against the demons, brought good results.”

However, according to the *Vita Per Metaphrasten*, Nicholas did *not* destroy the temple physically:

“As soon as the Saint began praying, the altar collapsed, and the statues of idols fell down, like leaves of a tree when a strong wind blows in autumn. The demons who inhabited the place left, but protested to the Saint amidst their tears: ‘You have been unjust to us. We did you no harm, and yet you send us away from our home. We had made this our home, while these misguided people adored us, and now where can we go?’ And the Saint replied, ‘Go to Hell’s fire, which has been

² **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).

lit for you by the devil and his crew.’ In this manner, all altars in the area were destroyed.”

Although the resident demon was ousted from the temple and condemned to roam the Earth, his battle against Nicholas was far from over. After Nicholas died, the demon planned an attack against his tomb in Myra. The tomb – large and appropriately decorated, possibly with a chapel attached – was a popular visiting point for pilgrims to Myra. They prayed there for his blessing and patronage, asked for healings, or for protection before going on a potentially dangerous sea journey.

One such boatload of pilgrims had an extraordinary experience. They departed from a coastal area (or from an island), planning to visit his tomb, taking with them various gifts to honor St. Nicholas and to ask for his protection. The following account of this voyage appears in the *Vita Per Michaëlem*:

“He, our saintly Father and Christ’s universally acclaimed hierarch, and now passed on to the Lord, following the many miraculous acts of his lifetime, continued to demonstrate magnificently his praiseworthy piety even after his death. He thereby caused wonder among the groups of the faithful living in every land and province who joined in honoring and worshipping him. Some came from foreign and distant lands to demonstrate their admiration for the Saint, seeking to have their minds enlightened by his saintly grace. Among them was one group, now engaged in preparing to pay homage at his sweet-smelling and illness-healing resting place.

“While these faithful were making preparations for their journey, their activity was noted by an evil and ruthless demon who at one time had inhabited the Temple of Artemis, an edifice that had been cleared of his demonic presence by our saintly and miracle-performing father and his supporters. Now, then, as these pilgrims were about to set out on their journey to the city of Myra, the demon approached them, having taken on the appearance of a woman. In this disguise, the demon spoke to the travelers and claimed that she had hoped to make the journey with them, but, being unable to do so, handed them a container that she said was filled with olive oil.

“She said to the pilgrims: ‘Take this container, oh men, as I am in ill health and cannot bring this offering to the Saint myself. Please forgive my illness, which prevents me from going with you to your destination. Once you have reached this much-venerated site, please pour this oil into the lamps that burn at the sacred place.’

“This, however, was pretense. The container (shaped like a wineskin, which could be used for any sort of liquid), although it seemed to contain oil, was actually filled with a liquid of evil power. The demons who had been driven out of the Temple of Artemis had been unable to harm the Saint during his lifetime, despite many attempts; now, these evil creatures, filled with resentment and rancor, were

about to prove their criminal nature once again, this time hoping to use the pilgrims to destroy the glorious grave and the saintly relics it contained.

“Having received this supposed offering, the travelers set out on their journey, carrying the container the evil spirit had given them, and setting their sails toward Myra. They spent all of the first day at sea. At night, however, Nicholas himself, the ever-present fervent defender of the victims of evil, appeared to one of the victims of the diabolical plan, and said to him: ‘Rise up and hurl this alien container to the bottom of the sea!’ At dawn, the man carried out this command he had received in his sleep, and he threw the vessel into the water.

“The moment he had done this, a huge flame rose into the air and remained suspended above the ocean, emitting dense smoke and nauseating odors. At the same time, the sea was torn asunder and began to boil with a great roaring noise, while drops of water were flung about like flaming sparks. The travelers were awed and frightened by this terrible sight. The whole boat on which they were assembled now shuddered in the turbulent water. The crewmembers, frightened by the sight and overcome by the foul smells, abandoned the boat’s helm and oars. Both crew and passengers were overcome by fear for their safety.

“Soon, however, their Protector [Saint Nicholas] was able to quiet their fears, as he commanded the satanic upheaval to yield by sinking to the bottom of the sea. Realizing that they had thus been saved, the men became aware that this danger and threat to their lives had been the demon’s work. Not long thereafter, they were able to reach the shore, disembark, and now the men were at last fully free of fear. *Seized by great joy, they gave their thanks to God and Saint Nicholas – to the first as Creator and Guardian of His creature, and to the second as the mediator who had caused their remarkable salvation by God.*”³

According to the *Vita Per Metaphrasten*,

“Pilgrims flocked to Myra from all parts of the Earth as numerous partakers of his grace. It happened that some lived in the remote regions of Lycia and therefore had to travel for many days; nonetheless undeterred, they resolved to visit the tomb of the Saint and partake of sanctification. So they raised their sails and set out on the sea for the metropolis. A malignant demon that once dwelt in the temple of Artemis but had been expelled with many another when glorious Nicholas had toppled the shrine to earth became aware of their sea journey. Partly in hatred for the Saint, because Nicholas had destroyed his temple and thereby made him homeless, by his powers trying to exterminate him, but partly also in wanting to keep the pilgrims from the exercise of sanctification, with a wish to undo their plans he disguised himself as a woman, carrying a jar apparently full of oil. The ‘woman’ said to the pilgrims that she would very much like to carry the jar to the Saint’s tomb, but that she feared the thought of making so long a

³ Emphasis mine.

voyage. For, she said, it is not possible that any woman alive would be so brave as to undertake the difficult sea voyage. ‘Therefore I ask you to take this jar and present it at the tomb of the Saint. There you can fill his lamps with the oil.’ The horrible demon made this request in words, handing over the jar to the pilgrims. However, as I shall shortly relate, this was the first step in an evil action and one truly worthy of the demon who made it. Then they received it, and the first day of their voyage passed. O faithful servant of God and egregious defender of those in jeopardy, Nicholas! This too was thy task, which was performed miraculously and beyond the power of imagination! For in the night Nicholas appeared to one of them and ordered the jar to be thrown into the deep.”

“When they arose at first light, they did as he said and cast it into the sea. At once the sky lit up in flame, and the most terrific stench followed. Then the waters began to split apart, booming like hell broken loose, with a tremor like an earthquake, emitting a rumbling; and drops of water glistened in the morning light. Then the ship, buffeted by the huge waves, began to sink. The men, stunned by such an unbelievable prodigy, lamenting as one, and clearly hopeless, looked at each other but found no way out of their plight. Yet he who from afar had taken account of their safety and had ordered that the jar be cast into the sea now appeared before them. He freed them from that evil instance and from the peril at sea; for at once the ship, without further interruption, moved from that spot, and the men had their fears assuaged. A gentle and fragrant breeze wafted them, and they delighted in the balm. Their hearts were filled with the greatest joy!”

In Robert Wace’s⁴ version of the legend, it is Diana⁵ who plots against St. Nicholas. In anger at St. Nicholas because of his interference with her worship, Diana appears in the guise of a nun to some sailors who are going to his monastery. She gives them a *mediacon*, a magic oil, to be spread on the steps and walls alleging it is a holy offering. St. Nicholas appears to the



⁴ **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.

⁵ **Diana:** in Roman mythology, goddess of the moon and of the hunt. The Latin counterpart of the Greek virgin goddess Artemis, Diana was the guardian of springs and streams and the protector of wild animals. She was, in addition, especially revered by women, and was believed to grant an easy childbirth to her favorites. In art she is typically shown as a young hunter, often carrying bow and arrows. The most celebrated shrine to Diana was on Lake Nemi, near Aricia.

sailors carrying the *mediacon* and tells them to spread it on the sea. They do so, whereupon it bursts into flames.

According to *The Golden Legend*,

“And in this country the people served idols and worshipped the false image of the cursed Diana. And to the time of this holy man many of them had some customs of the paynims, for to sacrifice to Diana under a sacred tree; but this good man made them of all the country to cease then these customs, and commanded to cut off the tree. Then the devil was angry and wroth against him, and made an oil that burned, against nature, in water and burned stones also. And then he transformed him in the guise of a religious woman and put him in a little boat, and encountered pilgrims that sailed in the sea towards this holy saint, and reasoned them thus and said: ‘I would fain go to this holy man, but I may not; wherefore I pray you to bear this oil into his church, and for the remembrance of me that ye anoint the walls of the hall’; and anon he vanished away. Then they saw anon after another ship with honest persons, among whom there was one like to S. Nicholas, which spake to them softly: ‘What hath this woman said to you, and hath she brought?’ And they told to him all by order. And he said to them: ‘This is the evil and foul Diana; and, to the end that ye know that I say truth, cast that oil into the sea.’ And when they had cast it, a great fire caught it in the sea, and they saw it long burn against nature. Then they came to this holy man and said to him: ‘Verily thou art he that appeared to us in the sea and deliveredst us from the sea and awaits of the devil.’” (Jacobus de Voragine,⁶ “**The Golden Legend: Lives of the Saints,**” translated by William Caxton, pp. 65-66)

Thought to Ponder: St. Nicholas became such an example of God’s power at work that the Church held him up as a role model to both its clergy and its laity. Legendary stories in Latin prose formed a part of the private reading of the clergy in their canonical hours, and in vernacular prose or verse were read before popular congregations in church on the days devoted to the honor of the particular Saint.

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.

Thought to Discuss around the Dinner Table: How did St. Nicholas get the power to fight on such a spiritual level? How can we?

