

Saint Nicholas and the Three Gifts

From The Life of Saint Nicholas (9th century)

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Impoverished Father

10. There was a certain man among those who were recently famous and well-born, and he was a neighbor, his home being next to Nicholas'. Owing to the plotting and envy of Satan, who always has a grudge against those who prefer to live a life in accord with God, this man was squeezed by great poverty and lack of resources. He had gone from being well-off to extreme indigence. He had three daughters who were both shapely and very attractive to the eye, and he was willing to station them in a brothel so that he might thereby acquire the necessities of life for himself and his household. For no man among the lordly or powerful deigned to marry them lawfully, and even among the lower-classes and those who owned the least bit of something there was no one well-minded enough to do this. And so the man looked away from his salvation and, as it were, fainted at the thought of prevailing upon God with persistence and prayer. By this logic he came to assent to situating his daughters in the abyss of such dishonor.

11. But the Lord who loves humankind, who never wishes his own creation to become hostage to sin, sent him a holy angel — I mean the godlike Nicholas — both to rescue him, along with his whole household, from poverty and destruction, and to restore readily his previous prosperity. For when he learned of the situation, the man who was and who was proven to be the all-honored and truly faithful steward of the Lord pondered in his mind this advice of Solomon's that is full of help: "God loves a person who is a cheerful giver" (Proverbs 22.8) and "The one who pities a beggar is himself nurtured" (Proverbs 22.9). And again: "Provide good things before God and humankind" (Proverbs 3.4). And that one from the same place that is apt in various ways: "Save those who are led away to death" (Proverbs 24.11). By the expenditure and very generous donation of his own money, Nicholas became a most ready resource for their defense, and he saved them, though they were already being led away to a death of profligacy.

The First Gift

12. But behold the righteous man's understanding and the manner of his charity, and wonder greatly at how unassuming his virtue was. Or rather, emulate him most eagerly in order that you, too, may be shown mercy, having great need of the kindness of God, since "He who is merciful will be shown mercy," (Matthew 5.7) according to the Lord's saying. The true model of purity and author of sympathy, Nicholas, wishing to use his own money to help the man, and to lead him with his daughters away from the shameful and dishonorable deed which had, in truth, already been decided for them — what does he do? He does not appear to him in person or speak about a gift or any other type of relief, thereby freeing him from shame while at the same time very carefully taking the trouble not to trumpet his own charity. After hurling a bag containing a large amount of gold into the house through the window at night, he quickly hastened home.

13. When the man who had been shown this mercy found the bag when it had become day, he was seized with joy and with ungovernable tears and gave thanks to God with amazement and astonishment, wondering in himself from where so great a blessing had come to him. The father of

the girls, after receiving this bride-price in the belief it had been provided to them from God, and considering that the godsend was a sufficient contribution for a dowry, without delay contrived a marriage for his first daughter, having acquired for her an honorable life with joy and pleasure granted by the mediation of saint Nicholas.

The Second Gift

14. When Nicholas, the man of God and benefactor who was generous in his charity, looked and saw that his beneficence had resulted in a good and saving deed, when the young woman's marriage-rite had passed, he threw another bag of gold, equal to the previous one, through the same window later at night, and hastily went to his own home.

15. As daybreak was dawning, the father, after shaking off the torpor of sleep, unexpectedly found this gift of gold. He fixed his face on the ground, giving prayers of thanksgiving to God with groans (as is reasonable), unable to wholly open his mouth to him because he was struck dumb at the doubling of his kindness. With cries of prayers that were only in his heart and unuttered, he said "Show me, O merciful Master, your angel among men, who has recently been proven kind to be good to us. Show me who the person is, who is seasoning for us this rich feast of yours, and what type of person he is who is ministering the wealth of your immeasurable goodness to us who are lowly, through whom, beyond hope, you saved us from spiritual death, sin, and from our calamitous poverty. For behold, through your inexpressible help, I am giving my other daughter in lawful marriage and am freeing her from the impiety which we formerly practiced because of our unexpected desperation, glorifying your all-holy name and exalting your unending goodness toward us who are unworthy."

The Third Gift

16. Accordingly, after the father yoked his other daughter in the same way as his previous daughter and shared in the gifts of God through his servant Nicholas, he vigilantly and attentively stayed awake the following nights, confidently expecting that the person who had secretly furnished such money for her sisters would provide the dowry for his third daughter; for then he would get hold of him so long as, at any rate, he didn't elude him when he entered the house, by falling asleep. As the man was meditating on these matters and staying awake with great effort, the worshiper of the Trinity, and of one member of the Holy Trinity, Christ, our true God, the servant Nicholas appeared. And again, at his usual point late at night, in order to escort the man's third daughter as he had done to the others, he threw in through the same window a gift of gold similar to the ones he had previously thrown in, and withdrew quietly from the place.

17. But the father perceived his arrival because of the gift of gold that fell into the house, and, going quickly from the house, overtook the saint at a run. When he recognized who he was, he threw himself face-first at his feet with cries, and gave thanks to him over and over with many words and called him, his and his three daughters' savior, after God, and said, "If our common Master, Christ, hadn't stirred your goodness, we would have long ago destroyed our own lives by a shameful and destructive livelihood. But as it is, the Lord has saved us through you, most blessed one, and rescued us from the filth of immorality. And so we ought, like a debt, to give thanks to you all of our days, because you stretched out a hand of help to us and caused the poor to rise from the ground and raised the destitute up from a dunghill through your generous and truly wonderful gift." When saint Nicholas heard these words, he raised him up from the ground and, binding him by an oath not to

make any of these blessings, of which he had thought him worthy, known to anyone for as long as he should live, he let him go in peace.

18. O the compassion of the holy man toward the needy! O the beneficial and beautiful purpose of all-blessed Nicholas! The care of his good-natured soul revealed in visible form a model of our Savior Christ's compassion toward us. He showed a shepherd's consideration toward those who were sick in soul even before his visible episcopal profession.