

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, and he was a neighbor, his home being next to Nicholas'. 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. The man 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 Nicholas 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 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). By the very generous donation of his own money, Nicholas became a most ready resource for their defense, and he saved them.

The First Gift

12. But wonder greatly at how unassuming his virtue was. Or rather, emulate him. Nicholas does not appear to him in person or speak about a gift, 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, 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. Nicholas 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. He said

“Show me who the person is, 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.”

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. As the man was meditating on these matters and staying awake with great effort, Nicholas appeared. And again, at his usual point late at night, 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, 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.” 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 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! 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.