

Saint Nicholas Saves Three Innocent Men

From The Military Officers (c. 400 AD)

translated by CHARLES W. JONES

In the days of the great emperor Constantine there was unrest and dissension in Frigia Adaifalorum, and it was suggested to the most benign emperor that the evils be exterminated. At once he sent an army with the officers in command who were called Nepotianus, Ursus, and Eupoleonis. Crossing the strait from their station in Constantinople, they eventually sailed into the Lycian prefecture.

They came to a place called Andriake, which constituted the port for the metropolis of Myra lying three miles, more or less, from it. There they took shore leave from their anchored ship because there was no wind for sailing. Some of the soldiers separated from the main group, to find food and recreation—ostensibly to buy food for the whole party. Shortly some looters, impersonating those soldiers, were arrested for looting and pilfering. As a result a great crowd started to riot in a plaza called Placomatus. Even the Myrians at the metropolis heard the crowd, who were mobbing the soldiers as if they were the lawbreakers.

The tumult and noise were great indeed. Hearing it, the servant of God Nicholas, who administered the Holy Church of God there as bishop, walked down to quiet the disturbance, asking whether anything wrong or illegal had been done. As he arrived at Andriake, the officers of the army saw him and hailed him, drawing him into conference. The soldiers who knew him and the others who met him for the first time greeted him and embraced him with great affection. He asked them: “Where do you come from, and on whose business do you come, and for what reason do you come?”

They told him: “We are peaceful. Our most benign emperor sent us to engage in battle with some lawbreakers, and we are on our way. Pray for us, most holy father, that we may prosper on our journey.”

Then the holy bishop invited them to go back to Myra with him, there to receive his blessing and to partake of food. The soldiers, admiring both the most holy bishop himself and his soft spokenness, commanded everybody to quiet the tumult and thereby avoid arrest. Then Nicholas urged the soldiers to climb with him to the bishop's palace.

Just then some people came from the city to that most holy man, saying: “Lord, if you had been in the city, three innocents would not have been handed over to death as they were, because Judge Datianus, taking those three men into custody, has ordered them beheaded. The whole city is in a turmoil because Your Sanctity was not to be found there.”

On hearing this, the most holy bishop became downcast. After speaking with the soldiers he took their leaders and crossed the city.

Coming to a plaza named Leonti, he asked those who were coming away from those who had received sentence whether they were still alive. They told him that the men still lived and were directly ahead at a place known as Dioscorus, which they would find at the martyrdom of the brother confessors Crescentius and Dioscorus. As they were talking, Nicholas said that the victims ought by now to be coming out. When they got to the gate, some told him that they were in a place called Byrra: that was to be place of the beheading.

Saint Nicholas, now running, found a great crowd of people before the executioner, who was holding his sword up, anticipating the coming of the holy man. When Nicholas came up to the place of the confessors of Christ, he found the three men with their faces covered with linen cloths. They had been placed in position, with their hands tied behind them. They were bending their knees and bowing their heads, expecting death.

At that moment Saint Nicholas, according as it is written, “The righteous are bold as a lion” (Proverbs xxviii, 1), fearlessly grabbed the sword from the executioner and cast it to the ground. Loosening the men from their chains he took them with him to the city.

Walking down to the Pretorium, he thrust open the door and entered the presence of Eustathius the Praeses. The Praeses, hearing from a guard what had been done, now walked up to honor the holy man. But the servant of God, Nicholas, turned away from him saying: “Sacriligious blood shedder! How dare you confront me, apprehended in so many and such evil acts! I will not spare or forgive you, but will let the mighty emperor Constantine know about you—how many and how serious are the sins which you have been discovered in, and in what fashion you administer your princely prefecture.”

Then Eustathius the Praeses fell to his knees and begged him: “Be not wrathful with thy servant, lord, but speak the truth, that I am not the guilty one, but the heads of state, Eudoxius and Simonides.”

Nonetheless the holy man answered: “It is not Eudoxius and Simonides who did this, but silver and gold.” For the holy man had learned that the Praeses was to receive more than two hundred pounds of silver to execute the citizens for crime. Yet the most holy man, after the officers of the army had earnestly spoken in behalf of the Praeses, granted him pardon, once the charges which the Praeses had leveled against the three men were cleared.

Then the army chiefs, during their refection with the very holy man, asked him to pray for them, and received from him his benediction. After prayers, they bade good-bye and sailed away.