

Reclaiming St. Nick

By Dr. Stephen Wendt, CM Board Member

Friends, I'm tired of hearing people run down Santa Claus. Everywhere I turn, folks are saying that we need to throw out Santa and get back to the essence of the season: Jesus, born in Bethlehem.



The instincts of these folks are wonderful. We do need to cut through the materialistic swamp and rediscover the central miracle – that God became like us so that we could become like Him. But let's not include Santa in the things we throw away! Santa's been working his heart out for Jesus for 1,600 years, and if his image is warped, it's our fault and not his.

Santa (or more properly, St. Nicholas) started in Asia Minor in the fourth century. He was renowned for his compassion. Born into a very wealthy family, he very quickly gave all his money away. He became a Bishop of the church (that's what you do with people who can't handle money, put them to work for the church) and his contemporaries thought he was the living image of Jesus.

He did not like to embarrass people in need, so he would sneak up on them and leave gifts for them to find later. His special concerns were the poor and the children, and he was active in efforts for social justice as well as personal charity. After his death, he was declared a saint. Yet, death didn't slow him down very much. He has been seen in countries all over the world ever since. Sometimes he is riding on horseback, sometimes on a camel. In at least a few instances he has been spotted in a cart pulled by two goats named Cracker and Gnasher.

His first confirmed sighting in this country was in 1821, by Dr. Clement Moore, professor of divinity at the General Theological Seminary in New York. Dr. Moore was so excited that he wrote a poem about his experience. Apparently, he wasn't too sure how his fellow scholars at the seminary would respond to the report, so he left his name off the first publication. The poem, however, has become the definitive statement of how St.

Nicholas has chosen to appear in our country (with reindeer this time), and you could not ask for a more credible witness than Dr. Moore.

“Twas the night before Christmas/When all through the house/Not a creature was stirring/Not even a mouse.”

Throw out Santa? That’s absurd! Let’s reclaim him instead! Let’s make sure the children know that St. Nicholas does what he does as an expression of Christ’s love. He gives with abandon and with joy in the giving, in the same way that God gives life and love and everything we have. And like God Himself, St. Nick gives and then asks us to share with others.

That reminds me. Do you know why we hang stockings at Christmas? According to Angela Carter, author of “Saints and Strangers,” the tradition began when Bishop Nicholas (back before he was a saint) heard about a very poor man with one leg. The man was so poor he could afford only one stocking, which he would wash out each night and hang by the fireplace to dry. One Christmas Eve, Nicholas wanted to give the man some money, but he could not find a way into the man’s home to leave it there unseen. The doors and windows were all locked, so finally Nicholas climbed up onto the roof. He knew the man could not afford a fire, so he decided it was safe to drop the purse full of coins down the chimney. He expected it to land in the fireplace, but instead it dropped right into the stocking that had been left hanging to dry – where it was found by the man on Christmas morning.

As Jesus said to His disciples, “Go thou, and do likewise.”