

# St. Nicholas Tells His Story

by Jamie Foster.

This is a 1-man, 1-act play where “St. Nicholas Tells His Story.” Items in red are stage directions, costume/prop suggestions, etc. The run time is about 45 minutes but could be paired down if desired. I’ve used this script for St. Nicholas Day presentations, church classes, and a Family Dinner’s 15-minute version for the grandkids.

The key material drawn upon for this script is Bill Bennett's book, [The True Saint Nicholas](#). Another good book (novel) by Glenn Beck is [The Immortal Nicholas](#).

If you can muster up a Greek accent, that would be fun.

Set: table front of stage but off to the side so doesn’t block view of the altar. Altar rear center stage. One stool by the altar along with a Chi-Rho cross/shield. Another stool elsewhere. Rocking chair slightly back from front and to one side with a Christmas quilt on it. On the table: old shoes, leather book/binder w/script, scrolls, magazine with Coke picture, “Night Before Christmas” book, ceramic cup with water, lantern, bags of coins.

St. Nicholas walks to the rocking chair and sits down, starts rocking, house lights go off. Top-of-show costume: monk brown; underneath for later is a green priest outfit with cross and gold ropes.

St. Nicholas is very friendly, light-hearted, and a tad ho-ho-ho-ish.

Sitting...

For a very long time now, the real me has been beneath the radar, practically invisible to modern-day scholars and obscured by current Christmas figures. I wasn’t trying to be quite so secretive, but I suppose if you take seriously the admonishment to give without drawing any attention

to yourself, then I can't be surprised or disappointed about being unknown. [standing...] In fact, I'll take that as a compliment. Thanks be to God!

I am thoroughly amazed at just how large a stir my story has created over the centuries, even if largely undocumented. My goodness, I'm not sure even I buy all that's said about me. Nevertheless, the stories and tales, legends and myths, are legion, having now spread across the continents, morphing as they go.

But isn't that really true about all of us? We all have our own personal histories that we know to be true. We also all have stories told about ourselves – some true some not so true. These will even carry on a couple generations, at least in the family. And if some are more true in spirit than they are in fact, well, I can live with that.

What I set out to do – what I intended to do – was share God's love. To the extent that you know me in that light, I am eternally grateful. God's love is a big message to tell. I must forgive those who may have exaggerated my story to match the proportion of God's Gift. And if their intentions, too, were to share God's love, then I am forever in their debt.

So, as best I can recall, here's my story. Forgive my own embellishments that over the years have crept in to even my own memories. Be honest, you have the same problem yourself, right... Do you really remember that event, or do you remember all the conversation about it since??? Be honest now. Anyway, off we go...

**Sit on steps...**

I was born to a fairly well-to-do couple, in the mid-to-late 200s AD. My father and mother were Theophanes and Nonna who lived in a city called Patara in a region you now call Turkey. They lived a long and prosperous life, but alas, went many years without children. Like Hannah of 1st Samuel, my mother prayed to God for a child, poured out her soul that God might gift her with a child. And he did – me! I'm told that at my first bath

after birth, I stood up and raised my hands as if in praise to God. They named me Nicholas, which in Greek means “people’s victor,” after my uncle who was an abbot at a nearby monastery.

Patara was a bustling city of proud Greek heritage and part of the Roman Empire at the time. Officials from the region would come to Patara and meet in a temple to Apollo that sat 1,000 people. [Be a boy on the pier!...] My favorite spot in town was the port. Fishing boats came and went with a great deal of hustle and bustle as did merchant ships laden with goods from all over the Mediterranean.

When I was seven, my parents delegated my studies to a trusted slave who took me to school and rehearsed me in all things reading, writing, and numbers. But, in one aspect of my studies, my parents maintained total control. They were part of Patara’s Christian community. This new and growing religion required much devotion, and from that my parents did not veer.

I loved the stories of David and Goliath, of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. I carefully memorized the words of Jesus, a favorite being, [recite as a child might, “formally”] “In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren ye have done it unto me.” A Christian’s duty was to help others, a lesson my parents drove into me from my early days by words and deeds.

And I heard the stories of how being a Christian was dangerous. Officials often needed scapegoats, and the Christians, not being fully understood or appreciated, were an easy target. My father told me of how in 64 A.D. a fire had destroyed the city of Rome, and that Nero blamed those Christians, and made human torches of them to light his garden at night. [sign of the cross]

It was a time when being Christian was fraught with peril.

A great plague came upon us when I was young, and it claimed both my father and my mother. I went to live with my uncle at the monastery. [Look to stained glass] I prayed for strength. [To audience] To my delight, strength came, and in response I immediately began my studies for the priesthood. As part of that process, I vowed to give up all my possessions, including my rather large inheritance.

[At rocker, fondling the quilt] Giving up possessions, giving away – giving – I learned, can be a profound gift to the giver as well as the recipient when properly understood and conducted. All possessions are God's, and no one else's. They are not yours to give, but merely yours to pass along. At the root of it all: sharing God's love.

One of the most oft' told stories from my life, and perhaps a premonition of things to come, goes something like this...

[In aisle...]

In Patara lived a once well-to-do family that had fallen on hard times. The father tried desperately to find work, but his soft hands bespoke "lazy" to potential employers. There were three daughters of marrying age in this family. But without a dowry, there was little hope of marriage for any of them. The father began thinking that the only way to at least keep his daughters fed was to sell them into servitude (which was a nice way of saying prostitution).

News of this predicament reached me quickly, but I must say I pondered on what to do for some time. I recalled Jesus' teachings, "when giving to the poor, let not your right hand know what your left is doing so that your giving will be in secret." In other words, let no man be the wiser. This was to be my first giving escapade at night. I waited till I was sure all were nestled asleep, [acting out, all three] then crept ever so quietly to a window of their house and [into shoe on table] dropped in a bag of gold coins. Some say it landed in a shoe, some say in a stocking hung to dry. I won't quibble about the details.

Word of the father's delight spread. The family gave thanks and praise to God who had provided not only enough to live on but to provide a dowry for the first daughter as well.

Wow, what a great feeling this giving! Sharing God's bounteous love, it's downright addicting. I had to do it again...

So, again, [into shoe on table] I did a bit of midnight marauding, only to be rewarded again by word of the family's tears of joy, thankfulness, and the marriage of their second daughter.

I was not so lucky the 3rd time. The father was on to me. He stayed up night after night hoping against all hope that a 3rd visit would come. But I was also on to him, so instead of dropping the bag of coins in the window, [into shoe on table] I arched a gorgeous throw through the window from what I thought was a safe distance. Some say the third bag I dropped down the chimney; again, I will not quibble the details. In any case, the father saw it land, and began chase as I attempted my retreat into the darkness. I didn't make it. He caught me, and to his utter surprise, he recognized who it was and got on his knees thanking me. I bade him, "do not thank me, thank God, the source of all gifts. And, I beg of you, please do not tell of my name in this endeavor, only the name of God." To my knowledge, he kept the secret all of his days. Thanks be to God!

Soon, my wealth was gone and I settled into my studies to become a priest. I began with a work called "the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," a treatise of the 1st or early 2nd century AD on Christian morality and practices. [Holding up scrolls] I poured over all the documents of the day in search of Christian truths and lessons. Like my uncle, I journeyed to the Holy Lands. Jerusalem around 300 AD was under Roman rule, and much of the city that Jesus had known was rubble beneath the modern-day city. Among my stops were Bethlehem and Golgotha.

The first of many maritime stories told of me occurred during my trip home to Patara from the Holy Lands. [On stool away from altar] I found a corner on the deck to call my own (there were no quarters for passengers such as me), and we set out under gentle winds. But while at sea, the weather turned and we found ourselves in the midst of a tremendous storm.

[MOTION] The crew began to panic, but I recalled the storm that overtook the ship carrying Paul to Rome for trial. I prayed for calm, both of the wind and of the sailors, and loud enough that they could hear my conviction. And calm the winds did, only to discover that the rudder had been rendered worthless by the storm. We drifted for days, during which I never gave up hope and tried to persuade the crew likewise. [Standing...] Then one day, we arose to see land, but not just any land, we were drifting right into Patara. Thanks be to God!

[Proudly before the audience] My uncle soon decided that my studies were complete. He gathered the Patara community together and proclaimed, “Blessed is the flock to be worthy of Nicholas as its pastor.” I can still hear his words as he continued... “Because this one will shepherd well the souls of those who have gone astray, will nourish them on the pasturage of piety, and will be a merciful helper in misfortune and tribulation.” [sign of the cross]

[Move into the/an aisle]

I took the job seriously. Offering kind words to strangers. Settling disputes. Convincing neighbors to help neighbors. I shared the teachings of Jesus, and did as very best as I could to lead by example. And whenever I passed by the house of those three daughters, I smiled a bit to myself.

Some years into my work as a priest, the Bishop of Myra (several miles east of Patara) passed away. I arrived one evening, and early the next morning I set out to the church for prayers and to pay my respects.

[Climbing up to chancel] As I climbed the steps and began to enter the sanctuary door, an old bishop whom I did not know stopped me. He asked, “What do people call you, my son?” To which I replied, of course, “My

name is Nicholas, your servant.” And the bishop’s reply was, [gesturing follow to audience] “Follow me...”

What I did not know at the door was that the bishops had gathered the day before to decide on a replacement for the deceased bishop. Upon lengthy arguments and with no resolution to the matter, one of the eldest among them said he had had a dream, and that the first person through the doors of the church the next morning by the name of Nicholas should become the next bishop. The group agreed to the plan, and the next morning, I stepped through that door...

Stunned. Overwhelmed. Thrilled. It’s hard to describe. And I protested of course, putting forth lack of readiness as a defense. Have you ever tried to dissuade a roomful of bishops?! [take off brown monk revealing green priest, add miter cap] I became the Bishop of Myra.

Did it really happen that way? It was a long time ago. Many people say so. Back then, people believed in dreams and such courses of action, more so than today at least. In any case, I did become the Bishop of Myra.

Soon a firestorm was upon us, the Christians. About 303 AD, Emperor Diocletian flew into a rage over the Christians, ordering churches destroyed, services banned, and scriptures burned. This went on for years and I knew it would soon reach Myra. I didn’t have to wait long before the Roman boots were on our streets. [at base of altar] And I soon found myself in jail. Tortured, malnourished, beaten – it was very unpleasant. My respite was to minister to those around me. Keep the faith. Tend the wounds. Survive, one day at a time. Galerius eventually succeeded Diocletian, but his heart was also hardened against the Christians. It wasn’t until he was on his death bed that he issued an edict to restore rights to the Christians in certain parts of the empire.

At that time, Constantine was battling another Roman leader. [hold up chi-rho] He had a dream in which he saw a flaming Chi-Rho cross, a symbol of Christ, emblazoned in the sky, and beneath it these words, “in this sign you

shall conquer.” He ordered the cross painted on his soldiers’ shields, and on to victory he marched. In 313 AD, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan which granted freedom of religion, including Christianity, and ordered the return of properties to those previously persecuted. Soon thereafter I heard my cell door creek open, a guard helped me up the stairs my legs a bit shaky. Dirty, ragged, and exhausted, I walked into the sunlight a free man again. Thanks be to God!

Constantine turned out to be quite the promoter of Christianity. His own enthusiasm for the religion helped spread it through all classes of people. When he moved his capital from Rome, he created Byzantium, now called Constantinople, and erected all manner of churches.

Of course, I remained in Myra. The job now was to put the pieces back together. Just recovering from such a long period of persecution was bad enough, but a schism had developed between those who had kept the faith and those who had not. My, my, can people become self-righteous.

[holding up a scroll] How many times did I repeat Jesus’ words, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you.”

A famine struck my Myra and the surrounding region soon after I was released from jail. It was bad. Food supplies were non-existent. Hunger was rampant.

And disease was spreading. The cries of beggars and mourners filled the streets. Then one day I heard of some grain ships stopping in Myra on their way to Constantinople. [Act out, clamor, bustle, walk, etc.] I hurried to the docks and found that the place was already swarming with hungry people. I managed to arrange a meeting with the captain, at which time I asked him for some grain. He explained that it was all weighed and measured when he left Alexandria and he had to account for the full measure upon arrival. I told him that we would pay for the grain, but he was still unwilling. [in aisle] I convinced the captain to walk with me through town to see the conditions, and then I appealed to him to do the right thing. In the end, he agreed to

sell us enough grain to get Myra through the worst of the crisis. Thanks be to God! Legend has it that when the ships arrived in Constantinople, the holds were completely full of grain.

[at the table] Emperor Constantine was counting on the Christians to help unify his realm. But, another schism had developed within the Christian community as to whether Jesus was as divine as God. This split threatened to divide not only the Christians but the empire as well. So, Constantine called all the Bishops to Nicaea to settle the matter. About 300 of us came together at Constantine's palace, though I must admit my name is not documented as an attendee, perhaps because of what I'll now tell you... Arius was the rabble rouser, and as he continued speaking his blasphemous words, I grew to where I had had enough. I marched up to him and slapped him in the face. I know, what can I say, probably not the right move, and in front of the emperor to boot. [removing miter cap, to jail area] I was stripped of my clerical robes and confined to another wing of the palace until the meeting was over. As it turned out, the group rejected Arius' arguments and the Nicene Creed was written to spell out what we Christians actually believe. The group ultimately had mercy on me (maybe even silently wishing they had had the guts to stand up to Arius so fervently), and [replace miter cap] my robes were restored to me. Thanks be to God! Here's how that earlier text read; it'll sound familiar: [from podium with scroll]

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the begotten of God the Father, the Only-begotten, that is of the essence of the Father. God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten and not made; of the very same nature of the Father, by Whom all things came into being, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. Who for us humanity and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate, was made human, was born perfectly of the holy virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit.

By whom He took body, soul, and mind, and everything that is in man, truly and not in semblance. He suffered, was crucified, was buried, rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven with the same body, [and] sat at the right hand of the Father. He is to come with the same body and with the glory of the Father, to judge the living and the dead; of His kingdom there is no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, in the uncreated and the perfect; Who spoke through the Law, prophets, and Gospels; Who came down upon the Jordan, preached through the apostles, and lived in the saints. We believe also in only One, Universal, Apostolic, and [Holy] Church; in one baptism in repentance, for the remission, and forgiveness of sins; and in the resurrection of the dead, in the everlasting judgement of souls and bodies, and the Kingdom of Heaven and in the everlasting life.

Thanks be to God!

[rocker] Around 340 AD I knew my end was near. I prayed the Lord would send angels, and on my death bed I inclined my head and saw the angels and knew it was time. It was December 6th, or so I'm told, when I departed this earth for a greater realm. Thanks be to God!

After my earthly life was ended, the stories and legends of my work grew and grew. Some were true, nearly all contained embellishment, and, well, some didn't get it right at all. But, as they say, it's the thought that counts. And I thank God in Heaven that all emphasize attempts at giving, at sharing God's love, and at helping people as Jesus taught.

You may know that I'm the patron saint of sailors. This no doubt came of the many stories told and retold of me by men of the sea. Here's one of those stories...

[ship/port area] A ship ran into desperate trouble in the eastern Mediterranean. A ferocious storm had driven the ship upon a reef and the wild surf threatened to destroy it. The crew called out to God in my name for help (they had heard other stories). An image of me appeared to them,

shouted encouragement to them, retied lines for them, seized the tiller and steered the ship to safety, at which time the image vanished. The ship landed at Myra, and upon meeting me in the flesh at the church, they at once recognized me as the image that had saved them. They threw themselves at my feet, to which I rebuked them saying, "It was not I who saved your lives, but your own faith in God." Don't thank me, thanks be to God!

They also call me the patron saint of children. This one pleases me to no end. It's also the one that most often puts me on my knees begging God's forgiveness of my boastfulness and self pride.

One day I visited a family in the hills near Taurus Mountain. **[act out]** The man of the house and I sat at their table a while, and soon the ragged children began coming to supper. The father, greatly embarrassed, said he could not invite me to dine as he barely had enough food for his young ones. "Our grain bin is empty", he said. "Trust in the Lord," I told him. "Go look in your bin." He opened the bin, which was empty yesterday, and found it full to the top. Thanks be to God!

**[Behind the table...]**

Before we go any farther, let's settle this issue of sainthood... There are some things you must understand about sainthood. People were venerated as saints long before the Roman Catholic Church formalized their canonization process in the late 10th Century. Before formal canonization procedures, people venerated those who had been exemplars of the faith in their local areas. In some cases, the interest in a given local saint might spread beyond the local area to the region and even to the world. As early as 200 years after my death, Justinian I built a church to honor me in Constantinople, and I'm named in the late 6th century liturgy ascribed to St. Chrysostom. **[Walking down into the aisle]** I was known as a Confessor—one who confessed Christ publicly in times of persecution, remaining faithful despite imprisonment, torture or exile. Unlike the martyrs who demonstrated how to die for Christ, we Confessors were recognized as an

example of how to live for Christ. So, I have no date for canonization. My original sainthood was literally “by acclamation.”

I know what some of you are thinking... “Weren’t you recently demoted?”

[moving to table...]

Here’s what happened. In 1969 the Roman Catholic Calendar was revised. Forty saints in fact were removed from the list, but my name was not removed. And I must also point out that my sainthood remains as solid as ever in Eastern Catholic and Orthodox churches. However, I was among the ninety Roman Catholic saints whose feast days became optional (rather than obligatory) under the revision. This allowed local churches to be more “in control” of the events they wanted to celebrate. The Papal Court stated, "Saints who lost their places or whose feast days were demoted from universal to optional [e.g. mine] in the new edition of the liturgical calendar are still to be venerated as they were before the calendar's updating." So, not to worry. I’m still properly a saint and, for all Christians I would suggest, it is right and good to celebrate my feast day. [Take a drink in slightly “cheers” fashion]

Different Christian groups, and indeed many other religions, have different understandings of sainthood. Here we are in a [adjust as needed for audience/location] Methodist Church. Methodists have, as most of you know, a different view of saints than do Catholics. While patronage and veneration are out, honoring and admiring are in. And your definition of saint is excitingly broad, including all Christians. Like others, you celebrate All Saints Day, when “all who have gone before us” are honored. For your understanding I say, Thanks be to God!

By the 6th Century, my reputation, mainly by the stories supporting it, were being told by clergy from north to south throughout Europe and around the Mediterranean. Churches were built in my name. For the most part, they focused on doing God’s work and not so much on me. Thanks be to God!

[shorten?] Even the Vikings adopted me as their patron. Being the quintessential sea-going souls, they simply could not resist claiming me as theirs. As you know, the Vikings, known as Norsemen, took it upon themselves to conquer lands, and one of the conquered cities was Bari at the southeast end of Italy. After gaining control of Bari, their concern shifted to making it a renowned city. There was lots of competition for world attention, and they focused on Venice as the model to follow. How to gain the glory of Venice?...

An opportunity fell upon them. They heard that Lycia was in trouble. The Byzantine Empire had lost control to the Turks. Myra had fallen into the hands of the Muslims. The Norsemen saw the opportunity - steal my relics (bones) from Myra and bring them back to Bari. That, they thought, would put them on the map! And so they did. They accomplished the feat, and were met at dockside on their return by throngs of cheering townspeople. Bari had their saint! Bari erected a basilica to me, and in 1089 Pope Urban II consecrated my new home (which took a century to build!). A few years later, Bari would become an important point of embarkation for Christian soldiers going off to Constantinople and Jerusalem in a holy war declared by Pope Urban II.

[While putting on Father Christmas red/white robe...]

By the 12th Century, miracle plays were telling tales of me. They were mighty raucous affairs, with villains and mock violence, chasing down murderers and the like. They were very exciting if not entirely accurate or saintly.

By the end of the 15th Century, over 2500 churches, schools, hospitals, and the like throughout Europe bore my name. England alone had 400 such churches. My name is invoked to protect the innocent, guard the traveler, watch the children.

Children were being named after me left and right. In England: Nicholas, Nick, Collin. In France: Nicole, Collette. In Italy: Nicollo, Nicola. In Dutch:

Klaas. In Russia: Nikolai. Cities were claiming me as their patron saint: in Norway, Sicily, Aberdeen, Portsmouth, and in Belgium even a town was named after me, Sint-Niklaas. Everyone wanted to claim me: butchers, millers, grocers, firefighters, apothecaries, bankers, travelers, newlyweds. And children.

One last story... One of the most famous of my stories in Western Europe... Three young theology students on their way to seminary stopped at an Inn. The innkeeper noted their heavy purses, and set upon a plan to steal their money. That night, the innkeeper crept into their room, killed them, stole their money, and hid the bodies in casks for salting meat (or making pickles, or whatever version is being told). The next day, I arrived at the Inn disguised as a beggar. The innkeeper told me, "Go away, we have nothing to serve you" at which point I roared, "You lie" and forced my way into the back room where the evidence was found. I fell to my knees and prayed, and the three innocent students came back to life. Thanks be to God!

### [Sitting in the rocker]

It's been an exhausting life. Just hearing the stories makes me tired. So, here we are today. What to make of me now? Different peoples have answered that question in very different ways. In France, children place their shoes carefully beside their bed or fireplace on the eve of St. Nicholas Day in hopes of treats and gifts. In some places, children set out straw and carrots for the white horse drawing St. Nicholas from town to town. Dutch children know of Sinterklaas who lives in Spain and visits the Netherlands once a year dressed in a bishop's red finery. Black Peter does the dirty work of going down the chimneys. Italy's gift giver is Befana, an old hook-nosed woman who to this day seeks the Magi and delivers gifts to the children as she journeys in that pursuit. In some parts of Germany there is Christmas Man, and in other parts Christkindel (Christ Child). In England, Father Christmas - you know, the ghost of Christmas Present in the Dickens story. And on and on it goes...

## [Standing...]

And then we get to the United States. In 1624, The Dutch West Indies Company sent settlers to the Hudson River. Their port city, New Amsterdam, became very busy. These early Dutch no doubt brought Sinterklaas with them, including the filling of empty shoes on the eve of his feast. When the English took over and renamed the city New York, Sinterklaas faded away... Temporarily...

In the early 19th Century, a fellow arose in New York by the name of John Pintard. He was an ardent patriot and lover of history. Old customs and ancient usages fascinated him. Ultimately, he would come to form the New York Historical Society which took on me, Saint Nicholas, as their patron saint. One of the Society's new members was Washington Irving - you know, "Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Rip Van Winkle," etc. He wrote a tongue-in-cheek history of New York and published it on St. Nicholas Day, December 6, 1809. It included tales of ships arriving with Saint Nicholas carved on the bows, and of the same saint riding over tree tops delivering toys to children.

## [Pick up book]

Then there's our good friend Clement Moore. As you all well know, he wrote a poem in 1822 that may well be the most reprinted American verse of all time. He called it "A Visit from St. Nicholas" and it no doubt reflected many images he had seen and heard before. And thus the American Saint Nicholas was born, described by Moore in what is now called, "Twas the Night Before Christmas." [slow down, sit] There was an added effect from Moore's poem. As with many feast days, Christmas was earlier celebrated in a rather rowdy fashion with much drinking, noisemaking, mayhem, and the like. Moore's images of a quiet hearth and children nestled in bed brought a new feeling to Christmas. It caught on. Christmas became a home-centered, family time. Christmas in America became a holiday for families and children. Thanks be to God!

[Pick up 1931 Santa Claus picture]

The picture of Sinterklaas (that you Americans shortened to Santa Claus) that now dominates the U.S. was created by Haddon Sunblom for Coca Cola in 1931. And embellished by legions of advertisers, publishers, artists, and writers ever since. It's OK with me if the image of Santa Claus brings comfort and joy to millions of the world's children... of all ages.

[Standing]

As odd as it may seem to you, seeing me dressed as I am before you, knowing what frantic Christmas busy-ness is going on out there even this very night, I do rest in the knowledge that I helped bring to the world the true meaning of Christmas. You've heard in one of your movies that we Greeks didn't write obituaries but rather asked one question, did he have passion? Well... that's a bit of an exaggeration, but there is some truth to it, and in any case it does pose a good question. For without personal passion, would any of us really live our lives.

By the grace of God and in the name of Jesus Christ, I had passion - for the sharing of God's love, for the celebrating of that One Precious Gift to each and to all, and for responding by helping others.

Merry Christmas to all.

Thanks be to God!

And to all a good night.