

St. Demetrius Orthodox Church

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In The Spirit of St. Nicholas

By Mike and Kathie Sherer

In 1972, a Lutheran pastor and his wife, a registered nurse, decided that the Christmas season had lost its meaning in their family. To combat the materialism personified by Santa Claus and his brimming bag of toys, they dug back into his history and found that Christmas could be celebrated.....

When we were children, we eagerly looked forward to the coming of the jolly old man in the red suit. Even though both of us were raised in families where resources were limited, Santa Claus still came and no one in either of our families was ever forgotten.

Somewhere along the way to establishing our own family, however, something changed. Our culture moved more and more into consumerism. Fewer of us wanted for anything. The electronic media, increasingly effective advertising, motivators, became pervasive. We didn't like the trends in which we found ourselves immersed. Voices from the marketplace coaxed us to buy more and more, especially during a season we had been raised to believe was God's special time. It seemed to us that gifts exchanged at Christmas were becoming a distraction from the meaning of God's best gift. We were painfully aware that many in our society were left out, individuals who were more in need than those to whom we gave Christmas presents (and more in need than those whom Santa came to visit).

Good-bye Santa, Hello Saint Nicholas

Upon researching Christmas and Santa, we made an unexpected discovery. We had thought that we would find that Santa had his origins in pagan mythology somewhere in the distant past. Instead, the trail led us back to the fourth century, to an actual Christian pastor, the Bishop of Myra. Bishop Nichols, we discovered, was a kind man who cared for the people not only in his congregation but in the wider community. He began to link up those people with an excess of material goods with those who had too little. But Nicholas did it in a surprising way, he maintained a double-blind. In other words, the giver never knew who received the gift and the recipient never knew who gave it. This marvelous arrangement made it possible for people to escape the conditions usually attached to gifts.

Bishop Nicholas' reputation lived long after him. However, through the centuries his story was confused with legend and mythology. By the 1800s, the saintly, generous Christian pastor had been transformed into a jolly, bearded man in a red suit who came to give gifts to well behaved children. The legacy has been betrayed. Therefore, when our daughters, Heidi and Wendy, were young we decided to begin a new tradition. We simply did not invite Santa Clause into our Christian observance. We did all the other things that Christians ordinarily do in December; we put up a tree in our home and decorated it (without the gifts beneath, however); we celebrated the season with special foods, we played the music of the season; we worshipped God on Christmas Eve and (when we could find a service) on Christmas morning.

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This newsletter is sponsored by Denise, Chuck, Craig, Vickie and families

In loving memory of their dad - Vangel Christoff

who passed away December 3, 2010.

May His Memory Be Eternal!

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In The Spirit of St. Nicholas

Gifts that Really Matter

We decided to try to recapture the spirit of Bishop Nicholas. We began to celebrate his feast day, December 6th. Our daughters created a simple puppet show which told the story of Nicholas. In addition, we took that money we would have spent on Christmas presents and, instead, gave it (anonymously, in the Nicholas spirit) to a person or ministry in great need of our help. Our daughters helped by creating original Saint Nicholas cards to be sent with the check.

Where did the money go? One year a local kindergarten teacher had a student in our class whose family was in need of socks and underwear. We purchased and wrapped these items and she delivered them to the family. Some years we gave to a ministry agency which helped unwed mothers take care of their young children. In recent years, we had sent our Nicholas gift to a project which sends easy-to-operate-and-maintain garden tractors to farmers in the Third World. Lately we are sending our gift to a ministry which helps the homeless secure housing for themselves.

How Our Children Responded

We had some real misgivings about removing Santa Clause from our Christmas celebration and inviting Saint Nicholas in. We were concerned about the effects the changes would have on our daughters. We had no doubt there would be a good and healthy result, because we were offering them an alternative that was built on a Christian value system rather than on market place persuasion. But we knew that our daughters would face a lot of pressure from peers as they grew older and probably even some ridicule.

There were some difficulties. One of the most unexpected sources of confusion and confrontation was from relatives. Since we didn't know how else to escape the exchange mentality we thought we were caught up in, we decided to make a clean break with Christmas gift-giving. After we stopped giving Christmas gifts to relatives, we imagined that they would stop giving to our family as well. Some did, but some insisted they wanted to continue. They said, "Think of what you're doing to your children. You are robbing them of the spirit of giving." Our reply was, "We intend to give gifts to our children on their birthdays and at other times of the year. We simply want to keep this season and our celebration free from too much materialism." In time most of our relatives accepted this idea and honored our request. A few never quite made it that far, but we knew they respected what we were trying to do. In school both Heidi and Wendy had to deal with the fact that all during December and early January other children would talk—on the playground, at the bus stop, in the lunch line—about "what I want for Christmas... what I got for Christmas." Our older daughter came home from school one day and reported this conversation:

"What are you getting for Christmas?"

"Nothing, Christmas is Jesus' birthday, not mine."

"Oh, I feel sorry for you. You're not getting anything for Christmas!"

"Well, I feel sorry for you if that's all you think Christmas is about."

Our younger daughter had similar experiences. Once her class held a Christmas gift exchange during December. The gifts were distributed by using a modified version of musical chairs. When she told the teacher that her family did not practice Christmas gift exchange, she was given a special opportunity: she started and stopped the music as others in her class "exchanged gifts" with one another. When discussing the experience at home afterwards, we learned that she felt really good about having been able to speak out for her family's special custom, and for not having practiced in something that did not make sense to her.

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