

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

St. Nicholas Caring for Others First Week of Advent Friday, December 6, 2013
8:15 AM Is 29:17-24; Mt 9:27-31 (**St. Nicholas**, bishop) (A legend explored)

Obviously we are using the wrong methodology in encouraging people to share the gospel; we should tell them not to say a word to anyone!

Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Nicholas. **St. Nicholas** is one of those figures in history that is very real originally, but then the stories about him, **the legends, have grown so much we don't know how much is really real**, like the movie Philomena, which is based on a true story, but has been elaborated to such an extent no one knows what's real and what's fiction.

Well, Nicholas was a bishop in Asia, modern-day Turkey; he may have been of Greek origin—that's not certain. The name is more or less Greek, Nicholas. **He was very concerned about the poor.** Supposedly according to legend, he was passing by a cottage of some poor people and he saw their socks hanging by the fire drying. He through a coin in; **the coin landed in the sock** supposedly, and that's where the custom came from of **having socks out on St. Nicholas day.** When he died his body was taken to Italy for some reason, and he is supposedly buried in Italy today in Bari.

His reputation spread far and wide and it went to Europe. **The Europeans changed a few things.** The Dutch, for example, instead of putting socks out, maybe they don't wear socks, but they put out **shoes not for a coin but for candy.** So they changed that part. Then it elaborated further, and pretty soon St. Nicholas started showing up dressed as **a bishop to punish evil children and reward the good ones.** And his arrival was through a chimney. That's where this idea that Santa Claus comes through the chimney. **It was St. Nicholas came through the chimney with Black Peter, who was a chimney sweep.** Now some

people think Black Peter was an African, but he wasn't an African; he was full of soot because he was a chimney sweep. **And he was the one that was designated to punish the bad children.** In Dutch it's *Zwarte Pier*. In German it was *Ruprecht*. So when I was in the seminary, which was a German seminary founded by German priests, they still had this tradition. So when you were a freshmen in high school the first St. Nicholas day, the night before, there was this event that took place where Nicholas would show up and Ruprecht would show up, and all the kids that had been troublemakers were all beaten and all the other kids got candy, and then we had a big party. It was a spectacle for the upperclassman to watch. So this was a big deal at that time.

But the point is St. Nicholas continues to draw people's interests and **it's his concern for the poor that should really alert us to his significance**, that he was concerned that people have what they need. So when we come together today on the feast of St. Nicholas, we can do whatever we like according to our own traditions, but the important thing is to **keep in mind his goodwill and his willingness to share**. And it's from there that we get actually the word Santa Claus: *Sinterklaas*, Dutch, "Santa Claus" made anglicized. But you know our **Santa Claus is really nothing like St. Nicholas** because Santa Claus is just about presents and about really toys and so on. That is not the original idea. **The original idea was caring for others**, and we need to keep that in mind.