

St. Nicholas' Enduring Christmas Gift

Yes, there really is a Saint Nicholas. He was a fourth-century bishop in Myra, in Asia Minor, famous for his gift-giving, concern for the poor and for children, and support of the spirit of reconciliation between Christians. His feast day is Dec. 6.

In the Middle Ages some enterprising citizens of the Italian city of Bari stole his remains and built a cathedral in his honor in Bari. Because of the importance of Saint Nicholas to both the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Church, the cathedral is one of the few places in the world where Catholic and Orthodox minister under the same roof. Pilgrims of both denominations are welcome there.

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When the charismatic renewal swept through the Catholic Church, one of the leaders in Bari, Matteo Calisi, wondered if the tolerance expressed at the Saint Nicholas Cathedral could grow into real reconciliation. He and Italian evangelical Pastor Giovanni Traettino reached across the divide and began a movement that has brought Catholics and Protestants together throughout Italy. Over the years, the reconciliation movement has reached out from Bari to Protestants in North and South America, Africa, Europe and Asia. In addition, the Eastern Orthodox and Messianic Jewish churches have also become involved.

One of Calisi's major impacts was in Buenos Aires, where Bergoglio opened the Catholic Church there to reconciliation with the Protestant leaders. We now know Bergoglio as Pope Francis, and he has continued his outreach to other Christian

traditions. In 2014 the pope sent a historic video to Kenneth Copeland at a pastors meeting. Copeland responded to the opportunity and, along with John Arnott, James Robison and Goeff Tunnicliffe, met with him later that year. Since then, many church leaders have met with the pope to heal the divisions between Christians.

The reconciliation movement born in Bari seeks to bring Christians into genuine unity in our diversity. God realizes that we have different practices and beliefs, and we're told to tolerate our brothers (see Rom. 14:1-4, 15:1-7). Our real unity is through Christ, for if we are each in Christ then we are also united in Christ (see John 17:20-23).

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But Christian unity does not end with unity of the brethren; it is only the beginning. Jesus told us that our unity is necessary if the world is to believe that God sent Him (John 17:21). So now, we are seeing Jesus' John 17 prayer answered as ministries like Finish the Task, organized by Rick Warren, bring together all Christian traditions to reach the whole world by 2033.

We believe we are seeing the beginning of a great revival, perhaps a third Great Awakening, ignited by the unity of Christians. So let us all join Christ in His prayer that we may be brought into complete unity so the world will know Him, and pray for a worldwide Great Awakening.

We also need to thank Him for the gift of the Christian reconciliation movement, which was started in the spirit of Saint Nicholas.

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