

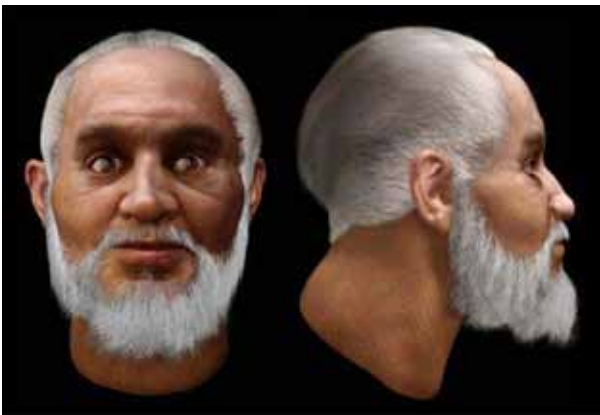
## Weekly Musing † November 28, 2011

The pictured “round things” are from my collection and are *Boy Bishop* lead tokens from the early Tudor period, about the time of Henry VII, the father of Henry VIII. They are artifacts of an interesting custom that grew up in the medieval English church but not very much elsewhere. A boy, usually a boy from the choir which generally would mean a boy who not only sang but may well have been destined for Holy Orders, was elected bishop on the feast of St. Nicholas (December 6th) and reigned until Holy Innocents Day on December 28th. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church opines, “The intention was to express in dramatic form the reverence for childhood show in the Gospels.” The young bishop would actually wear vestments and make parish visitations. On occasion, if a parish fell vacant, he would appoint a successor, albeit, one suspects, with plenty of well heeded advice. He also collected money on his rounds and even preached. There is an extant sermon of one boy bishop which I have read. The sermon is not short like mine and I suspect took at least half an hour or more. The practice was abolished by Henry VIII, one suspects for monetary reasons rather than anything profoundly theological, restored under Bloody Mary (Queen Mary I) and eliminated once and for all by Elizabeth I. However, it has made a bit of a resurgence of late in the English church.



Though you can not see it on these tokens, both because of condition and the form of English letters of the time, part of the legend reads “St. Nicholas.” How did the name of a 4th century archbishop of Asia Minor get on a medieval English token? Our theme today is, yes you guessed it, St. Nicholas (corrupted into Santa Claus by the mostly well meaning Dutch). Rather than simply enumerating the facts of the saints it serves us well to look at how they got where they are. What is durable, why did our understanding of saints evolve, and what does their current and ancient hagiography say about the needs of the people of God.

Unlike many saints, St. Nicholas was undoubtedly real and even his bones exist. When his bones in Italy (how they got there is next week’s story) were put through forensic method, they yielded a man who probably looked like this:

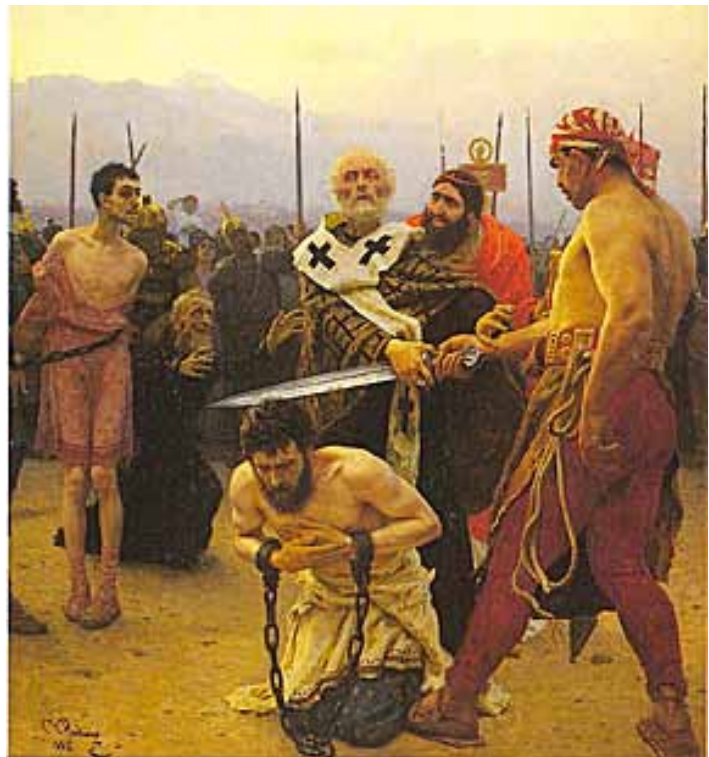


Nicholas was popular in his lifetime for many things. The most prominent story is of three young maidens who spent their dowries taking care of their aging father. This meant they most likely could not marry and were destined to a “life of degradation” as it was euphemistically put. We hardly ever think of the institution of the dowry, which held sway for many centuries.

St. Nicholas put three bags of gold secretly into their house at night, thus assuring them of marriage. Those three bags of gold became the three gold balls which were a symbol of the pawnbroker’s business for many centuries and have only recently disappeared.

There are many more stories of St. Nicholas, many of which stretch the limits of credulity. They often involve three boys. Another reasonable story of St. Nicholas is his intercession in three executions (painted in Russian in the 19th century).

Notice the omophorion, the long wool scarf embroidered with crosses that St. Nicholas has around his neck. It is the mark of the archbishop’s office.





St. Nicholas is the patron saint of Russian. This icon from my own collection is an example of the traditional portrayal of St. Nicholas and dates from the 19th century. It is approximately 10 inches by 14 inches.

How St. Nicholas became the patron saint of children, sailors and prostitutes is a matter of conjecture but it is a reflection of the spiritual needs of the faithful.

Next week: “The marauding crusaders, St. Nicholas in Europe and America, the relics of the saint, and a saint for modern times.”

## News from St. Luke’s

The letter and budget for the pledge drive has gone out. I hope you pray before you fill out the card. Too often we consider prayer a formal nicety like “please” and “thank you” but it is at the heart of who we are as followers of Christ.

I hope you have a Holy Advent. Fr. Jacob Knee from St. Stephen’s said in his column in the Gazette that Advent is a time for stopping rather than shopping. Indeed. I am attempting to do some of that myself.

Don’t forget the Christmas dinner and pageant on December 11th at 6 pm. Reservations would be nice. Practice starts this coming Sunday at 9 am for children who would like to participate in the Christmas play.

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