



# Saint Nicolas, Patron Saint of Lorraine, in NANCY (France)

*Saint Nicolas is the protector of the weak and oppressed,  
as well as the patron saint of lawyers, seamen and school children,  
of Russia and Lorraine*



# SOME INFORMATIONS ABOUT SAINT NICHOLAS, HIS TRADITIONS AND LEDENDS IN LORRAINE

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## Nancy Saint Nicholas celebrations in Nancy



In English, the translation of Saint Nicholas is “Santa Claus”. Does that remind you of **anyone**? Of course it does –Saint Nicholas is the ancestor of Father Christmas!

On the calendar, his day is the 6<sup>th</sup> November, but, for practical reasons, we celebrate the event on the weekend closest to it.

Being Patron Saint of Lorraine, the tradition has not been lost in that region which means, as Father Christmas comes as well, the children of Lorraine are very lucky and receive two lots of presents: on both the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup> December!

That Saturday in their homes, all the children of Lorraine will stay up later than usual; they will hang up their stockings, prepare a drink for Saint Nicholas and leave sugar and carrots for his mule to make their long journey from house to house more enjoyable.

In Nancy, parents and children will go and watch parades and shows in the Old Town and Place Stanislas. A few kilometres to the south of Nancy, in the Saint Nicholas de Port region, 3000 people from Lorraine and beyond will come together to watch the ancestral procession in the glow of a myriad of candles. A spiritual event which has not changed since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, 2018 will mark the 773<sup>th</sup> procession.

The next morning, Saint Nicholas has been: his glass is empty and the mule has eaten all the food left out for him. The well-behaved children find sweets, fruit and little presents in their stockings. They say that the really naughty children receive a whip but it’s so rare that nobody really knows if it’s true!

The day continues with the Saint Nicholas parade and the town is all lit up and filled with music!

**It is the most important festive weekend of the year in Nancy!**





## BIOGRAPHY

Saint Nicolas was born into a wealthy family in Patara in Lycia (South-West Anatolia - Asia Minor) around 260 AD. His life and acts have been described in many legends. It is said that he managed to stand up in his bath the day he was born.

As he grew older, he preferred to go to churches rather than playing with children of his own age. Heir to a large fortune, he was initially known for his unbounded generosity. It is said that while still a young man, he provided three poor girls with dowries to prevent their ruined father from turning them into prostitutes.

As a young man, Nicolas went on a pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine. On his return his uncle, the Bishop of Myra, died. During their prayers, the bishops who had assembled to choose his successor heard a voice telling them to elect the first man called Nicolas who entered the church.

Elected in 303, he was known for the special care he took of his flock whom he saved from famine; he also fought against the heavy taxes imposed on them.

In 325 he defended the faith at the Council of Nicaea (a town called Iznik today, not far from the eastern coast of the Bosphorus Straits,) at which the Arian Heresy was condemned.

Shortly afterwards he interceded firmly with the Governor of Myra in favour of three innocent people whom he managed to save from being beheaded in the nick of time. He also petitioned the Emperor Constantine in similar circumstances, pleading in favour of three officers who had been unjustly condemned; the Emperor publicised his intervention.

Saint Nicolas suffered greatly on account of his Christian faith as Emperor Diocletian (who reigned from 284 to 305 AD) cruelly persecuted Christians from 303 onwards. Nicolas was arrested and imprisoned and forced into exile for a number of years. However, in 313 Emperor Constantine (who reigned from 306 to 337) established the right to freedom of religion and Nicolas was free to practise his faith openly again.

He died in the port of Myra (South-West Anatolia) on 6 December, probably in the year 340, victim of the persecution by Roman soldiers, hence today's Saint Nicolas Day.

Spreading from the eastern Mediterranean, his reputation first grew as protector of prisoners and of the oppressed, and subsequently of seamen. The categories he protected expanded and the number of faithful calling on him to intervene in all circumstances rose steadily.

By the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup>C he was venerated throughout Western Europe, and this grew dramatically following an expedition by the seamen of Bari (in southern Italy) to Myra in 1087 to rescue his remains from the Muslims. His body was brought back to their home town.

At roughly the same time Count Aubert de Varangéville brought one of his fingers to the Church of Port which quickly attracted numerous pilgrims. The church in Port was rededicated to Saint Nicolas in 1102 but was soon replaced by a much larger church to house the growing number of faithful who made the pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. This devotion to Saint Nicolas attracted pilgrims from all over Europe who in turn attracted a thriving colony of merchants. The town of Port was renamed Saint-Nicolas-de-Port and became the largest commercial centre in the duchy of Lorraine.

René II named Saint Nicolas Patron Saint of Lorraine, a title which was confirmed by Pope Innocent X in 1657.



Following the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup>C, Saint Nicolas Feast Day was abolished in a number

of countries in Europe, but the Dutch retained the Catholic custom (*Sinterklaas*).

When the Dutch emigrated to the USA at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> C, the custom became steadily more popular, *Sinterklaas* becoming Santa Claus, a moralising character whose role was to reward well-behaved children and punish naughty ones.

Then in 1860 the caricaturist Thomas Nast, who worked for *Harper's Illustrated Weekly*, the New York magazine, drew Santa Claus in a red costume lined with white fur, with a broad leather belt around his waist.

Today's Father Christmas was actually created in 1931 when Coca Cola gave him a new look in an advertisement for their famous drink.



## LEGENDS OF SAINT NICOLAS



A number of legends have grown up around Saint Nicolas reflecting his generous character. One of them tells the story of an impoverished nobleman of Patara in Lycia who was about to sell his daughters as slaves to pay his debts. When Saint Nicolas heard about it, he dropped gold coins down the man's chimney three nights in succession to enable him to pay his

debts and provide dowries for his daughters who thus remained free.

The Patron Saint of children and of the oppressed also performed many other miracles.

### ***A. The legend of Lord of Réchicourt***

In 1230, Lord Réchicourt went on a Crusade and was taken prisoner in Palestine. In the depths of his jail he had nothing to eat or drink and only rats as company. He prayed fervently to Saint Nicolas, the Patron Saint of prisoners. Then on the evening of 5 December 1240 Saint Nicolas delivered him from jail, transporting him to Lorraine where he arrived with even greater faith and fervour than before. On 6 December he woke up in front of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port Church.

### ***B. The Legend of Munster Church***

One day while out hunting, Sir Guillaume de Torcheville found himself in a desperate situation. Being sucked down by bog-waters he prayed fervently to Saint Nicolas promising that if he escaped unhurt he would build a chapel in honour of the Saint. As he sank beneath the waters and lost consciousness, he

suddenly felt as if he was being lifted up. When he awoke, he was miraculously lying on firm ground. In gratitude to Saint Nicolas he had a magnificent church built in the centre of Munster.

### ***C. The Legend of the three gleaners***

Three children were gleaning corn in the fields. On their return home, they lost their way. Having walked for a long time, they found themselves in front of a brightly lit building. It was a butcher's shop. The friendly butcher offered them a meal and a bed for the night. The hungry and exhausted children were delighted with their good luck and only too happy to accept. However, as soon as they had fallen asleep the butcher seized them, cut their throats, chopped them into little bits and put them in his brine tub.

Several years later, Saint Nicolas heard about the frightful end of the three little gleaners. He went to the evil butcher and innocently asked if he could stay the night. The butcher was flattered that the great Saint wished to sleep under his roof and gave him a very friendly welcome. Once seated, the Saint asked if he could have some salt meat to eat. Seeing the butcher turn white with fear, the Saint went down to the cellar, blessed the brine tub and

opened it. The three children came out alive and fresh saying they had slept very well.

This is the best known of the legends concerning Saint Nicolas and explains how he became the Patron Saint of Children. It gave rise to numerous songs and poems and has many variations. It is part of the region's folk memory however and in the Saint Nicolas' Day processions the three little gleaners and the evil butcher are always present on his float.



## THE FEAST OF SAINT NICOLAS



Saint Nicolas Day is celebrated in France in Alsace, Lorraine and Nord Counties, and in Belgium, Germany, Holland and Austria. On the calendar of saints' days it is usually celebrated on 6 December in commemoration of his death. In fact the festivities, parades, ceremonies, processions and fireworks displays are held during the first week in December whether or not the 6<sup>th</sup> falls in that week.

Today's Saint Nicolas tours various towns, visits schools and goes from house to house on the 5th and 6th of December asking children if they have been good. He gives sweetmeats and presents to well-behaved children and a stern lecture on how to behave

to the others, and if need be has the Bogeyman, his faithful follower, beat them with a stick.

In olden days, children left a glass of *eau-de-vie* and a plate of carrots near the fireplace for the Saint and his donkey. Even today, a number of the villages in Lorraine keep up the custom and the Saint's visit to the people living there is a popular event for young and old alike.

Since the Second World War, Christmas has largely replaced Saint Nicolas' Day for the giving of gifts. In some countries however, such as Luxembourg, children are still given their presents on Saint Nicolas's Day.



The colourful floats, music, important processions and display all make Saint Nicolas'

Day an important cultural event in many areas, especially in Nancy, where the feast last 40 days.



Saint Nicolas' Day is also a very important day in Saint-Nicolas-de-Port. After the non-religious parade through the centre of town, a magnificent ceremony takes place in the basilica. The high point is a candlelit procession through the darkened church which gives the impressive building a very mysterious aura.

## II. THE BOGEYMAN (PERE FOUETTARD)



The bogeyman was first referred to in the 16<sup>th</sup>C.

In the legend, he was “born” in Metz in 1552 when Charles the Fifth’s troops were besieging the town. The Tanners’ Corporation invented a mythical half-ogre, half scarecrow figure in the image of the besieger.

However, the Bogeyman does not have same origin for all who celebrate Saint Nicolas’ Day.

For the Dutch he was based on the Moors left behind by the Spanish; for others it was invented by 18<sup>th</sup>C teachers to punish naughty



and lazy children. For others it was the butcher in Saint Nicolas’ legend.

In fact the Bogeyman’s name varies as the region or country visited by Saint Nicolas.

In Bavaria and Austria he is called *Krampus* (meaning hook).

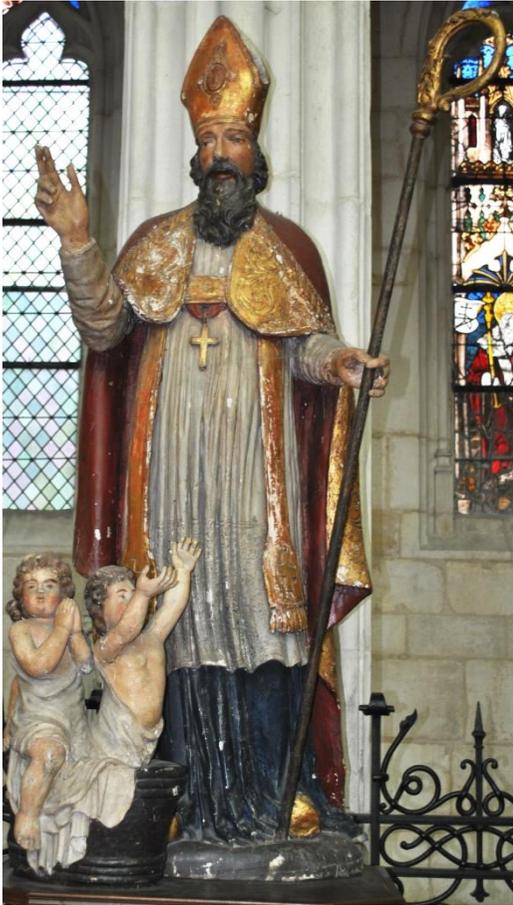
In other parts of Germany he is called Ruprecht or Knechtruprecht, equivalent to Robert in French (another name for the Devil).

In Rhineland and Silesia and a few other places he disguises himself as an animal (usually a billy-goat) called Pelzbock, Rasselbock, Pelznickel, Pelzruppert or even Bartel (Pelz means fur or pelt).

The Bogeyman is called Hans Trapp in German-speaking Mosel and *Bossue* (hunchback) in Alsace where he is the manifestation of an evil spirit called Mullewitz.

The Bogeyman’s job is to see if children have been good and to threaten the most unruly with a cane. He carries a wicker basket on his back in which he is supposed to carry off naughty children which further adds to his reputation as a bogeyman.

## THE BASILICA OF SAINT-NICOLAS-DE-PORT



In the 10<sup>th</sup>C the municipality of Port came under the Priory of Gorze, near METZ. However, at the request of its inhabitants, the

Abbot decided to build a church there around 1013.

Then in 1093 the relics of Saint Nicolas were brought back by Count Aubert de Varangéville and placed in the church. Thereafter, the church attracted numerous pilgrims with the result that Port expanded rapidly.

As the first church soon proved too small, it was rebuilt in 1193.

In 1477, René II, Duke of Lorraine, decided to build an enormous church in homage to the Saint to give thanks for his victory over Charles the Bold.

Building started in 1481 under Father Simon Moycet, but in reality the first stone was only laid in 1495. A further 65 years was needed to complete the work as although the church was inaugurated in 1544 the towers were only finished between 1550 and 1560.

In 1635, during the Thirty Year's War, the church was burnt down; a further hundred years passed before it was restored. Then in 1940, during World War 2, it was partly destroyed again by bombing and shelling.

In 1950 Pope Pius XII raised the Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port to the status of basilica.

Its size is impressive: 85m (280 ft) long, 31m wide, the internal height of the roof vault

being 32m and that under the towers 86m. The basilica is one of the most beautiful examples of Flamboyant Gothic Art and architecture in France; all the murals and stained glass date from the early Renaissance.

Given the damage caused to the basilica by the various wars, large sums of money were needed to rebuild it. Mrs Camille Croue-Friedman, who lived in the USA but originally came from Saint-Nicolas-de-Port, left part of her fortune to the Bishopric of Nancy *“with the aim of rebuilding the basilica and restoring it to its original beauty”* thus enabling the church to be restored.

In 2002, over €1.3 million was spent on restoration work.

# LES FÊTES DE SAINT NICOLAS

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