



To Possess the Holy

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St Nicholas Pilgrimage

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Cover Image

St Nicholas and Scenes from his Life

Russian Icon

National Museum, Stockholm

To Possess the Holy

A Reflection on the Life of St Nicholas of Myra
and the
Translation of his Relics

*Talks given on pilgrimage to the shrine of St Nicholas in Bari,
26 April – 11 May 2017*

Peter Sills

Foreword

St Nicholas was Bishop of Myra, a town in what is now the south-west of Turkey, in the fourth century. He became a legend in his lifetime, and has from the first been one of the best loved of saints. He died in 343, and around 750 years after his death some sailors from Bari in Apulia seized his relics and took them to their city where they rest to this day. Bishop Nicholas is described as a saint, a holy man, and those who removed his relics believed that they possessed holy remains. What does it mean to possess the holy? My retelling of the story of St Nicholas is offered as a reflection on this question.

I have chosen to tell the story largely through the eyes of those who were there at the time. Some of the characters, like Nicholas' uncle (also called Nicholas) and Archbishop Urso, are known to us from history, others are those who must have been there but whose names are not recorded, like the shipowner Guido Scippione, whom I picture as the organiser of the raiding party that seized the relics. I have followed the traditional accounts of St Nicholas life, but my story is a work of imagination – something not entirely absent both from the traditional story and the legends that grew up about him.

Information about the early Church is confused, and this is true of the life of St Nicholas. Whilst the broad outlines are clear, there is confusion about the details. There is no doubt: (a) that he lived, (b) was Bishop of Myra in the fourth century, (c) that he attended the Council of Nicea and was one of the signatories to the Nicene Creed, (d) that a notable cult developed after his death, and (e) that his relics were seized, and are now divided between Bari and Venice. There are also many stories about his life and ministry; some read like legends, *i.e.* they may have some basis in fact, but have been embroidered in the telling, and some, like the story of the pickled boys, are likely to be fictions. It is impossible now to sift the facts completely from the fiction, so I have had to make some choices, for example:

– Some say that his dates are uncertain; others give precise dates: 15 March 270 – 6 December 343. The date of his death seems generally agreed, and I have assumed that he was born in or around 270.

– He had an uncle, also called Nicholas, who cared for him after his parents died; some say he was Bishop of Patara, others that he was an abbot. I have made him both: an abbot who became a bishop.

– There is a tradition that Nicholas was chosen to be bishop when a layman, and at an early age; against this it is said that his uncle ordained him presbyter, and that he became bishop after his return from pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 317, which, if he was born in 270, would make him 47, not so young, especially in the third century. However, this late date seems incorrect as it is agreed that, when a bishop, he was imprisoned in the persecution of Diocletian, which began in 303 and continued until 313. I have assumed that both the stories of his visit to Holy Land and that he became a bishop whilst relatively young man are true, but not that he was a layman, and I have adjusted the dates accordingly.

– One account says that it was the other bishops in Lycia that chose him to be Bishop of Myra, but this does not tally with the generally accepted view that at the time bishops were chosen either by the local presbyters or by the whole of the local church, lay and ordained. I follow the latter view, that he was acclaimed bishop by the whole of the local church.

However Nicholas was chosen, his ecclesiastical and social status at the time of his appointment was very different to that of bishops today. In the fourth century the position of the Church within the Roman Empire was precarious: Christians were despised because they did not follow the Roman religious cult, and were subject to local discrimination. However, early emperors were reluctant to issue general laws against them. Their position improved under the Emperor Gallienus who acceded in 260 and issued an edict extending tolerance to Christians; nearly forty years of peaceful co-

existence followed. The Church remained a minority, enjoying the right to worship as it chose, but there was always the risk of a change of policy when a new Emperor ascended the throne, as happened under Diocletian who launched a general persecution of Christians. When Constantine became emperor, the persecution ended, and some time after the Edict of Milan in 313 Christianity became the religion of the Empire.

One effect of this was to change the position of Bishops. In the Early Church they were simply leaders of the local church, usually a small minority of the local people, and had no jurisdiction outside their congregation. They were assisted by deacons (presbyters were a later addition, and the distinction between them and the bishops took time to become clear). If bishops were held in esteem, like Nicholas, it was because they earned it through good works and personal wisdom and holiness, not through the prestige of their office. After Constantine things changed; bishops acquired secular power and prestige, and also, in time, the trappings of office: rings, copes, mitres, pastoral staffs, etc. After the Edict of Milan Nicholas would have become an important person, and this perhaps explains the stories of him intervening in secular affairs, like saving three men from execution, achieving a reduction in the level of taxation, and bringing relief when the harvest failed.

1. *The Making of a Saint*

Colossians 2.6–15 + 3.1–4

AD 290 – the first episode of the story is narrated by Nicholas' uncle, Bishop Nicholas of Patara.

Some say that saints are born, not made. I know what they mean, but looking back on Nicholas' early life, I think its a bit of both. Almost from from the moment he was born there was something special about him. Some people are born wonderfully endowed, and, as he grew up, it was clear that Nicholas was one of them. But then, there was also the influence of his family. His father was my brother Epiphanius, and I remember him saying to me before Nicholas was born, that he and Johanna had prayed to God every day that if they had a son he would be dedicated to the Lord. Their prayer was heard and God gave them a son, and they fulfilled their vow, dedicating him to the Lord. To my surprise, they gave him same name as me. It means 'champion of the people' – it was an honour, and a challenge, to bear this name, but Nicholas lived up to it. Alas, early in his life tragedy struck, and Epiphanius and Johanna did not live to see their hopes for him fulfilled; they died in a terrible plague when he was still a young boy. Nicholas was their only child. By the time of the plague they had moved to Myra, and I had become Bishop of Patara, our home town; it fell to me, as his nearest relative, to care for him as my own son.

As a family we were well off, and Epiphanius had done well, so Nicholas inherited a large fortune, but it wasn't important to him – although it did enable him to travel to Egypt and Palestine a few years later. As a monk I didn't have children of my own, but sometimes parents dedicated a son to the monastery, and so Nicholas joined them. I think that Epiphanius and Johanna would have been happy with that – actually, now I think about it, I think they actually discussed the idea – but in any case it provided the right environment for his gifts to grow. It worked out well; Nicholas seemed

naturally attracted to the religious life. From an early age he had observed the weekly fasts on Wednesdays and Fridays, he was devout in his prayers, and stood out among the other boys, a natural leader. When he was old enough I ordained him presbyter.

Some seem to possess holiness as a natural endowment, others want it as a possession. They seem to think that by acquiring something that had been part of the life of a holy person a bit of the holiness would rub off on to themselves – or make them seem important in the eyes of others. You never saw that kind of possessiveness with Nicholas. Who he was just came from within him, not from anything he possessed, or the people he knew; his spirit simply shone through.

Since the time of Alexander the Great our province of Lycia has been Greek. And since the time of St Paul there have been Christians here, though few in number. Most people still worship the pagan gods, and look down on us. They want to know where our loyalty lies: What comes first, they demand, Rome or Christ? For centuries we were persecuted, and it still happens, but under the present emperor, Licinius, although we're still despised, we're tolerated. The Romans must realise that persecution is not going to wipe us out, and that making martyrs only strengthens our resolve. So, we co-exist; but we sit uneasily in this pagan culture. You never know when the official line will change again, and persecution return. There are plenty of hard-liners waiting for an emperor more to their way of thinking, and then they will try again to make us bow down to their so-called gods, and worship the emperor. We'd rather die.

There are several families here who can trace their Christian faith back to the visit of Paul. He came to Patara on his third journey with Silas (*Acts 21.1*), and later he passed through Myra on his way to Rome. People still tell the stories of his visits. At both Patara and Myra he had to change ships, and so he had a few days among us. He preached in the synagogue, as was his

custom, and made some converts. Some time afterwards some of his other converts came down from Colossae. They had a letter that he'd written to them, and they shared it with their fellow Christians in Patara. Someone made a copy – we treasure it to this day! He wrote because not everybody in Colossae had grasped what a big change that becoming a Christian had made in their lives. Although they'd been baptised, many seemed to think Christianity was one of the new mystery religions, like the cult of Mithras. Paul urged them to be on their guard, and not to let their minds be captured by hollow, man-made ideas and delusive speculations. In baptism, he reminded them, they had died to their old life and had been raised to a new life with Christ: 'You died,' he wrote, 'and now your life is hidden with Christ in God.' (*Col. 3.3*) Christianity offered a new life in which the social divisions of race, status and gender were transcended. In Jesus, he wrote, all God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge can be found. Every power and authority in the universe is subject to him; he alone has reconciled us to God.

Nicholas took great encouragement from St Pauls' words, and they aroused in him a great desire to visit Palestine, and walk in the footsteps of Jesus himself. I encouraged him. About seven years previously some monks from Anatolia had established a monastery at Beit Jala in the caves above Bethlehem, and Nicholas went to join them. It was a formative experience, shaping and deepening the saintly gifts that God had given him. We missed him, and longed for him to return. I was getting on in years, and my health wasn't so good; there was work for him to do.

2. *Bishop Nicholas*

1 Timothy 3.1–13

‘Bishop John has died.’ The news soon went round the fellowship in Myra, and for days it was all that they talked about – that, and who was to be the new bishop. Bishop John had been well loved, and his people grieved for him, but life had to move on. Several names were proposed, but one always featured in every conversation: Nicholas.

He had not long returned from his pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine, and this had given him a depth of experience that added to his already deep faith and aura of holiness. Sopater, the son of one of the elders in the church at Myra at the time, takes up the story –

I remember my father telling me how Nicholas had touched the hearts of many before he went to Palestine. They’d already marked him out as a future leader, and hoped that Bishop John, who was getting on a bit, would last until he returned. Some thought Nicholas was too young for a bishop, but, as they conceded, he was wise beyond his years, and wore his natural authority easily. I remember my mother saying that bishops didn’t have to have grey hair! It wasn’t long before all agreed that he should be the next bishop. My father was one of those impressed by the stories they’d heard about his voyage to Egypt, especially how he, like St Paul on his way to Rome, had saved the ship from disaster in a violent storm. And when one of the sailors had fallen from the mast and been killed, Nicholas had prayed and he was restored to life.

I was only young at the time, but I can remember the great rejoicing on the day he became Bishop of Myra. They say he’d been reluctant to accept the call, but in the end he saw that the feeling that he should be the bishop was so strong that he couldn’t refuse.

Our confidence in him was amply repaid. My father was impressed with the way he cared for the poor and the needy. Unlike the pagans, he used his own wealth. There was a poor family not far from us. They had three daughters, but not enough money to provide them with dowries, which meant that they were unlikely to be married, and would probably end up in a brothel. One night they found a bag of gold on the floor that someone had thrown through a window; then a second one; and then a third. Eventually it came out that Bishop Nicholas had done it. I was surprised, as I said to my father, because they were a pagan family. I'll never forget his reply: 'Sopater,' he said, 'Jesus didn't die just for the Christians, but for everyone. And so we have to show the same love to anyone in need. That's what Jesus taught in the story of the Good Samaritan.' Later I saw how his generosity gave substance to Nicholas' faith. He gave not just because he was moved by the plight of the needy, but also because he accepted that his faith in God would be worthless if he failed to do unto others as God had done unto him.

There were lots of stories like that. He became known for his secret gift-giving; people would leave shoes outside at night and he would put some coins in them. Injustice was another thing that moved Nicholas. On one occasion he saved three slaves from being unjustly executed; and on another he saved sailors from drowning... The list is endless.

Everyone regarded Bishop Nicholas as a holy man; I asked my father what this meant: was holiness something he possessed? 'That's what it seems like,' he said, 'but it's more that he is possessed by God. You know what holiness means, Sopater?' 'Does it mean being close to God?' I asked. 'Yes, but more than that,' my father replied. 'To be holy means to be set apart. God has set Bishop Nicholas apart for his service, and he has touched his life with his grace. Holiness is a gift, my son; it's something given, not something you acquire by your own efforts.' Well, that made sense to me. You just sensed the goodness flowing out of our bishop.

After he had been our bishop for several years, our lives changed for the worst. I was in my twenties by then; my father had died, and I and my elder brother had to take care of the family. We were used to changes of emperor – most of them only lasted a few years before they were murdered or deposed, some less than a year – but none of them changed the law that the Emperor Gallienus had made allowing the Christians to live in peace. But at the back of our minds we knew that this could change, and when Diocletian became emperor, it did.

Diocletian saw himself as the restorer of Roman glory; he was fanatical about the Roman religion, and surrounded himself with public opponents of Christianity. The first sign of things to come was his gradual purging of Christians in the army. It happened to one of my cousins; overnight: no job, no income, no pension. He was lucky to escape with his life. Galerius, Diocletian's co-emperor, and the other hard-liners, pressed Diocletian to go further; they wanted Christianity to be totally eradicated. Diocletian hesitated. He sought guidance from the oracle of Apollo at Didyma. (These oracles are nothing more than superstitious nonsense, but our rulers believe them!) When the emissary returned he reported that Apollo had been unable to speak because those he called 'the just on earth' had hindered him. Galerius and his hard-line gang saw their opportunity, and informed Diocletian that these 'just on earth' could only be the Christians – at least they got that right! – we are the just. Their pagan god knew the truth, but not them. But it was bad news for us. We stood accused of frustrating the imperial will.

Diocletian was enraged and agreed to the hard-liners' demands. Years of peaceful co-existence gave way to wholesale persecution. Churches were destroyed, the scriptures burned, treasures seized, and Christians forbidden to assemble for worship. When they began to arrest the bishops and put them in prison, anxiety was rife. We wanted Nicholas to hide, or escape, but he wouldn't hear of it. 'When they wanted to arrest Jesus,' we argued, 'he went

into hiding.’ ‘Only because his hour had not yet come,’ Nicholas replied, ‘and when his hour did come he suffered rather than deny who he was. And he warned us that we too would be face persecution: “You will be handed over to the courts, flogged, arrested and taken away. All will hate you for our allegiance to me; but the man who holds out to the end will be saved.” I am not going to deny him now. He died for me. I’ll die for him if I have to.’ Nicholas’ deep faith sustained him; it had sustained us too; would we be able to hold out to the end without him? We were afraid.

It wasn’t long before they came and took him away. So many clergy were put in gaol that the warders had to free common criminals – thieves and murderers – to make room for them! It was an awful time, and in Myra we were overwhelmed with grief. It felt as though our light had been snuffed out.

3. Contra Pagans & Heretics

Philippians 2.5–13

It is difficult to be sure for how long Nicholas was imprisoned. It could have been for as long as ten years, but that seems unlikely, as, apart from zealots like the co-emperor Galerius, there was not much enthusiasm for the persecution, and many who had to enforce it did so reluctantly, feeling sympathy for their victims. It more or less came to an end in 306 when Constantine became emperor, and Nicholas may have been released after only a few years. While he was in prison Myra was without a bishop, but despite the persecution, I imagine the life of the Church continued

underground. In 313 Constantine formally ended the persecution with the Edict of Milan.

The persecution failed completely in its objective, and in some provinces of the empire was only minimally enforced. Arnobius, a Christian writing at the time, considered that its motive had been economic rather than spiritual. The rise of Christianity, and apathy towards the official cult meant that offerings at the pagan shrines were falling. Arnobius exulted that the arts of their priests were brought to naught, and their ceremonies exposed to derision. It wasn't long before Christianity supplanted the pagan gods and became the religion of the empire. But there was a price to be paid for its emancipation: from then on the state began to take a role in the life of the Church.

Alongside the caring image of Nicholas there was a more steely aspect to his character, which came out in his attack on pagan religion and against heresy in the Church.

One of the stories that was passed down in families, and which Sopater told his children, tells of Nicholas' triumph over the goddess Artemis, who was the principal deity worshipped in Lycia. She was a daughter of Zeus, and was worshipped as a particularly powerful virgin fertility goddess. The Romans called her Diana, and it was the silversmiths in Ephesus who, realising that their trade in images of the god was threatened, accused St Paul of perverting the minds of the people, angrily seizing him and his companions (Acts 19.23–41). Sopater takes up the story –

'The temple of Artemis at Myra was the most impressive and stunningly beautiful structure in all Lycia. It occupied large grounds, with beautiful plantings and an inner court with columns and an altar, and inside there was the goddess' statue. When the Emperor Constantine freed St Nicholas and the other bishops from prison, lots of people still worshipped the pagan gods like Artemis. As a defender of the Christian faith, Nicholas, like St Paul at Ephesus, spoke out against these superstitious ways. He worried that some

of his people might slip back into their old ways, visiting the shrines to make sacrifices and seek protection. He believed the worship of the old gods was demon-inspired and that, as bishop, he had to expose the demons and safeguard the people.

‘The demons fought back, and there was fierce conflict between Nicholas and Artemis, which lasted all his life. But he overcame her. It was through Nicholas that her temple was destroyed. It now lies in ruins, and when it fell the demons fled. Many people saw them go. They were awed, and gave praise to God for the mighty act that he had wrought through Nicholas, the champion of the people!’

[While Artemis and the rest of the Olympians had no physical reality, spiritually they were very real. The biblical scholar, Walter Wink, describes them as the inner forces that shape personality and society, and as such they are still with us today. These forces are real. The battle that Nicholas fought against Artemis, was the same battle that we fight against the forces of greed and corruption that led to the banking crisis.]

Nicholas was equally opposed to heresy. In the Early Church each bishop was, to a large extent, pope in his own diocese; he produced his own doctrinal statements and liturgy, and ordained whom he wished. The result was a wide variety in belief and practice. In the third century the Church was still working out what it believed, particularly its understanding of the Trinity. One cause of deep division was the nature of the Son: was he co-eternal with the Father, in a word uncreated, or did he have a beginning, like all other creatures? The controversy caught fire through the preaching of Arius of Alexandria, who contrary to the views of his bishop, Alexander, taught that the Son was not co-eternal with the Father. He possessed neither the eternity nor the true divinity of the Father, but was made ‘God’ only by the Father’s permission and power; he was simply the very first and most perfect of God’s creatures.

Arius touched a nerve; his teaching spread rapidly, and many bishops agreed with him. The last thing that Emperor Constantine wanted was a division in the Church, so, in 325 he held a Council at Nicea, the first Ecumenical Council ever held, to resolve the issue, and to bring uniformity in some other matters also. Nicholas was one of about 300 bishops who attended (about 1800 had been invited). The overwhelming majority came from the East, with only five attendees from the West – the Pope was the most notable of the absentees!

[The contrast between then and now is seen in the fact that, it was the secular power, in the person of the emperor, who summoned the Council, and not the Church. Faith in St Nicholas' day, as for many centuries thereafter, was as much a matter of state concern as taxes, trade and conquest.]

The Arian debate was heated and prolonged – it went on for a month. Much of the debate turned on the difference between being 'born' or 'created' and being 'begotten'. The Arians saw these as essentially the same; their opponents did not. Part of the problem was that these terms, and others used in the debate, were drawn from pre-Christian Greek philosophers and the different shades of meaning, in which the Greeks delighted, were lost on those who spoke other languages. Latin, for example, simply did not have any equivalent concepts, nor did the Latins accord the same importance as the Greeks to these subtle distinctions. The Arian view was condemned overwhelmingly, and Arius and his supporters exiled.

I can imagine an exasperated Bishop Alexander saying to a colleague, 'How can you discuss these things with the Latins? They simply don't have the language, nor the subtlety of thought, that God has given to us Greeks.'

The statement of orthodox belief that the Council agreed is known as the Nicene Creed; it is still in use today, and Nicholas was one of its signatories. Although the Council rejected Arius, it did not bring an end to Arianism; his

views continued to be held by many Christians well into the succeeding centuries.

[It is said that Nicholas was so incensed by Arius that he struck him on the face, but this is most probably a fabrication. Arius, as a presbyter and not a bishop, would not have been admitted to the debate. But it makes a good story!]

4. Nicholas Acclaimed a Saint

1 Peter 1.3–9

Twenty-two years have passed since the Council of Nicea, and under imperial protection the Church has grown and its influence greatly increased. Nicholas is now an old man, and in failing health. On 6th December 343 he died. Although anticipated, his death plunged Myra into grief, and I imagine that most of the town attended his funeral. The archeologists say the first church in Myra was not built until the sixth century, at least 200 years after Nicholas died. Where he was buried initially is not known for sure, although in 1993 a grave was found on the small Turkish island of Gemile, east of Rhodes, which historians believe is the site of his original grave.

In those days, there was only felt to be a thin separation between this life and the life to come. The persecution of the Church in the first centuries had created many martyrs, and they were felt in a real way still to be part of the Church. In the Great Thanksgiving prayer of Eucharist the Church affirmed its belief that the prayers of the faithful were joined with those of the angels and the saints, and all the company of heaven, as we do to this day: 'Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we

proclaim your great and glorious name....' I imagine the celebrant at Nicholas' funeral assuring the congregation that Nicholas was now among that heavenly company, joining with them in their worship.

'It is just as Jesus said,' he reminded them. 'You remember on the night before he died, he said to the disciples, "Set your troubled hearts at rest. Trust in God always; trust also in me. ...I am going on purpose to prepare a place for you. And I shall come again and receive you to myself, so that where I am you may be also..." So, brothers and sisters, he says the same to us now. He has received Blessed Nicholas to himself, and where he is, Nicholas is also. We miss him; we grieve for him; we may not see his like again, but we should not let our hearts be troubled; he has gone no further than God, and God is very close.'

Nicholas may have died, but he did not cease to exist, and the sense of continuity between heaven and earth leads, quite naturally, to the expectation that a notable holy man, like Nicholas, would continue his work of caring and healing, and that he was still close to his people, as he had been during his life.

When Nicholas died, Sopater was well into middle age, and had children of his own. He still felt a close connection with the saint, and all the family would pray to him. They would talk to him as they had done when he was alive, and ask for his help. They would talk about whatever was going on in their lives and ask for guidance; they would talk about those who were ill and ask for healing. What they actually did, was to ask him to pray for them. Calling Nicholas a holy man did not mean that healing and wisdom came from any personal power of the saint himself; they might flow through him, but they came from God. Sopater would, of course, pray himself, but he wanted Nicholas to pray with him as he done when he was alive. When Sopater's wife fell ill he poured out his anxiety, as though talking to a friend:

Holy Nicholas, I've come again to ask for your prayers. Nana is ill, and I'm beside myself with worry. I don't know what will happen if she doesn't get better. You know what a wonderful wife and mother she is. Please pray for her. I know that God listens to your prayers. Please ask God to heal her and make her better. And, please, pray for me too.

Lots of people prayed like Sopater, asking Nicholas for his prayers, and they noticed that when they did their lives changed. Difficult situations were resolved, the sick recovered, new strength and guidance were received. Nicholas' reputation as a healer and as the friend of mariners spread. Many, I guess, made the journey to Gemile island to pray at his tomb. Not all would have been orthodox believers, and many, no doubt, thought that their aid came personally from him, but even so, help was received, and Nicholas was well on the way to being recognised as a saint.

This was long before there was any bureaucratic process for making saints. Sainthood was a matter of local recognition; saints were popularly acclaimed not officially designated. There's something about holiness, about being possessed by God, that everyone seems able to recognise, but which is hard to describe. I think with Nicholas it was a combination of factors: his devout life, his concern for others above self, his personal courage in the face of persecution. All this came from his sense of connectedness with a reality greater than his own will, an inexhaustible source of strength and faith. Sopater and those close to him knew that from their personal encounter with him as their Bishop; and, as he continued to care for them by his prayers, they acclaimed him a saint, one of those especially blessed by God.

5. *Pilgrimage to Myra*

Acts 5.12–16

If there is no great division between the saints and the faithful, between the living and the dead, it is quite natural to talk to those whom we love but see no longer, and to ask for their help. Those who had sought Nicholas' help when he was alive, naturally continued to ask for his help after he had died. For example, a sailor called Demetrios was caught in a great storm. As his boat foundered and he began to drown he called out to St Nicholas, 'Come and save me from certain death.' And he was saved.

I imagine that after the church of St Nicholas was built in Myra in the 6th century his relics were removed from the island of Gemile. An ancient Greek marble sarcophagus was reused to hold them. It was now easier for people to visit his shrine, and it soon became a place of pilgrimage – aided by the miraculous phenomena of the manna. Its not clear when this was first noticed, but at some time after his burial at Myra a clear liquid was found coming from his tomb, which was called manna. It is pure, clear water; from the first it was endowed with miraculous power, and was used for healing. The phenomenon survived the translation of the relics to Bari, and continues to this day. When crypt at Bari was renovated in the 1950s the relics were moved and wrapped in a cloth, which became wet through. The extraction of the manna forms the climax to the annual three-day festival, the object of our journey, and which concludes this pilgrimage. The phenomenon is not easily explained; infiltration from outside the tomb has been ruled out as the casket has been proved to be impermeable. From the beginning it was believed to be exuded by the relics, and that, even in this sceptical age, seems to be the best explanation.

Time has moved on, and we have reached 550AD, just over 200 years after Nicholas died. In the town of Simena about twenty miles west of Myra, Stefanos, whose sight is failing, is talking to his priest, Father Hermas.

‘Father, my sight is failing, and if it gets much worse I won’t be able to do my work, and then what will become of us?’

‘So the ointment that Dr Lukas gave you hasn’t helped?’

‘No. I feel the problem is inside my eyes, not on the outside. I’m really afraid, Father. Do you think that St Nicholas could help me? I’ve heard that at his shrine they anoint you with the manna that comes from his tomb. Priscilla went there when she didn’t seem to be able to have a child. She prayed at the tomb and drank a little of the manna, and now she has twins! I’m sure he could help me too.’

‘I’m sure he could, Stefanos. Do you believe that he can?’

‘Yes, Father; I believe he can.’

‘Then you should go. May God bless you and heal you.’

Later that week Jason, another of Father Hermas’ flock, comes to him and makes his confession. The sin is serious; he has cheated his business partner. Father Hermas knows that Jason has a reputation as a sharp operator, but he senses that his contrition is genuine, and that he truly repents and wants to make a new start. He absolves Jason, and says to him, ‘For your penance you must make a full restitution of all that you obtained wrongly, and you must make a pilgrimage to the shrine of St Nicholas at Myra. There you must make an offering of the same amount, and recite the akathist asking St Nicholas to cleanse your heart of evil.’ Fr Hermas promises to pray for Jason, and bids him go in peace. [The akathist is a hymn dedicated to a saint.]

Jason hears that Stefanos is also going to Myra, and offers to accompany him. They set off a couple of days later. Jason describes what happened when they arrived.

Myra’s a large town, much bigger than ours, and crowded with people. We hadn’t realised it was a feast day, and lots of people were on their way to the

shrine. We followed the crowd, and it wasn't long before we reached the church. There was a long queue. When we reached the shrine Stefanos told the priest about his failing sight, and how Father Hermas had encouraged him to come to St Nicholas to be healed. He felt that this was his last chance before his sight failed completely. The priest asked him if he believed that St Nicholas could heal him. Fervently, Stefanos said, 'Yes, father; I believe he can heal me.' The priest asked him if there was any sin that he hadn't confessed. 'No, father; I have made a full confession to Fr Hermas,' Stefanos replied. The priest then rose, took a cloth, poured a little of the manna on to it and touched Stefanos' eyes with it, making the sign of the cross. He then laid his hands on Stefanos, just like it says in the Epistle of St James, and prayed for his sight to be restored. His hands pressed the cloth over Stefanos' eyes, and he held them there for several minutes. Stefanos said that as he did this, he felt a strange sensation within his eyes, and when he opened them he was able to see more clearly. I could hardly believe it; Stefanos couldn't speak. We wept for joy. It took a few days for his sight to be fully restored, but by the time we reached home it was fully recovered.

After his healing Stefanos went to a quieter part of the church to give thanks, and I also found a quiet spot. I knelt and began to say the akathist, and as I did the truth about my life – how I'd cut corners and played false, and driven hard bargains, always looking for a way to make a bit more – hit me so hard that I felt winded. And the tears began to flow. As I wept, trying to finish my prayer, I had a vision of St Nicholas. I asked him to take away the evil in my heart, to give me a new heart and put a new spirit within me. It seemed to me that he looked on me with compassion, and I felt a great release, as though I was letting go of something that had been possessing me. 'Get up, Jason,' he said, 'Your prayers have been heard; God has taken away your sin. Go in peace.' I got up, still trembling, and went to make my offering.

6. *Relics & Devotion to the Saints*

1 Corinthians 1.18–24 + 8.5–6

Many people noticed the change in Stefanos and Jason when they came back from their pilgrimage to Myra, and not just their fellow Christians. Others who had not embraced the faith also noticed the change, and wondered what had brought it about – after all it was undeniable that a notable cure had been performed on Stefanos. One of them was, Julia, the widow of Gaius, a centurion of the Roman garrison at Patara. Julia, like many others followed the official cult, but with nominal allegiance. She had become friends with Stefanos' wife, Euodia, whom she'd met at the market, and they often talked about religion.

'You know, Euodia, I've rather given up on the gods. You make offerings, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. And, unlike your Christian God, there's no sense of goodness about them, with all their lust and jealousy. We're just like their playthings – we live in fear of what they might do.'

'I've heard lots of people saying the same, Julia, but they're reluctant to say anything. Perhaps they fear that Zeus will throw down a thunderbolt!'

'You're right. Worship seems to be about appeasing them. And there's so many of them; you can't keep on good terms with them all. And these new religions with their mysteries don't seem any better. Since Stefanos was healed I've thought more about joining you Christians. While Gaius was alive, given his position in the army, it was difficult to change religion, but things are different now.'

'Oh! That would be wonderful, Julia. You're right about the gods. They are an immoral lot. St Paul said they weren't gods at all. "There are many gods and many lords," he said, "yet for us there is one God, the Father, the creator of all things, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom we exist." I'd love you to know him and join us in the faith.'

So, encouraged by Euodia, Julia goes to talk to Father Hermas. She listens as he tells her the story of Jesus, and describes the God of love whom Jesus revealed. As he talks, she knows in her heart that among the Christians she will find the faith that she seeks, and happily she commits herself to the preparation for baptism, which she knows will take most of a year. At one of their meetings Father Hermas talks about healing, and Julia asks how Stefanos was cured. Euodia told her about the manna and the miraculous cloth that had the priest had used. And so Father Hermas explains about devotion to the saints and the power of their relics.

‘Well, Julia, lets start with St Paul. He says that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of Christ, not persecution, nor famine, nor the sword, not even death. We believe that there’s no great gulf between this life and the life to come, they are both points on a continuum along the line of time. The saints live on with us; they are present in spirit, though absent in body. Blessed Nicholas inhabits his shrine at Myra, and people go there to talk to him, and ask for his help.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Julia. ‘I often feel that Gaius is still with me, and I chat to him. And I like to have some of his things around me. Is that what relics are about?’

‘Y..e..s... but they are a bit more than that. Relics are tangible tokens of the presence of the saint here and now, not just reminders of their lives. As you say, when someone we love has died we often want to have something that they owned or touched near to us as a tangible reminder of them and of their place in our lives, but with the saints, their relics bring us near to them and we feel their presence. And at their shrines we’re touched by the aura of holiness of those who are dear to God.’

‘But from what Euodia said, I gathered that these saintly relics are not just like the things that belonged to Gaius. They had some sort of power – after all the manna cured Stefanos.’

Yes, I was going to talk about that. The relics of a holy man like Blessed Nicholas seem to retain something of his holiness. Its not easy to explain. Its more experienced than understood. Christians do not believe in the ancient Greek idea that the body and the soul are separate. We believe that we are a unity, not a duality. Body and soul are two ways of talking about the whole person. Our spirit gives life to the whole of us, not just our minds, but our flesh and bones too. We believe that our spirit survives death, and with some people, especially those whose lives were lived close to God, something of their spirit seems to emanate from their relics; it can feel almost tangible.'

'Oh! ...At the shrine, can you see or touch the relics?'

'Rarely, if ever, Julia. They are kept safe in a tomb, or in a reliquary.'

'Oh! Well, I suppose, people being what they are, they might get damaged or stolen if everyone could touch them. Tell me a bit more, Father, about why Christians venerate the saints.'

'Quite simply, its because they gave their lives to God – literally, of course for those who are martyrs. Jesus said, "Follow me." And that's what they did. We celebrate their lives because they show us what it means to follow Jesus. He said that those who follow him will do even greater works than he did. So if we ask them, they will help us by their prayers, and through them God will work miracles: healing the sick, setting prisoners free, and opening the gateway to heaven.'

As Julia leaves, Hermas reflects on the need to keep people's hopes in check. Popular beliefs about relics ran ahead of what the Church taught. People wanted to believe that relics had magical powers, and there were some clergy who would not scruple to play on those beliefs. He had to keep reminding people that relics were a sign of the saint's presence, but that healing came from God alone. The holy wasn't magic; it wasn't something you could possess and use; it was a gift from God to those who lived their lives for him alone.

7. *Miracles & Manna*

Mark 8.14–26

St Nicholas is one of the most widely revered of all the saints. He is commemorated by the Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran and Orthodox Churches, and some Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian and other reformed Churches have been named in honour of him. The reasons for this are not hard to fathom. In his lifetime he gained a reputation for holiness and generosity and as a miracle worker, and that reputation grew as miracles continued to be attributed to his prayers after his death. In fact, so many miracles were attributed to him, that he was called Nicholas the Wonderworker. And, then of course, there was his transformation into Santa Claus, which originated in the 12th century when some French nuns copied his practice of secret gift-giving on the eve of his feast day.

The website of the St Nicholas Centre in Bari features many stories about him, some of which we have heard on this pilgrimage. They illustrate and explain the extent of devotion to him, but they also raise some difficult questions, and, at least for me, they pose some challenges. So, today I am stepping aside from the story to offer a more personal reflection.

Devotion to the saints was not part of my upbringing, and although Helen and I attended a church dedicated to St Nicholas for over ten years, I don't remember any special celebration on his feast day, nor any teaching about him, so when it comes to devotion to the saints, I feel a bit of an outsider. As I think about it, I experience a kind of internal dialogue; it goes something like this:

Well, Peter, what do you make of all this? There are some extraordinary claims made for this saint; are they believable? For example the story of him healing an old woman on his way to school when he was a young boy, or restoring three boys to life

years after they were pickled in a brine tub. Jesus raised Lazarus after four days; can his saints do better?

I think you're being a bit unfair. You've picked two of the more improbable stories which are generally thought to be later additions. You know very well that there's a tendency to heighten the miraculous as stories are retold – you can see it in the gospels: Matthew heightens the miraculous compared with Mark's earlier account. And then there is the desire to know more, to fill in the gaps. It happened with Jesus and the apocryphal stories about his childhood. People were so keen to know more about the so-called hidden years of his life – basically the first thirty years – that some wrote what they imagined must have happened, and a credulous generation believed them. You see the same desire to fill in the gaps in the stories of the saints. People want to be assured that right from birth God had endowed them with special powers. But, then, there wouldn't be any stories if nothing had happened.

OK. I accept that. Lets take another story: the man in 1920 whose sight was restored after he slept in the Chapel of St Nicholas: Is that believable?

Yes, I think it is. Either these people are telling lies, or something must have happened. This man had nothing to gain by making up the story, so I'm inclined to believe him. Its just like it was at first with St Nicholas. People didn't tell these stories simply to build up his reputation; they weren't propaganda; that came later. Initially they were told because they made sense of an experience – of a healing, or a change in personal fortune, that seemed miraculous. Devotion doesn't come out of thin air; people wouldn't keep coming to the shrine if they got nothing out of it. The stories may be beyond our experience, but that alone doesn't make them incredible.

Alright; I can go along with that, too. But some of the stories were propaganda, put about by the guardians of certain shrines to boost the pilgrim trade. Leaving that aside, isn't the real question Why don't these things happen today? Has God

changed his ways since the early times, or is it that we have lost faith and the way of looking at life that it gives?

But they do happen. You remember Oswald Sills [a priest and father of a friend], and the story of him healing a man with cancer by prayer and laying on of hands. These things do happen today – probably more often than we think. I think the trouble today is that we no longer expect the miraculous, and so we can no longer recognise it when its before our eyes.

Yes. I think that's the crux. Liberal, rational westerners are reluctant to acknowledge that there's a dimension to life that we can't weigh or measure. There's a capacity that the ancients had that we've lost – although, I have to say you do see in in this part of Italy. But for most of us we're like the disciples whose minds were so closed that they couldn't grasp the meaning of the feeding of the five thousand.

You're right. It can't be that God has changed his ways.

But why is it that some are helped and some are not?

I think that's where we touch the real mystery. I don't think God intervenes arbitrarily, helping some, ignoring others as he chooses; the God of love isn't capricious, like the pagan gods. Archbishop Michael Ramsay said that God's love is always flowing towards us, but he seems to wait on our co-operation to focus it. I found that helpful. Focussing the love of God through prayer is a spiritual capacity that, in our rational world, we have let wither away. But its still there, and you do hear of old-fashioned miracles today. There's another modern story of St Nicholas calming a storm and bringing a boat to safety. The challenge is to be humble before another's experience, and to seek to learn from it.

Don't you think that the miraculous now presents itself in different forms, like the cures that modern medicine has made possible?

Yes, up to a point. But that strikes me also as a rationalist view. You see, it doesn't give value to things that are outside our intellectual comprehension. When I was an academic my life was focussed on the intellectual level, but as a priest I've come to realise that there's more to life than the intellect – love for example: that's something we know is true because we feel it, not because we can rationalise it. I think the miraculous is on the same level. The faith of those who ask Nicholas for help challenges me to find in my depths a response to God that goes beyond the intellectual.

That's what you did in Lisieux when you poured out your heart to Sainte Thèrese. I think you've been there.

Yes, I think I have. I'd been feeling a bit depressed, and asked her to pray for me. And the depression did lift. It felt like an answer to prayer.

So, what do you make of the story about the Manna? D'you think its genuine – I mean, there have been so many frauds like it in the past?

I think its true. And it works – people are helped. In a sceptical, scientific age, it would be hard to get away with the deceptions that were common in the Middle Ages. Take the Turin Shroud, for example: tests showed it to be a fake. But the manna is real. I come back to the absence of this aspect of devotion in my spiritual upbringing: How do I respond to phenomena like the manna? Intellectually, I accept it; but I need to learn how to respond emotionally. I've got to the point where I know that the truth has to be felt rather than understood. I think on this pilgrimage I need to ask God to help me more to feel his truth.

8. Rise of Islam

Genesis 16.1–15

In AD 630 Vox Vaticana Clara, the ancient precursor of Vatican Radio, and known locally as the VVC, began to get reports of a new religious movement in southern Arabia led by a self-styled prophet called Muhammed. Arabia was well outside the empire, and they might have ignored it – new religious movements were hardly news; they cropped up regularly – except that it was causing anxiety in Jerusalem. They discovered a priest, Fr Andreas, who had just returned from two years there, who agreed to be interviewed.

Father Andreas, thanks for coming to talk to VVC. Tell us what you've heard about this new religion – its called Islam, isn't it? Can you tell us what the name means? And why the Church in Jerusalem is so anxious about it?

Thank you. Yes, its called Islam, which means 'submission' or 'self-surrender'. We think its new, but actually it began many years ago, around 612, I was told. Its based on revelations given to a man called Muhammed, which he believed came to him from God.'

Is this the same God that we worship?

Yes; it is the same God, whom they call Allah. Muhammed says there is only one God, and he believes he has been commanded by him to turn the people away from the worship of idols, and to surrender themselves to God.

Just like St Paul?

Well... similar motivation, but Muhammed is not proclaiming a saviour. He denies the divinity of Christ. He accepts him as a prophet, like he accepts Abraham and Moses as prophets, but he denies his equality with God.

He's not the only one. Sounds like another version of the Arian heresy.

Oh no! Its quite different. Muhammed believes that Islam is the final revelation of God, correcting and supplanting all other religions, including Judaism and Christianity.

I can see why Jerusalem is anxious! So does Muhammed claim some connection with us and the Jews?

Yes, he does, and it is very disturbing. Like Jews and Christians he claims descent from Abraham, but through Ismael, the son of Hagar. You remember the story in Genesis, and the assurance given to Hagar that God will make a great nation from the descendants of Ismael – Muhammed claims that the Muslims are that nation.

That is disturbing. It's not a prophecy you hear much about.

No you don't. He also believes that the revelations that he receives are the direct speech of God, so the very words he speaks are treated as holy, like God himself. For the Muslim God alone is holy; he is utterly set apart; wholly other. Any kind of human representation or mediation – statues, pictures, icons, saints, saviours – are utterly ruled.

It sounds very uncompromising. That leads me on to the reports about battles. Can you tell us about that?

Well, just like Christianity in its early days, this new faith aroused opposition. Just as the Jewish high priests opposed Jesus, so the guardians of the Ka'ba – the shrine of the gods in Mecca – opposed Muhammed. He was forced to flee to Medina. There many people accepted his teaching and became Muslims. He had a sizeable following. However, he believed that his message was for all Arabs, maybe for the whole world, and in the face of continued opposition, he decided that the only way to convert those who still resisted was by force.

So Islam is being spread by force. And if its for the whole world... then we do have a problem.

Potentially. At the moment its the so-called polytheists that he wants to stamp out. The very existence of idolaters, he says, is an insult to God. There can be no compromise with idolatry; for them the choice is submission or the sword. I'm not sure how this fits with his proclamation that Allah is all compassionate and merciful, but that's how it is. And there's no doubt that he is a very capable leader, militarily and politically.

If he's attacking the polytheists, does that mean he's leaving Jews and Christians alone?

Well, he accepts that we're monotheists, so we're tolerated but regarded as inferior; we have to pay a special tax. When I left the news was that Muhammed had taken Mecca, the main source of opposition. His followers are ferocious fighters... they believe that God is on their side... it makes you wonder where it will end.

And on that disturbing note, we'll have to leave it. Thanks for coming, Father Andreas.

Muhammed went on to overcome the Jews in Arabia, on one occasion 800 Jewish men who refused to abjure their faith were executed, and under his successors all the Jews and Christians were driven out of the Arabian peninsular. The Arabs had two important factors in their favour. The first was the hostility of semitic and coptic Christians in the Middle East towards the powers in Constantinople, in part because of their persecution of heretic Churches. The second was the disarray in the Persian empire, the other major power besides Rome. As a result they were able rapidly to conquer large parts of the Middle East and Asia Minor, including Myra. In 827 the Arabs invaded Sicily, and four years later they took Palermo, and thereafter Brindisi, Taranto and Bari, which for thirty years was the seat of an Arab Emirate. In 846 they advanced as far as Rome, sacked the city, stripping the silver plate from the doors of St Peter's. It was saved by Pope Leo IV, who summoned help from his allies and took personal command of his forces!

9. *Myra under Threat*

Acts 7.59 – 8.8

Myra was a seaport, and many of the stories about St Nicholas involved sailors, who named him as their patron saint – he also became the patron saint of children and prisoners (reflecting his concern for the wrongly condemned). The sailors who visited Myra naturally heard of St Nicholas, and the miracles attributed to him, and spread the stories around the world. Some of those sailors came from Bari, the capital of Apulia, a region of Italy that had also taken Nicholas as its patron saint – a patronage that helps to explain the determination of Bari to acquire his relics.

Before the Arabs reached Italy, they had conquered large parts of Asia Minor, including Myra, which was besieged in 809, and fell to Abbasid troops under Caliph Harun al-Rashid. A new church had been built in Myra in the previous century, replacing the one built in the sixth century; the Arabs attacked it, and tried to destroy the saint's tomb, but were not successful. Arab corsairs attacked again in 1034, but the church and the shrine again survived. The Arabs must have been repulsed, because the church was restored by Constantine IX in 1043.

The loss of Christians lands cannot have been easily accepted by the imperial authorities in Constantinople, but by that time their power had seeped away, and they could not offer effective protection. What remained of the Roman Empire was in terminal decline. Since the time of Constantine there had been tensions between the East and West, between the emperor and the pope, which became progressively worse over the centuries, and ended in the Great Schism between the Greek and Latin Churches in 1054.

By then the city of Rome had been repeatedly attacked and sacked by Germanic armies, with its former glory in ruins. Politics and religion went hand-in-hand; the papacy became a pawn in the power struggle among the

leading Roman families, and also between Rome and her foreign oppressors. The nadir, in a period of appalling violence, corruption and wickedness, was the reign of Pope John XII who became pope in 955. The son of Alberic, a germanic lord who had ruled Rome for the previous twenty-two years, he was elected at the express wish of his father, when only eighteen. Not only was he a youth, but he was a dissolute layman. (So corrupt had the papacy become, it was not unusual for laymen to be elected, and rapidly ordained.) John XII reigned for nine years. Of him Edward Gibbon said: 'We read, with some surprise, that he lived in public adultery with the matrons of Rome; that the Lateran Palace was turned into a school for prostitution, and that his rapes of virgins and widows had deterred the female pilgrims from visiting the shrine of Peter, lest, in the devout act, they should be violated by his successor.'

Eventually, the Byzantine empire tried to oust the Arabs, but without success. On 26 August 1071 at the battle of Manzikert, Romanus IV, the Byzantine Emperor suffered an humiliating defeat by Sultan Alp Arsan. Ten or more years later The Empire struck back, this time regaining control over Asia Minor.

It was during this period, at the end of the eleventh century when Myra was again back in Christian hands, that a monastery was built. Eastern monasteries differed from those in the West. The East did not have religious orders, and does not to this day; they simply have monks. Disciples gather around a spiritual leader, and live a common life together. The monastery at Myra, would have been on this pattern, and these orthodox monastic communities were generally quite small. The monks lived a simple life of prayer and penance; they aimed to be self-sufficient, depending on their own labour and the charity of the local people. The monks at Myra looked after the shrine of St Nicholas, welcomed pilgrims, and guarded the manna. The offerings of pilgrims were part of their income. It was hardly a secure existence, and the period of Christian rule proved to be only a short respite.

Early in the reign of Emperor Alexius I Comnenus, who ruled from 1081 to 1118, Myra was again overtaken by Islamic invaders, this time the Seljuk Turks. The scene was set for the rescue of the relics from the infidels.

10. The Relics Must be Saved!

Psalm 69.1–2; 13–18

Guido Scipione is a restless man. As the owner of the largest fleet of ships in Bari he is rich, one of the city's leading citizens and the confidant of Archbishop Urso. Guido has done well. His father was a fisherman, with two or three boats of his own, and when Guido took over the family business his drive, and talent for spotting new opportunities, enabled him to develop it. Years ago fishing ceased to be part of the business; he now operates a fleet of cargo-carrying vessels up and down the Adriatic and on to Greece and Asia Minor; his business stretches from Venice to Antioch. He's a devout man, and attributes his success to St Nicholas, the patron saint of mariners, and also the patron of his beloved Apulia. Guido is also ambitious. Like many driven men, he seeks approbation from others, and as well as creating business opportunities he has been astute in seeking ways to benefit his city, and so to rise in the estimation of its citizens. He offers a prayer of thanks for his good fortune as he makes his way to Archbishop Urso's palace with some important news.

The Archbishop received his request only a hour ago. Guido's servant had said his master had something of the utmost importance and urgency to communicate, and Urso had agreed that he would see him within the hour. He liked Guido and his straightforward business approach – a welcome change from the church sycophants with whom he usually had to deal. Holy

Church needed the goodwill of their rich benefactors. Urso, like Guido, has a particular devotion to St Nicholas, and this too was part of their bond. Almost from the beginning of their friendship they had anguished over the fate of his shrine, for so long in the hands of the infidels. At the turn of the year Archbishop Urso had a dream in which St Nicholas appeared to him saying that he no longer wished his shrine to be among the infidels; he wished it to be removed to Bari.

‘Guido,’ the archbishop had said at one of their meetings, ‘we have to find a way of fulfilling the saint’s desire. I need your help. Can we together render this service to our blessed patron?’ Guido didn’t hesitate: ‘Of course, we can, my Lord. We’ll need to know the details of the shrine; where the tomb is; who guards it... I’ve got a ship from Myra due in tomorrow. Matthew, one of the officers, always visits the shrine; I’ll find out what he knows.’

Guido had left rejoicing in the favour St Nicholas had shown him; it wasn’t everyday that he had a commercial opportunity blessed by a saint.

Two days later Guido had returned to the palace. Matthew had told him that the shrine was left alone by the Turks – he thought it must have something to do with the custom of women who wanted a child of going to the shrine to ask for the saint’s help. They drank a little of the manna, and always conceived afterwards. It was guarded only by a small community of monks. ‘They wouldn’t be able to stand in our way,’ he said, ‘particularly if St Nicholas is with us.’

As he waits for Guido, Archbishop Urso reflects that St Nicholas’ tomb had become a popular place of pilgrimage, and he is very aware of the religious and commercial advantages of having the shrine of a major saint in Bari. Relics were a sign of prestige... and then there was the spiritual benefit that it would bring him personally. He tries to put these thoughts to the back of his mind... after all, he is doing this at the saint’s request. Even so, he had made sure there were no legal impediments. He had summoned his chancellor who

had confirmed that there was no law against the translation of relics, even without the consent of the guardians, particularly if it was the saint's wish. He knew what the archbishop wanted to hear. 'The translation of relics is quite normal, my Lord. You remember, the celebrated abduction by the monks of Ely of the relics of St Withburga from Dereham. Legally, relics aren't property, they are a person. The saints decide where they wish to rest; it is up to us to carry out their wishes. If we have misunderstood, then they are perfectly capable of making their displeasure known, as as Blessed Swithun did when the monks of Winchester sought to move him.' Archbishop Urso was reassured.

A knock on his door signals the arrival of Guido with his urgent news. After the preliminary courtesies, Archbishop Urso asks, 'Well, Guido what have you come to tell me in such haste?' 'My Lord, we have to act immediately. One of my ships has just returned from Venice, and the captain reports that the Venetians have decided on the same course of action as ourselves. They are, even now, sending ships on their way to Myra to seize the relics.' 'God forbid!' Urso exclaimed. 'It was to me that St Nicholas appealed, not to that scoundrel the Venetian Patriarch! I've never trusted him. He's always opposed me. What connection has Venice with St Nicholas? Its pure greed and opportunism! Of course we must act immediately. Are your ships ready to go?' 'Yes, my Lord. Anticipating your agreement, I have put everything in hand.' Excited, but with decorum, they go to the archbishop's oratory where they kneel and pray before the icon of St Nicholas, asking God and his saint to aid their venture, and then Guido hurries away.

Left alone Urso reflects on his desire to possess the holy relics. 'Well,' he says to himself, 'St Nicholas asked to be moved, and I am carrying out his wishes.' That's what he will say if challenged, but he knows in his heart that it's not as simple as that. Relics were indeed greatly prized; bishops and monasteries would boast of their collection, and some had few scruples as to

how they went about it, like the Syrian bishop who had seized St Simon Stylites in 459. When the saint was near to death, a large crowd equipped with knives and sickles had gathered at the base of the column on which he lived, waiting for him to drop off. The bishop hearing of this, sent a raiding party to disperse the peasants, and seized the whole of the saint's body to add to his already vast collection of relics. 'Well,' Urso mused to himself, 'I'm not like him. I'm not doing this for me, but for Blessed Nicholas.' But at the back of his mind Urso knows only too well that the relics will bring prosperity to Bari, and increase the esteem in which he is held. 'St Nicholas must wish this,' he reasons, 'as a sign of favour to myself. If he desires to move, he must also desire the consequences.'

Archbishop Urso slept well that night.

11. Lost in Translation

Psalm 107.23–32 / Acts 27.1–6

From the palace Guido went straight to the port, and gave the order to sail. It had been decided to send three ships to Myra, with a complement of around fifty men as well as the crew. They were two or three sailing days in front of the Venetians. The tide was on the turn and the wind set fair; with the saint's help they should arrive well before them.

Spirits were high as they sailed, but even so there was concern about the Turks: would they meet opposition from them? Reaching Myra in good time, they made fast their ships and sent two pilgrims who were travelling with them, one Greek the other French, to prospect the lie of the land. They could explore the city and the shrine without rousing the suspicions of the Turks.

The two returned with the news that there were no Turks at the shrine, only a small community of monks, and so, led by Matthew, a company of forty-seven set out at once to seize the holy relics.

The shrine was guarded by four monks. The Barians entered devoutly and worshipped at the altar. They then asked the monks, 'Brothers, show us where lies the body of the holy confessor.' Speaking a different language, the monks misunderstood the request, and showed them the place from which with a sponge they extracted the holy manna. But something about the Barians made them uneasy; one monk whispered to the others, 'Be on your guard; I don't trust these people. They're asking too many questions. I reckon they're up to no good.' One of them challenged the Barians: 'Why are you asking all these questions? Have you come to take the body? If so, it will be over our dead bodies; we'd rather die than see him taken.' 'That's exactly what we are here to do,' said Mathew, confirming the monks' worst fears. As the confrontation became more heated, the Barians told them about how St Nicholas had appeared to the archbishop in a dream, and asked to be moved to Bari. At that moment a phial of manna that one of the priests in the party had taken from the tomb and placed on a pillar, fell off but was not broken. This was a clear sign that the Barians had the saint's favour.

Matthew, angered by the monks' obstructions despite the sign of the phial, threatened one of them with his sword, demanding that he tell them where the body lay. Another monk came to his brother's aid: 'Why do you manhandle a servant of God in that way? You can see where the manna comes from, that is where the saint is laid.' And then, to the surprise of the Barians, he added, 'Many people, kings and potentates, have sought to take the holy body, but they had no luck as the saint was unwilling. Yet it may happen through you, because last year he warned us in a vision that his abode would move, if Myra could not be guarded from the Turks. So, put up your sword; if the saint is with you, we cannot stand in your way.'

Emboldened by the monk's words, Matthew then broke open the sarcophagus; inside was the coffin containing the holy relics. Impetuously, he lowered himself into the tomb and bathed his hands in the manna. There arose a wonderful perfume, a clear sign, the monks had to accept, that St Nicholas was freely granting himself to the Barians. They wept, saying, 'The saint is yours, for he has never accorded such a favour to others. Alas for sorrow, how great an evil has happened to our land.' And they raised a great lament: 'O Nicholas, our dearest father, why do you desert us when we are afflicted by so many miseries? Are all the tokens of our service, which we and our fathers have meted out to your glory nothing to you? Alas, now a dark curtain will descend over the whole province of Lycia.'

For the Barians it was not sorrow, but joy that overcame them. Quickly gathering as much as they could of the holy relics – about half – and wrapping them reverently in a silk cloth, hurriedly they bore them to their ships, and so on to Bari.

12. The Fate of Myra

Luke 21.5–11; 34–36

The Barian sailors left Myra rejoicing; the people of Myra were left distraught. By the time the Barians reached their ships word of their deed had passed round the town and a large crowd had gathered on the shore, grieving at their loss. Vainly some tried to swim after the departing boats, grabbing the rails and crying out to the rowers, 'Give back our father and our lord, our master and nourisher, who in every way has by his protection kept us safe from our foes. Let us have even a part of his body, so that we won't be

completely divorced from our great patron.' The Barians were not unmoved by this outpouring of grief. It is said that the sorrowful dirges could be heard echoing nearly two miles out to sea, and that very few among them could not, even with great effort, keep themselves from tears, at the sound of such wretchedness, but so convinced were they that it was the saint's will to leave Myra that they pressed on, and reaching their ships, sailed out into deep water.

So the sojourn of St Nicholas at Myra for 775 years came to an end. Others before had tried to take him, but none had succeeded; the Barians must have had the saint's favour, otherwise they too would have failed. The Myrans were orphaned. They may have had some consolation when they discovered that not all the relics had been taken, and a miracle-working icon had been also left by the Barians at the express wish of the saint; but any comfort they had was short-lived. Eight years later, in 1095, Pope Urban II launched the first crusade, and as the crusaders made their way to the Holy Land the Venetians took the opportunity to seize the remaining relics.

For many years Myra had been in decline, greatly suffering from the Arab raids, and in time most of the inhabitants moved away, exhausted by war, threatened by earthquakes, and impoverished by the silting of the river Myrus. The loss of St Nicholas must have seemed like the last straw. The dire warning of Jesus about the end had become reality for them.

The Barians sailed on. Many signs of the saint's favour accompanied their voyage. One day in open sea, a bird rather like a lark alighted on the casket containing the relics; it sang sweetly and touched the casket with its beak. This was taken to be a song of praise to God and his saint, and the kiss of its beak a sign of devotion to the saint. Then the bird circled the whole ship and its crew as it sang. It seemed to the sailors that he was extending to them all his praise and blessing for what they had done for the magnificent, miracle-

working shepherd. Then, having rendered his oblation, he flew away and they saw him no more.

When they finally arrived at Bari, the saint was met by a great procession of priests and people, but there was disagreement over where he should be housed. The sailors had pledged among themselves to build a new church, others thought he should be taken to the cathedral. The argument must have continued for several days; eventually Dom Elias, the abbot of the Benedictine monastery in Bari, intervened and won the day for those who wanted to build a new church.

At this moment word came from Archbishop Urso, who had been away at the time of the saint's arrival, but had hurried back as soon as he heard the news, that the saint should be carried to his palace. This aroused immediate protest, and some of the leading citizens were sent as a delegation to persuade the Archbishop to change his mind. Guido Scippione was among them. 'My Lord,' he said, 'we all hold you in the greatest honour, and we know that it was to you that Blessed Nicholas vouchsafed his desire to make his home in Bari. All your people, my Lord, wish like you, to honour his desire, and so we beseech you, it is fitting that we build a new church for him where all can worship and seek healing at his shrine.' But Urso, did not heed the advice of his friend, and remained adamant that the relics should be under his personal guardianship. The crowd were divided, and the dispute became so heated that it led to fighting, in the course of which two youths were killed. The Archbishop relented, and agreed that Dom Elias should have charge of the relics until a new church was built, and so St Nicholas was conveyed to the monastery. I wonder if Archbishop Urso, or Abbot Elias, or Guido Scippione reflected in their triumph, that treating the holy as something to be possessed cheapened it, and turned it into a commodity and a source of division. And did the people of Myra, united in their devastating loss, grieve because the relics had been stolen, or because the holy no longer embraced them?

It took over 100 years for the new basilica in Bari to be finished, and for St Nicholas to be moved to his new home. Meanwhile the church in Myra languished, and more or less fell into disuse. Five of us on this pilgrimage visited it in 2001. The building was intact, but not well cared for. The remains of St Nicholas' sarcophagus were still there, and also part of the raised seating behind the altar where the presbyters sat. It was a sad sight. Since then the Turkish government, with Russian support, I believe, has restored the church, and has requested the return of the relics! They assert that St. Nicholas himself desired to be buried at his episcopal town, and that his remains were illegally removed from his homeland.

13. Nicholas as an Icon of Jesus

John 14.11–14 + 20.19–23

At the consecration of the Basilica of St Nicholas, Pope Urban II laid the holy relics beneath the altar in the crypt. I can't imagine that he would have been other than deeply moved, even for a man as accustomed, as he would have been, to great occasions and to the company of saints. As the casket was lowered reverently into the ground, he would have believed, like Archbishop Urso (who, no doubt, assisted him) that he was carrying out the saint's personal wish to make his home in Bari. As well as the visions that Archbishop Urso and the monks of Myra had received in which St Nicholas had indicated his wishes, there is also a story that on one occasion, when he had been on his way to Rome, he had passed through Bari, and had chosen it as his burial place.

Maybe I am too infected with Western scepticism, but these stories strike me as just too convenient to be true. I can't fit them with the earlier stories about the devotion of St Nicholas to his people, and the way he cared for them – stories that explain the widespread devotion to him and the rise of his cult. Would such a man, while still alive, have decided to turn his back on his people and be buried elsewhere than among them? I think its much more probable that he would have wished to stay with his people, even if he had to suffer for them, as he did under the persecution of Diocletian.

Well, whatever the Pope and the Archbishop may have believed, and whatever I may feel, they were laying to rest the mortal remains of a man who had lived his life so close to God, striving to follow the pattern of Jesus, that the love of God shone through him. In that sense we may think of Nicholas as an icon of Christ, and understand the miraculous signs associated with him as coming from God. On the night before he died, Jesus promised the disciples that if they were true to his name they would do the same works as him, indeed they would do greater works than him. We should not be surprised if he is true to his promise, as he was through his servant Nicholas.

Nicholas, like all the saints, helps us to understand what it means to possess the holy. Holiness is the distinctive characteristic of God and of all that is specially associated with God. To be holy is to be set apart by God for his service, whether people, places or objects. Holiness has a two-fold character: it is a gift and it is a goal. As a gift it has nothing to do with any achievement or quality of our own; it comes from God alone. As a goal it is God's call to us to be holy as he is holy. To grow in holiness is to let God form us so that his love shines out in our lives and we manifest his divine concern for justice and righteousness. The life of Jesus is the supreme pattern of holiness, and the love that he showed is the essence of Christian holiness – a love selflessly devoted to the will of the Father, and poured out in self-sacrificing service. Both the gift and the goal are the work of the Holy Spirit,

and those, like Blessed Nicholas, who are called saints in the Church are the men and women in whom this gift and power of the Spirit is outstandingly manifest. They are not flawless paragons of virtue, but men and women through whom others have become more sure of God and his grace.

There can be no doubt that through St Nicholas men and women have become more sure of God and his grace. He lived at a time of political uncertainty and social disorder, when the state religion had lost its power, morals were lax and inflation was rife – a faithless age, without hope, and groping for direction, not unlike today. Into this situation Christianity offered something new: an understanding of God as love, which not only fulfilled men's deepest spiritual needs but also held the key to overcoming all social evils. Here was the incredible good news that God loved his people so much that had come among them as a man to teach and to heal, and in the end to offer himself for them in forgiveness. Here was a God in whom people could really have faith. Nicholas allowed himself to be possessed by this God, and that is why we call him holy.

O Nicholas, man greatly beloved, we rejoice that in you we see the love of God and the power of God. Bari is blessed to be your resting place.
