

Q. I am a Sunday school teacher and I need to know what we should tell our children about St. Nicholas. With all of the pre-Christmas Santa Claus stuff on TV, it is hard not to confuse them.

A. Several years ago, I wrote for an Orthodox children's magazine. The editor, who had run the publication for years, told me that I had total freedom in choosing topics for articles as long as I didn't mention St. Nicholas because, whatever I might say, she assured me that people would "come out of the woodwork" to complain.

The problem is that we have a wonderful Saint: Nicholas of Myra, and our culture has a secular "icon of consumerism," which is also called St. Nicholas or Santa Claus. I won't go into how this happened, but to mention that, from the time of Cromwell in the 16th century until the middle of the 19th century, English and American Protestantism had pretty much ignored the Feast of the Nativity. As part of the Romantic Movement in the last century, Christmas experienced a revival, and Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, along with the fanciful poem "Twas the Night Before Christmas," which is actually titled "A visit from St. Nicholas," played a part in this renewal of popularity.

The author of the latter work, an Episcopalian clergyman in New York City, placed the Dutch tradition of gift giving on St. Nicholas' (Santa Clause) day in connection with the Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord. The problem was further confounded by the progressive commercialization of the Feast. "Santa" was transformed from a fourth century bishop into a chubby, North Pole dwelling toy manufacturer who drank Coke, had a wife (Mrs. Clause), and even navigated his sleigh with the assistance of a "Red-nosed Reindeer."

Now, the extent to which any Orthodox family chooses to buy into the whole "Santa thing" has a lot to do with the bigger issue of the extent to which the parents choose to engage the world on its terms, and the extent to which they choose to entrench and isolate their children, as far as possible, from the influence of secular society.

My children grew up knowing that St. Nicholas is an Orthodox Saint, and being told that it was because Americans are generally wrong about everything having to do with religion that they got "Santa" wrong too. On the other hand, they grew up to the age of four or five with the classical American cultural myths of Santa Clause and Easter Bunny. I can remember driving home from our first Pascha as an Orthodox family, when my boys were four and three respectively. The older boy commented to his brother that the "Pascha Bunny" probably hadn't gotten to our house yet because, "He is probably still cracking eggs in Chicago or Minneapolis." Did this do any harm to my kids' spiritual formation, faith, life, or trust in God? Not as far as I can tell. They learned, as they were growing up, that there is a difference between imaginary personalities like the Easter Bunny and the American Santa Clause, and the holy persons who highlight the history of our faith. Long after they stopped believing in "Santa" they continued to put out their

shoes on the Eve of December 6th, and their mom continued to give them little gifts such as fit into a child's shoe. They understood that St. Nicholas didn't come and place the objects there. We did tell them, and sincerely believe, that the prayers of St Nicholas of Myra, who rescued the three little boys from the butcher's barrel, and the three young women from the life of a concubine, also helps and cares for little boys and girls whose parent are struggling and laboring to provide for them.

At our parish we have a big event on St. Nicholas' Day, and we tell our children all kinds of stories from his life. We give the small toys and gifts along with fruit. After Christmas, the Romanians have a party for the orphans in the Denver area who were adopted by American families. They have a real sloppy looking Santa who wouldn't fool anyone. He gives small gifts to all the children, we share a meal, and have a chance to meet and educate the adoptive parents about the Orthodox faith.

Now, concerning your Sunday school children. I suggest that you give a great deal of attention to the "real St. Nicholas," especially on his day. If kids ask about Santa Claus, suggest that they talk to their parents. I have found that, by the age of six or seven, when children are ready for Holy Confession, they will have figured it out with no harm being done. I hope that this answer is helpful, and that I will not be thought of as either a curmudgeon or a secular Neo-pagan.