

# Voices: Did Santa slap a heretic?

December 14, 2022

Did Santa Claus—Old Saint Nick—really slap an early Christian heretic?

For the answer to that question, we must go back into early church history to answer three other important questions.

## Was there a real Santa Claus?

Believe it or not, there really was a historical person named Nicholas recognized by the church as a saint sometime in the A.D. 800s. Santa Claus is the English pronunciation of the Dutch name Sinterklaas, which is how the Dutch referred to this Saint Nicholas.

There are many legends about Nicholas and the man he became. Behind those legends is the story of a man who purportedly slapped the leader of a heretical movement at an important gathering of early church leaders.

According to tradition, after young Nicholas' parents died in a plague, he went to live with his uncle—a monk in a monastery. Nicholas later became a priest himself and then the bishop in the city of Myra, Turkey.

Nicholas became renowned for his great generosity and kindness, which gave rise to legends of miracles he performed for the poor and needy—such as surreptitiously placing gifts in stockings and even dropping some gifts down chimneys.

Under severe persecution of Christian churches by the Roman Emperor Diocletian (A.D. 284–305), Nicholas was imprisoned and later released by Emperor Constantine (A.D. 306–387). Constantine was the first Roman

emperor to recognize Christianity officially as a legal and legitimate religion throughout the Roman Empire.

But trouble soon emerged in Constantine's empire. A huge theological dispute had developed that threatened the very unity of his kingdom.

## Who was the heretic?

Arius (A.D. 256-336) was an influential priest and presbyter of the church in Alexandria, Egypt, an important center of theological thought and discourse during the fourth century.

Arius promoted a certain understanding of the person of Christ that became widely popular, albeit thoroughly heretical. His view was that Jesus was a *created* being—the first and, therefore, most prominent of God's creation—and not co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father.

For Arius, Jesus was of a "*similar* essence/substance" as God—in Greek, *homoiousios*—but he was not of the "*same* essence/substance" as God—in Greek, *homoousios*. The addition of that one little Greek letter—the *iota*—created an enormous theological and Christological firestorm in churches across the empire.

Arius allegedly was a songwriter who loved to put his theology into lyrics to be sung or chanted. Sometime around A.D. 319, the popular chant, song and cry of the Arians—"There was a time when the Son was not"—began to be heard.

Worried about this growing division among the churches in his empire, Constantine called the bishops together in the Nicea to settle the dispute once and for all. Apparently, only 300 of the 1800 bishops attended.

# Did Santa Claus really slap this heretic?

Tradition says Saint Nicholas was one of the bishops present at this first ecumenical gathering of bishops known as the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325).

According to author Robert Payne in his *The Holy Fire: The Story of the Early Centuries of the Christian Churches in the Near East* (1957), as Arius presented his case, he broke into a chant. Thinking the emperor would listen more attentively to a chant than a lengthy rant on a complex issue of the faith, Arius purportedly began to sing:

*The uncreated God has made the Son  
A beginning of things created,  
And by adoption has God made the Son  
Into an advancement of himself.  
Yet the Son's substance is  
Removed from the substance of the Father:  
The Son is not equal to the Father,  
Nor does he share the same substance.  
God is the all-wise Father,  
And the Son is the teacher of his mysteries.  
The members of the Holy Trinity  
Share unequal glories.*

As Arius argued for his position, Nicholas purportedly became more and more infuriated at what he perceived to be a complete heresy regarding the nature of Jesus. Finally, he had enough. Saint Nicholas rose, approached Arius, and as the story goes, Nicholas proceeded to slap Arius in the face.

So, did Santa Claus really slap an early Christian heretic? Since the story is mostly based on legend, and there is no historical record of this alleged

incident until as late as the 14th century, the answer is probably not.

But if you believe Old Saint Nick was this historical Saint Nicholas of Myra, who may have been at the Council of Nicea; and if you mean the heretic was Arius of Alexandria, who was in fact present at that meeting; and if you embrace the legend of what occurred at the Council of Nicea; then, yes, one day Santa Claus really did slap a face. And for good reason.

## **And now for the ‘rest of the story’**

What decision did the bishops finally adopt at Nicea? This is the most important point of the previous story, whether all the events happened or not. This point has a huge bearing on what we believe about the Christ of Christmas.

Fortunately, the bishops refuted Arius’ position as heresy. What resulted from the Council of Nicea was one of the earliest statements of the Christian faith—the famous Nicene Creed—articulating, in part, what is still our orthodox doctrine of the person of Christ:

*We believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
begotten from the Father before all ages,  
God from God,  
Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made;  
of the same essence as the Father.*

*Through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven;  
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,  
and was made human.  
He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered and was buried.  
The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.  
He ascended to heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again with glory  
to judge the living and the dead.  
His kingdom will never end.*

As this Christmas approaches, may we all say together, "Thank God for Nicea." This Christmas, as we reminisce regarding supposed stories of Old Saint Nick, may we all sing and worship with confidence who Jesus really is: "O come let us adore him, **Christ the Lord.**"

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