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CHANGING LOOKS OF SANTA CLAUS DATES BACK TO BENEVOLENT BISHOP OF MYRA IN FOURTH CENTURY

DAYTON, Ohio — Are you ready for that tall and gaunt donkey-riding visitor to slide down your chimney Dec. 25? You know, the guy adorned in clerical garb, a bishop's miter atop his head and a shepherd's staff in hand, who's going to put gifts in your Dutch shoes?

Didn't think so.

Our modern Manhattan Santa Claus — a white-haired, roly-poly man in a red and white suit who annually delivers gifts while driving a reindeer-pulled sleigh — is a stark and secular contrast to his humble and religious beginnings .

And this concerns Ray Herbenick, professor of philosophy at the University of Dayton who has studied eastern-Christian religion.

"We're so consumed by the modern commercialism of the Christmas season that we lose sight of the past — and I think it's important that we somehow retrieve it," says Herbenick, whose Carpath-Rusyn heritage leads him to still remember the historical St. Nicholas of Myra, Turkey, and venerate religious icons of the Eastern Christian bishop.

According to legend, our Santa is the descendent of a man named Nicholas who, in the fourth century after Christ, became bishop of a village called Myra, in what is now Turkey. Bishop Nicholas, a benevolent man made famous for kind acts toward young people and the desperate, is one of the most popular saints in all of Christianity. He also is revered as the patron saint of travellers and sailors.

Don't get Herbenick wrong. He isn't the Grinch of Academe.

"I don't abhor today's Santa Claus traditions," concedes Herbenick. "But we've gotten so far removed from the historical and religious significance of St. Nicholas that we've lost sight of his message of charity, especially to those in need.

"So many people today experience anxiety and holiday blues because they feel the Christmas season has lost meaning for them," Herbenick says. "Maybe this is a way to get that meaning back into their lives by caring for others who hurt even more."

The Bishop of Myra's method of generosity involved anonymously giving bags of gold to the needy during the night — not unlike today's phenomenon of random acts of kindness performed throughout the year. The most famous story surrounding the legend tells of his giving gold to three poor girls to be used as dowries so they could marry.

As centuries passed and stories of the man spread throughout the world, bedtime tales of St. Nicholas helped make him the patron saint of children. Eventually, Europeans gave gifts to their children on the eve of the feast of St. Nicholas (Dec. 6) to honor him.

On that eve, children left shoes filled with straw for St. Nick's donkey ("prototype" to Santa's

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sleigh), and by morning the straw was gone, their shoes filled with presents.

From there, New York writer Washington Irving satirized Dutch traditions in an 1809 story, including the legend of Sinter Klaas (an English translation of “Sint Nicholass,” later Americanized to “Santa Claus”). He described Saint Nicholas as “flying across the sky in a wagon and dropping presents down chimneys for good little boys and girls.”

Irving envisioned Saint Nicholas not in clerical dress but as a jolly fellow, whom New Yorkers came to adore, says Teresa Chris in her book *The Story of Santa Claus*. English settlers to America had eagerly adopted the Dutch celebrations of St. Nicholas’ Day, gradually merging them with their own traditions of celebrating Christmas and the New Year.

Other events also led to the evolution of our Santa Claus, perpetuated by American writers and artists, even a popular soda company:

- Santa trades in his wagon for a sleigh, which is pulled by “eight tiny reindeer,” in Clement Clarke Moore’s classic poem “The Night Before Christmas,” which was written for his children in 1822. Moore replaces Dutch shoes with stockings and gives Santa an exotic home at the North Pole. Santa is now a potbellied “Jolly Old Elf” who slides down chimneys to give children their gifts.

- Other versions at the time had Santa on a white horse and even in a cart pulled by a goat. Some had him as a tall and gaunt figure with long straight black hair. But Moore’s account was so vivid and compelling that it became the standard.

- In 1863 political cartoonist Thomas Nast created many of the characteristics seen in Santa today. Nast’s Santa, drawn for *Harper’s Weekly* magazine to raise Union spirits during the Civil War, was an Uncle Sam lookalike in star-spangled jacket, striped pants and a cap. Nast added new details every year, from a Santa poring over a list of naughty and nice children to showing him busy in his toy shop at the North Pole. Santa eventually dropped the patriotic threads for a black wool suit.

- Santa’s next fashion upgrade owes its design to Coca-Cola company artist Haddon Sundblom who, in 1931, helped create a massive Christmas advertising campaign. Haddon replaced Santa’s suit in favor of a “Coca-Cola” red and white number. The model for Santa was a retired Coca-Cola sales rep who represented so much the public perception of Santa — a smiling, white-haired, plump and rosy cheeked old man — that the Coca-Cola Santa remained and continues to thrive today.

Herbenic, a Byzantine Ruthenian Rite Eastern Catholic like fellow Pittsburgh-born artist Andy Warhol, a popular subject in the professor’s research, says his family recaptures the spirit of the holiday by exchanging little gifts between Dec. 6 (Feast of Saint Nicholas) and Christmas. They also quietly look for opportunities to help those less fortunate than themselves or ones with special needs who find it difficult to seek out help — much as Warhol did in soup kitchens of New York City on the holidays.”

“The truth is, we don’t know a lot about the bishop of Myra,” says Herbenick. “But it shouldn’t keep us from recapturing traditions of personal care found in diverse religious traditions. The legend of St. Nicholas and the spirit of charity should be at the heart of this season — not crass commercialism with little thought to the meaning of it all.”

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