

“The Hope of the Hopeless”**Advent** (Feast of St. Nicholas)

Rev. Basil Christi

In the name of the promised Prince of Peace, God’s Christ, in Whom, from His first to His second coming, we find the hope that fills our hearts and sustains us for all our days: peace be with you. Amen. Dearly beloved of God...

Advent is the season of preparation for the promise that we have in Christ Jesus, the hope that we have in Christ Jesus, the love that we have in Christ Jesus, and the joy we find in Christ Jesus, as He comes in answer to our hearts’ deepest and most desperate cry, fulfilling our foremost need for forgiveness. Throughout Advent, we penitently prepare ourselves for Christmas’ swaddling clothes and cradle, Bethlehem’s manger, under the shadow of Calvary’s cross. This is the season in which we recall that our rescue required a Redeemer, that a Saviour should be sent to save us from our sins. This is the season that helps us to come to terms with the reason for this season which brings us to rejoice in Him who came for us. Yet, all too often, this season becomes conflated with the one which follows it. It certainly does so as, from almost the season’s start, all the mall “Santa”’s surface, and secular “Christmas” carols, interspersed with our sacred songs, fill the halls that are now filled with storefront signs showcasing the season’s sales. All too often, the figure who ought to figure first and foremost in either case, does so in the shadow of another figure, a figure whose feast was just observed by those who gather in the name of that former figure. Yet, this figure, who would come to be known as “Santa

Claus” by the many, who we know as Saint Nicholas— and whose day of commemoration was just yesterday, according to our Church’s calendar— would *never* have allowed us to turn our gaze away from Him who God has graciously given us, the true Gift of the season. Saint Nicholas would certainly *not* have wanted to figure so prominently— or even at all— in the stories and songs of this season. Saint Nicholas would *never* have had us lose sight of the source of both his and our hope: Jesus Christ, the “reason for the season”!

Now, you may wonder, how is it that I can speak for Saint Nicholas with such certainty? Well, I can speak this way, in no uncertain terms, because the Coca-Cola caricature that has sadly captured the imagination of many a child’s heart around Christmas bears no resemblance to the man who the Church celebrates... and who has now made his way into becoming a regular Internet meme. You may have already seen the meme to which I’m referring, the one that is continually circulating throughout social media like Facebook, but, if you haven’t, it generally consists of one of two icons of Saint Nicholas with a caption that refers to his conflict with a heretic by the name of Arius. In one of the images, Saint Nicholas is depicted as most saints of his stature are portrayed: he is wearing a stole, which is also known as an *omophorion*, while holding a Bible in his hand. These are the marks of his office as a bishop in the early Church. Yes, Saint Nicholas of Myra, a Greek Christian from the fourth century, was a bishop who would come to be known for his secretive gift-giving— he was not some holly jolly, north pole-dwelling, magic sleigh-riding, figure that engaged in questionable practices of forcing fairy folk to slavishly labour all year for the sake of filling his sack with toys for

today's tots! No, Saint Nicholas was, and remains, a Christian who we remember for his life of service to God and God's people. Yes, it is true that, in the west, he has come to be associated with "Santa Claus" (who in the east is associated with Saint Basil the Great instead of Saint Nicholas), but there is really not much of any real relevance between the stories surrounding these two. Again, Saint Nicholas was a Christian whose hope was found in Christ alone, God's gift to us. Sadly, we know very little about Saint Nicholas, apart from a number of legendary accounts. As to the other icon used in the Internet meme that I had mentioned, it tells us a great deal about his fervent faith if what it depicts is true. This icon captures that moment, in the conflict with Arius, that gives me that sense of certainty that Saint Nicholas would want us to firmly affix our eyes upon Jesus and behold Him alone as the object of our hope for salvation, rejoicing in His coming among us according to God's great promise. Yes, of this I am certain, because the meme uses the icon that captures that moment when Saint Nicholas slapped Arius across his mouth, because Arius spoke against the only hope that we have for salvation.

The meme comes with a variety of wordings, but the most popular seems to be the one that most closely parodies a line from the satirical sci-fi movie, *They Live* (1988). It reads as follows: "I have come here to distribute presents and slap heretics... and I'm all out of presents!" I have to confess, I too couldn't help but post it to my Facebook page over the past few years. The image of Saint Nicholas striking Arius combined with that caption was just too good to pass up! Of course, some may be shocked to think of good ol' Saint Nick in that way, but I believe that that outburst was well warranted when one looks at the legend. The story surrounding the slap sets it at the time when Saint

Constantine the Great, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, called the Church's first ecumenical council to come to a consensus on the doctrine pertaining to the nature of God's Christ, namely, is the Son of God of the same nature, or substance, as the Father, or, is the Son of God, merely a creature of God, albeit of a similar nature, or substance, as the Father. Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria, had been championing the heretical belief that the Son of God was not fully God. He relied on his faulty reason over God's faithful revelation, saying, "If the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: and from this it is evident, that there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows, that he had his substance from nothing." His bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, failed to act against Arius at first; and therefore, Arius managed to spread his heresy throughout most of Christendom, doing so through songs that took hold of many a Christian, threatening the faith of the faithful. It was Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, Alexander's eventual successor, who was the chief defender against Arius' false teachings, now known as Arianism. At the council that Emperor Constantine convened at Nicea, Athanasius challenged Arius before three hundred and eighteen Christian bishops from all over the known world, as well as countless Christians who wore the title of "Confessor", that is, they were those who didn't give in and deny our Lord during the times of great persecution from the Roman authorities (these were the ones that would have died as martyrs, but were spared as those in power were replaced by those who were more sympathetic to Christians). So, picture if you will the scene: while the first Christian Roman emperor is seated in a great hall, surrounded by the bishops and saints that he had summoned and for whom he paid vast

sums of money so as to ensure their safe passage as well as their presence, surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses, as Arius argues against the full deity of Christ, a lone figure rushes forward and slaps him in the face! You can rest assured that that was not the normal protocol that one adheres to when appearing before the emperor to deal with doctrinal matters of any degree of importance; however, given the true degree of the importance of this particular doctrine, Saint Nicholas deemed it sufficient cause to step forward and break with protocol in such a striking manner.

It is from this setting, the Council of Nicea, that the expression, “not one iota of a difference,” arises. You see, the theological terms that were at the heart of the conflict were the Greek words, ὁμοούσιος, meaning, “of the *same* substance,” and ὁμοιούσιος, meaning, “of a *similar* substance.” The difference in spelling is only the presence of the Greek letter iota; the difference in meaning, however, is all about God’s presence among us. Saint Nicholas fully understood the very real danger to every believer on account of this “iota of a difference.” Indeed, if there is any truth to any part of this legend, then Saint Nicholas was vindicated by Christ Jesus and the Virgin Mary, even though the emperor was greatly offended by such an outburst and breach of proper protocol. The emperor had Saint Nicholas imprisoned and stripped of his stole and Bible—the very signs that marked Nicholas as a bishop in Christ’s Church. According to legend, our Lord and the blessed Virgin appeared to Nicholas, while he was still in his cell, and returned to him both stole and Scriptures. Saint Nicholas had either tried to slap Arius back to his senses or he was so incensed that he could not help but lash out against such damnable heresy in his hearing. Either way, he was passionate about defending the true

faith because the God that he— and we— worship is passionate about us. He did not send a creature to save us; He Himself came to save us. He is the sure hope that we have in this life for Life everlasting. Yes, exactly who it is that came for us actually matters to us.

Just as our faith is only as good as its object, so too our hope is only as sure as the object of our hope. We can either be hopeful or hopeless. Arius tried to take away our hope— and as such was a servant of Satan! Today, over the course of Advent, that season which culminates in the coming of Christmas, Satan will continue to speak to our sinful nature so as to steal from us our hope, sowing doubt or discontent. The world, with its ways, will stir up our sinful hearts us to look to the presents that we give one another and the lights that we string up around home and hearth to define the times. Yet, our eyes at Advent are particularly set upon the promise that we have in Christ Jesus, the hope that we have in Christ Jesus, the love that we have in Christ Jesus, and the joy we find in Christ Jesus, as He comes in answer to our hearts' deepest and most desperate cry, fulfilling our foremost need for forgiveness, for He is God's gift to us, God's own light in the darkness. Jesus Christ, the "reason for the season," is the figure who is foremost for us... indeed, I'm sure that good ol' Saint Nick himself wouldn't have it any other way! I, for one, wouldn't dare to argue against him! Would you? I hope not. AMEN.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing in His Christ, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.