2 Corinthians 1:3-7

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our trouble, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the same comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so through Christ our comfort also overflows. If we are troubled, it is for your comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you the ability to endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is sure, since we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so you also share in our comfort.

Christmas Traditions: St. Nicholas, Bishop & Confessor

People view Christmas as a comforting time of year, full of people being nice to each other and showing charity...but even Christians tend to either remove or shove aside the source of that comfort and charity, which is Christ, as we heard in our lesson, and replace it with family, lights, cheery holiday movies, or even the big red guy in a sleigh, etc. We've let so many things be inserted in Christmas and Advent, that we've let Christ be pushed to the side. Even good things like spending time with family and the comfort that brings can end up overshadowing the true comfort that is here in God's Eternal Word.

But ironically, the one figure that has taken over Christmas, may actually help us refocus on Christ. I'm talking about St. Nicholas, but not the jolly old Christmas movie version - *the* St. Nicholas.

Nicholas was born sometime around 280 A.D. in Patara, Lycia, an area that is part of present-day Turkey. He is believed to have died on December 6, 343 A.D., which is why today is called "St. Nicholas Day." Nicholas was a devout Christian. He later served as bishop, or head pastor, or Myra. The thing Nicholas was most famous for, however, was his charity. Nicholas was well known for doing exactly what our lesson from 2 Corinthians says, sharing Christ's comfort with those in need.

There are many legends of Nicholas' charity. One of the legends goes like this: There was a poor man who had three beautiful daughters. But the man had no money to help his daughters get married. If they didn't get married, there would be no one to help his girls after his death. St. Nicholas was passing through when he heard villagers talk about the girls. Nicholas wanted to help, but he knew the man wouldn't accept his charity. So one night he came to their house

in order to remain anonymous. One source says, he threw gold coins down the chimney, and fortuitously, they landed in the girl's stockings which had been hung in the fireplace to dry. Other sources say that he either threw the gold through an open window into stockings, or actually entered the house through the window and put the gold in the stockings. The next morning, the girls woke up, found the gold, and were of course, overjoyed because they were able to get married and live happily ever after.

This is, of course, just legend. But regardless of how Nicholas actually helped them, he was nevertheless, a very kind, generous, and charitable man. Nicholas shared Christ's comfort by being charitable, giving physical gifts to those in need.

But it's actually something else that Nicholas did that we remember him in the church on December 6, St. Nicholas Day. More importantly than sharing comfort through physical gifts, Nicholas shared spiritual comfort through preaching, confessing, and defending God's Word.

In the 300's A.D., a controversy raged in the church over whether or not Christ was actually Divine - that is, whether or not Christ was "True God." A man named Arius believed and taught that the 2nd Person of the Trinity (Jesus) was less than God, and that there was a time before Jesus existed. Arius believed that before Jesus was born into the world at Christmas, He didn't exist, because Jesus was less than God, or was of a different substance than God (*Homoiousios).* Of course, the Bible affirms that Jesus is God, is of the same substance of God (*Homoousios*) and that there was never a time that Jesus did not exist.

John 1 says "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...Through him everything was made, and without him not one thing was made that has been made." And then John makes it evident who this eternal Word was: "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us. We have seen his glory, the glory he has as the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." Jesus was eternally-begotten of the Father, the Eternal God who became flesh.

Arius, in denying that the Son was eternal, essentially said that God wasn't born at Christmas, but someone less than God. This isn't a minor disagreement. This is what Muslims and Mormons believe about Christmas. If you say that Christ didn't exist before He was conceived

in the womb of Mary, you make Christmas - which is nothing other than the birth of God in time - irrlevant. If you make Christ less than God, you deny the Trinity, and you deny the Faith.

St. Nicholas wasn't about to let this happen. He was intolerant of error. Another legend says that St. Nicholas - remember, kind, generous, charitable, Nicholas - was so upset at Arius for his false teaching about Christ that he punched Arius in the face! From that time forward, Nicholas, in his preaching and teaching, made a concerted effort to push back against this (very dangerous!) heresy. St. Nicholas defended that Jesus was true God, that He was of the same substance of the Father (*Homoousios*).

So Nicholas helped pen these words: "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father." St. Nicholas helped write the Nicene Creed, which we still confess today. It's the "Christmas Creed" because it tells us of the Eternal Birth of the Son, which gives meaning to the birth in time of God in a manger.

Although unfortunately overshadowed by silly cartoons, the actual St. Nicholas is an inspiration to us. We rightly seek to imitate his faith and good works. But especially in our culture we need to keep in mind which comes first. St. Nicholas was indeed a generous and giving man and this should not be downplayed or dismissed. It is commendable. But for Nicholas, the *source* of his charity was everything.

Nicholas was loved and comforted first by Christ. He first was shown charity and mercy by Christ. Because the true God was born into the world in time as a true Man, God has shown the ultimate mercy and charity to all the world.

Christ suffered from the moment He was conceived until the moment He died on the cross. Christ showed more charity than any person could ever hope to: Christ gave up Himself. Christ didn't use His Divine attributes even though He Had every right to. Christ became true Man, in order to suffer and die. But because Christ was true God, His suffering was enough to count for the sins of the entire world. If Christ had not been God, His death wouldn't have been enough to pay for the your sins or my sins.

Christ's charity as true Man *and* true God was what motivated St. Nicholas to show charity. He himself was the recipient of charity from God - the "*God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our trouble, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the same comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so through Christ our comfort also overflows.*"

So we shouldn't be surprised that a man so zealous for the truth - potentially punching heretics in the face - would also be zealous in works of mercy - potentially putting gold in stockings - for the zeal is the same and has the same source: Christ. And we should note that St. Nicholas is commemorated in the Church not for his physical charity, but for being a Bishop and Confessor, because the greatest charity is the release of men from the bonds of sin by the proclamation of Jesus Christ:

For Our Lord Jesus Christ, for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man. The true God born in time as a true Man. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, in order to bestow gifts upon those who did not deserve them. He died and was buried - all in order to give you the greatest gift of all. The Lord bestows upon you a Kingdom which has no end.

So today, you are free to commemorate and remember St. Nicholas. Maybe start a new tradition of putting your gifts in your stockings today, although I might not suggest putting gold in them. Let Nicholas' zeal for charity, and more importantly, for truth, remind you of the true charity of Christ: That the eternal Word, the eternally-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, became true Man, born in time at Christmas, for you.

Amen.