

Christmas Eve Reflection 2016, "Yes, Really" by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, Kennebunk

They called him the Defender of Orthodoxy, Holy Hierarch, the Bishop of Myra, and the Wonderworker (all of which makes for an impressive resume to be sure); he attended the Christian faith's first Ecumenical Council, the Council of Nicaea, AD 325; which had been called to preserve unity in the church that was threatened by competing claims about the nature of Christ. I'm speaking of Saint Nicholas who was and remains, a true heavy-weight.

Through the centuries many stories and legends have been told of St. Nicholas' life and deeds. His reputation evolved among the faithful, taking on mythic proportions as accounts of his miracles and extraordinary generosity spread among the Early Church.

In what is easily his most famous exploit, Nicholas aided a poor man who had three daughters but could not afford a proper dowry for them. This meant that they would remain unmarried and, in absence of any other possible employment, forced into a life of harsh servitude. Hearing of the girls' plight, Nicholas decided to help them, but being too modest to help the family in public (or to save them the humiliation of accepting charity)--as the story goes--he went to the house under the cover of night and threw three bags (one for each daughter) filled with gold coins through the window.

Another version of the story has Nicholas dropping the bags down the chimney instead; and as fate would have it, the daughters had washed their stockings that evening and hung them over the embers to dry, and the bags of gold—as you would guess--fell into the stocking. It was of course Saint Nicholas' legendary habit of secret gift-giving which over the centuries gave rise to the Jolly O Elf, popularly known as Santa Claus.

Which brings us to the 19th century, New York City, and to the story of eight-year-old girl by the name of Virginia who, in September of 1897, wrote a letter to the editor of the New York's *Sun*, which read:

DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 years old.
Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus.
Papa says, 'If you see it in THE SUN it's so.'
Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?

Virginia O'Hanlon, 115 West Ninety-Fifth Street

The response was initially printed as an unsigned editorial, but was later identified as the work of veteran newsman Francis Pharcellus Church. It has since become history's most reprinted newspaper editorial, appearing in part or whole in dozens of languages. It reads as follows:

VIRGINIA, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You may tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, VIRGINIA, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

Many years ago in the city Bethlehem of Judea, a Child unlike any other child was born, born of an "intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge", born "to give life its highest beauty and joy." Now there are "skeptics of a skeptic age," as there always will be, who with cold hearts and closed minds scoff and mock the very notion that anything whatsoever existing beyond the scope of direct human perception could either exist or be of any lasting value.

To my mind, only the darkest of cynics and twisted nay-sayers could ever possibly dismiss the significance of truth and beauty and love and charity and goodness in the world; and to dismiss those who have been born, those who have lived and died and preached and sacrificed for the sake of transforming the world to more closely resemble truth and beauty and love and charity, is to dismiss the possibility that anything or anyone is capable of lifting us from dark despair to the pinnacle of life and life and abundance. To so dismiss the possibility of what can be is to enter the realm of the fool. They are wrong.

By contrast, people of faith, yes of all faiths, have always stood in opposition to the cynics and the naysayers—as we do this evening in our celebration of the birth of One who in the very least, exemplifies life and life abundant, who embodied the radical, transformative alternative to the darkness...and who indeed will continue to “make glad the heart...ten times ten thousand years from now.” People disposed by faith, and hope, and charity have grasped hold of what they know to be of timeless importance. Indeed, people so disposed possess all the evidence and all the reason anyone could ever possibly need to wholeheartedly celebrate Christmas; and so we worship in Spirit and in Truth. In the manner of untold generations before us, we are the people who yes, have seen a great light, who yes, envision a world fully animated by peace, justice, charity, joy and love.

-Amen and Merry, Merry Christmas!