

For Catechists

What to Tell Catholic Children About Santa Claus



As Christmas approaches, you will encounter children whose families have encouraged them in the European-American tradition of believing in Santa Claus, the jolly man in the red suit who brings presents to good children. It is important to know that the question of whether or not to believe in Santa can be a sensitive subject **that should be discussed between a child and his or her parents.**

In past years, some families have encountered catechists who told children that Santa Claus is made up or “not real.” That can be devastating to a child and can even lead to a family leaving the parish program. Catholics DO believe Santa is “real” - in the sense that Saint Nicholas was a real person and now lives on in the Communion of Saints. The cultural customs that have developed through the centuries surrounding this benevolent figure are what we would call a “myth” - a story that tells a truth. Here are a few ways to talk positively about Santa to help children see that he represents a facet of the love of God.

- ◆ "Santa Claus" is not an imaginary or made-up name. It comes from the Dutch *Sinterklaas*, which translates to "Saint Nicholas."
- ◆ As a young man living in 4th century Turkey, Saint Nicholas inherited a great deal of money and he secretly gave gifts of food, clothes and money to the poor in his village. When a family could not afford for their daughters to marry, Nicholas provided money in secret, dropping it down the chimney or through an open window—until the father of the family caught him in the act. This is how the identity of the secret giver was revealed. Every December, he continued to reward good boys and girls with small gifts. Later, he became the Bishop of Myra. Today, we remember him because of his generosity on St. Nicholas' Day (December 6th) and as Santa Claus at Christmas.
- ◆ Santa Claus represents the boundless love of God and the spirit of goodness and generosity that surrounds us, especially as we prepare to celebrate Christmas.
- ◆ He shows us that good behavior is rewarded (and bad behavior is not) - by others besides parents. This helps small children to begin to understand that there is such a thing as good and bad choices.
- ◆ He teaches us that we are surrounded by good spirits who watch over us. This can be a basis for children to understand the Communion of Saints.
- ◆ If you are in a multicultural parish, the belief in Santa can also be an opportunity to discuss other Christmas traditions. There is a custom in some Latin American countries, for example, of leaving straw under the child's bed for the Three Kings' camels, because they bring candy and gifts to children in the night. Some families open Christmas presents on Epiphany instead of Christmas. Again, do not tell children who celebrate these traditions that this is “wrong” or “not real.” We should honor the wishes of their parents in these matters.

Thank you for all you do to help children and families find Jesus and know their Catholic faith.

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For more information about traditions about Saint Nicholas, visit <http://www.stnicholascenter.org/>