Old Saint Nick: the man, the myth, the legend

By Chaplain Corey Thornton

Every year since my girls have grown old enough to write, they have composed a letter to Santa Claus in preparation for Christmas. These letters usually contain a line or two of greeting to Mr. Claus and maybe even one to Mrs. Claus, but their primary content is the wish list. Not only have my wife and I found these letters, with their shaky handwriting and phonetic spelling, adorable, but they have also proven to be helpful as a suggested shopping list for us (aka, Santa's Helpers).

My eldest daughter has finally reached the age to where she no longer believes "that Santa Claus is real." My wife and I have made a deal with her that she not attempt to enlighten her two younger sisters of this fact, preferring to let them figure it out in their own time. While I imagine that some of you might take a different approach with your children, I know from experience that many have chosen a similar course.

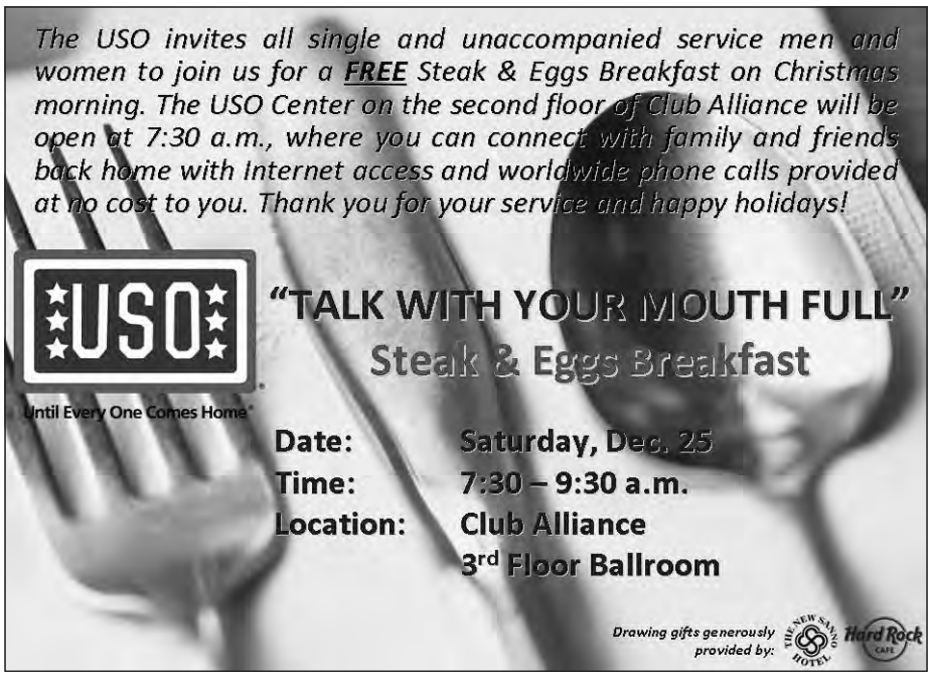
A poignant example of this came when I began to discuss the writing of this article with some of my friends. No sooner had I mentioned the plan to talk about the history behind Santa Claus and how far the myth about him has transformed over the years, when one friend warned me not to write it. His reasoning was that his son, who still believes in Santa Claus, would read the article and be crushed. But such are the risks of reading. And though I cherish the fun in playing out the legend of Santa Claus with my younger children, for our understanding to stop at this point is to deprive ourselves of the riches found in the history of the man behind the myth. So with a more mature understanding of our Christmas tradition in sight, let us venture on towards the man behind Santa Claus.

Though there seem to be countless sources connected to Santa Claus, the primary inspiration for him is Saint Nicholas, who was not the manager of toy making elves in the North Pole but was a fourth century Christian bishop in the city of Myra (now Demre), which is in modern day Turkey. Saint Nicholas' parents both passed tragically when he was a young man and, although they left him financially well off, he determined to devote his life to acts of charity. One of his most famous of charitable actions sheds some light on our modern day Santa Claus legend. A local man, a father of three daughters, had lost all of his money and was forced to support his family in abject poverty. Unable to provide a suitable dowry to attract potential suitors to marry his daughters, he prepared to give them over to prostitution. When Nicholas heard about this he came to the family's aid. In the cover of night, he approached their house with a bag of gold and threw it through the window. This was intended as the dowry for the first daughter. As the other daughters reached the age of marriage he did the same for them. On the third donation, the father caught Nicholas and overwhelmed him with gratitude.

This is one of many stories supporting the great veneration of Saint Nicholas by Christians worldwide. For many churches, which consider the Nicene Creed authoritative and recite it in worship most Sundays of the year, it is interesting to note that as a bishop, Nicholas was present and influential at the Counsel of Nicaea in A.D. 325, from when the creed was produced. His fame grew so widely that, in the later middle ages, nearly 400 churches in England were dedicated in his honor.

It might be noteworthy to our Navy Sailors that, in the east, Saint Nicholas is the patron saint of sailors. In the west, he is the patron saint of children, which is likely why in countries like Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands; many began to give presents in honor of his name at Christmas time. As this custom spread to England and eventually to America, it did not retain its historic roots but was instead popularized by Dutch Protestants into the "nordic magician" that came to be known as the Santa Claus that we recognize today.

Having grown up with the legend of the jolly old man, dressed in red, who would ride his sleigh and reindeer to my house on Christmas Eve to deliver presents down the chimney, I have a deep fondness for Santa Claus; in fact, I can't imagine a Christmas without him. But as I continue to grow up and mature in my Christian faith, my appreciation for Saint Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, who stood up for his faith and lived it out through acts of charity to the poor, has grown tremendously. It is his example more than the story of Santa Claus that inspires me to be a more charitable and caring person at Christmas and the whole year around.



Brothers in faith rejoice at international Christmas event

Members of the Yokosuka City Committee Gospel Choir greet the audience after their performance at the International Christmas Celebration held here at the Chapel of Hope Dec. 12. More than 500 people from both on and off the base attended the event.

Story and photo by Dan Bowen, CFAY Public Affairs

Sailors, civilians, family members and their Japanese counterparts filled the Chapel of Hope to listen to scripture, sing, dance and eat at the 28th annual International Christmas Celebration Dec. 12.

"International Christmas is our biggest event," said Religious Programs Specialist Seaman Tiffany Jimenez. "We invite other choirs and people from outside the gate to come and celebrate Christmas with us here at the Chapel of Hope."

The evening included scripture readings of Isaiah 60:1-3, Isaiah 9:6, and John1:1-14. Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka (CFAY) Commanding Officer Capt. David Owen served as a guest speaker, CFAY Chapel of Hope Chaplain Barry Metzger gave the invocation and Commander Naval Forces Japan (CNFJ) Force Chaplain John Swanson provided the Christmas message. CFAY Chapel of Hope Chaplain Cory Thornton and his family performed the lighting of the Advent Candle and the benediction was given by Pastor Kensei Yokomizo from the Yokosuka First Church of Christ.

"We are grateful to see citizens from the United States, Japan and other countries worshipping with us," said Owen during his remarks. "It is fitting to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas as a community of faith. Though our cultures and language may differ, the message of peace on earth and good will to men everywhere brings us together in spirit."

The night became especially joyous when choirs from on and off base took the stage. The Combined Chapel Choir, Yokosuka City Committee Gospel Choir (YCC) and the Yokosuka Church of the Korean Christian Church in Japan performed throughout the celebration energizing the crowd and creating an exuberant atmosphere.

The event was nothing new for YCC Director Thomas Givens and his fellow singers, who have been performing gospel, classical and other styles of music in Yokosuka for more than 10 years, but the night is still something the whole group looks forward to participating in every year. The choir is comprised of a few Americans but the majority of its members are from the local community.

"They love coming on base and having the interaction with Americans," said Givens. "They love the chapel and when I say, 'Chapel of Hope', they're ready to come because of the way they're treated and they love to sing to Americans. It couldn't be any better."

The editor asks:

"***Did you know***, the celebration of the new year is the oldest of all holidays? It was first observed in ancient Babylon more than 4,000 years ago. In the years around 2,000 B.C., the Babylonian New Year began with the first New Moon (actually the first visible cresent) after the Vernal Equinox (first day of spring).

"The Babylonian new year celebration lasted for 11 days. Each day had its own particular mode of celebration, but it is safe to say that modern New Year's Eve festivities pale in comparison.

"The Romans continued to observe the new year in late March, but their calendar was continually tampered with by various emperors so that the calendar soon became out of synchronization with the sun.

"In order to set the calendar right, the Roman senate, in 153 B.C., declared Jan. 1 to be the beginning of the new year. But tampering continued until Julius Caesar, in 46 B.C., established what has come to be known as the Julian Calendar. It again established Jan. 1 as the new year. But in order to synchronize the calendar with the sun, Caesar had to let the previous year drag on for 445 days.

"Bringing in the new year may also include the making of New Year's resolutions. That tradition also dates back to the early Babylonians. Popular modern resolutions might include the promise to lose weight or quit smoking. The early Babylonian's most popular resolution was to return borrowed farm equipment."