

Stergioulis – Machine Translation Draft 1

The holy father Methodius, priest and abbot, on the life of our late holy father Nicholas, Archbishop of Myra.

1. Since the confused conversation between us has come to an end, because of the weakness of my poor mind, it seems to you who met me like an unsolved riddle. Your undoubted plainness of language now requires, O Theodore⁹, excellent and well-known among men, a speech of praise with a variety of expression, and clarity of meaning, but also concise in length. Therefore, in order not to appear deaf and unprepared, obedient to your faith and desire, I would prefer to narrate rather than to praise once more the greatest achievements of the famous Nicholas, because it is said that narration is usually more interesting. And if at any point praise intertwines with the narration, we must attribute this gift of ability – that is, to praise by telling stories – to God, and to your faith; both to God who gave it to you, and your faith that was strengthened by His generosity. It is customary for the listeners of a narrative to hear first about the ancestry, the home-town, and daily activities of the person being praised, and then about his upbringing and education from a young age¹⁰, in order to clearly impress upon the minds of the listeners – whoever dares to narrate them – his acknowledged or admired intellectual progress and ability, thus anticipating the same education or progress (in his listeners).**

So I stand before you, to tell what I saw and read in the books¹¹, since God, as soon as we open our mouths, provides us with the gift of eloquence.

** Stergioulis lists three different generals of the period, all named Theodore, who might be the recipient.

** Here Methodius lists the purpose of the standard structure of a hagiographical “Life”.

** 11. I.e. Michael the Archimandrite, and the *Praxis*, or “Acts”.

2. Nicholas, the servant of God, the fragrant¹² vessel of the all – holy and life – giving Spirit, the flower, the branch and the root of Myra, the myrrh; the bishop white as a lily, whose state resembles a blossoming violet; the defender of the truth, crimson as a rose; the temperate like the bud of a flower just turning green; he who wears his white hair like a crown on his head; he who has trained in spiritual struggles; he who, though frail in body, has a strong spirit; the one who is coolheaded but warmed by the eagerness of the spirit; he who dwells in Myra, but rushes to aid those who call upon him, even beyond Myra; he who resides in heavenly realms, but is near to those who invoke him with their prayers; he who has been buried like a ripe grain of wheat to bear fruit, yet his soul stands close to God; he who, like a lamp, is covered with a veil, and he who rekindles the divine grace like the deep red precious gem which adorns many icons; the secretly smoldering spark in hearts of many men, which, in most of the believers with the same name Nicholas, has changed into a burning wick (those, that is, who have the name Nicholas, all of them are sanctified); he who appears immediately to all who invoke him, and frees those who are in great need; he who acquired many epithets through his deeds and because of his extraordinary virtue, while still there are even more that escape our memory; he who, because he was born according to the law of natural succession, is confined to the limits of the country, of the city where he lived, and of his earthly life. Because even Christ, the architect of the ages, chose to be born at a certain moment in time, He who

is outside the limits of time, establishing order in time¹³. But let us leave these matters aside, and talk about the servant of Christ.

3. Nicholas came from Patara, a city in the province of Lycia, which at that time (of St. Nicholas) had many inhabitants. But now it looks more like a village than a city¹⁴. And this is what happens to cities in various ways – they decline and their inhabitants emigrate – because of their countless sins against God. This is how we also understand what we usually write, that is, that cities are punished for the sins of their inhabitants¹⁵.

In fact there is a plain nearby, torn in two, like a torn garment. And from the rift that has been created, hot steam seems to rise during the day, while at night fiery smoke emerges as if from a copper furnace¹⁶. This burns the hand of whoever dares to touch it, but without consuming it or the flesh, as it would happen if someone put his hand to the fire; but it is an illustration and a prelude, with a slight resemblance, of the eternal fire. Puzzled by the phenomenon, the elders passed down from generation to generation, each father to his child, (as this unwritten but true word has been preserved to us), that due to the immorality and sensuality of its inhabitants divine justice condemned this land to this horrible spectacle, to prevent them returning to this place.

4. I have briefly related this event, although it was not necessary, in order to instill in souls the divine fear, so that we remember with fear the threat (of God) that: "My Spirit will no longer remain among men these, because they are completely dominated by carnal thoughts"¹⁷ and thus escape it. And immediately a short period of time was set before the disaster. He said, in other words: "all the remaining days of their lives will be limited to only one hundred and twenty years."¹⁸ And he added: "Many cries rise up from Sodom and Gomorrah to me; their sins are very great. I will therefore come down there, to see whether their sins are really like the cries that come up to me or not. I certainly want to know!"¹⁹ Indeed, from the beginning carnality²⁰ provoked and brought about the worldwide flood, and the destruction of the Pentapolis²¹, as well as the divine punishment (of Patara) just mentioned. For this reason let everyone keep his body like a sanctified vessel²². We do not belong to ourselves, as the great Paul strongly proclaimed, he who constantly interceded with God and continuously prayed to Christ, for we have been redeemed with a precious price, the blood of Christ. Therefore we must glorify God with our body, without defiling it; for it is the temple of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, and which we have received from God²³. So, after this reminder, I proceed to the narration, and my discourse is as follows:

5. So He, who came from Patara, but was registered as a citizen in the heavenly city, in the Kingdom of Heaven,²⁴ was born as I shall relate hereafter. And it was necessary, like lamps²⁵, which, although they are lower down, illuminate the ceiling above, for us to connect the beginning of his genealogy²⁶ to God, and to honour the thrice-holy one, who, although born of natural parents, does not originate from earthly Patara.

However since I intend to narrate his life during his youth, so that my speech may be shorter and not reveal the roughness of my discourse, let me speak about his ancestry, his birth, and everything else, offering you, wisest of men, a pleasant narrative. And while you know that, as we wish to live in luxury like the rich, so we must seek rich and varied food also for the satisfaction of our spiritual needs, which will suffice every time we taste it. So let us exhibit an appetite for spiritual food. For you will be less spiritually hungry when you hear and accept spiritual words, compared to when you are pressured to put them into practice.

6. He, who was born in a particular city, Patara, but acquired pious children everywhere by the fruitful fatherhood of his soul, had pious and wealthy parents, who did not attempt to acquire any degree of office. They knew well that he who touches pitch cannot avoid getting soiled²⁷. They conceived the venerable Nicholas during their first carnal intercourse, without proceeding to another. Because the only male among the first-born who opened his mother's womb, Jesus our God, granting the parents the first -born son (i.e. Nicholas) to become a priest, subsequently seals the gates of their procreation with sterility. In order to follow openly, in his birth, both in the same and in the opposites in relation to his birth, the Forerunner**, whose purity it is acknowledged that he received; and whatever he (the Forerunner) abolished by his late birth – i.e. the limitations of maternal nature – these Nicholas restored with his early birth. And so both left more than enough childlessness to those who gave birth to them. In other words, not polygyny** but childlessness, they left to their parents, becoming the most beneficial for the world²⁸.

** John the Baptist.

** “Many descendants”.

7. So, after being born in this way and his life arranged thus by God, he immediately reveals, from his infancy, gifts that are not suitable for his age. That is, he who grew up as a baby should, and unable yet to use his mind as an organ of reasoning, calculated the hours and days for the sake of the Lord²⁹, accurately designating Wednesday and Friday and no other day. So he suckled like all babies, but only once on that particular day (Wednesday or Friday), not twice, appropriately cultivating the priestly rule, even he even matured. This happens, I think, many times in every mature man who can stay continent. To fulfil the Davidic verse in his person, "the righteous man will flourish like a palm tree."³⁰ Indeed, just as the palm tree sprouts and grows to a sufficient width from the earth, a characteristic that no other plant has, so too he from his infancy develops perfectly, complete in all aspects of his being, and finally emerges as righteous.

8. Following faithfully the habits and way of life of his parents, he did not allow himself to take part in quarrels³¹ and intrigues. He did not stray from the courts of God, that is, the church, being nourished within the natural and necessary boundaries of the divine commandments and, in general, pushing away from him any company of his immature peers and any desire for a woman. He had acquired chastity with purity, and had become closely attached to it, living a very careful life to prevent the multitude of passions from surrounding the realms of his mind and conquering his (spiritual) prowess.

While he was living and behaving in this way, he was left an orphan by his parents, only to be truly adopted with special care by God. Although he took good care of his money and seemed to be content because of the large fortune (that his parents left him), in reality he did not rejoice, but lamented and tried to propitiate God more, asking for guidance and revelation on the best way to manage it, that is, how to make use of the wealth that was given to him in a way pleasing to the One who granted it to him, and thus making his riches a ransom to free him from the desire to acquire them, rather than the means of acquiring new material goods, and in no way an obstacle³² (in his spiritual life).

9. With thoughts of this kind, and as he secretly distributed his wealth to those who were in need and to the poor, a certain neighbour of his, once glorious and rich, like another Job, reached the extreme point of poverty, having perhaps been drawn into such a thing by Satan. He had three

daughters, beautiful and known for their nobility, whom he was about to put into prostitution, led by his poverty.

Indeed he had decided on something like this, if he had not been prevented by a good angel, Nicholas, who is the work of God and was offered as a gift to Him. Since none of the arrogant rich men would marry them, because of their great poverty, and no poor man showed a willingness to marry them either, the man decided by force to drive his daughters into unlawful acts of lust, in order to gain the necessities to live³³.

10. As soon as the blessed Nicholas learned about this, he felt great pity for the girls and their father's unacceptable decision, and fearing the snare³⁴ of this human weakness for the acquisition of goods, he decided to help the family that was in danger. So he prayed to God and devised a way to give charity to the suffering family without being noticed. Late at night he took a large bag of gold, and threw it into the poor family's house.

What a miracle! He was fulfilling an old commandment in a new way; that is, the old commandment: "Love your neighbour as yourself;"³⁵ the new commandment of the Lord resonated even more perfectly: "When you give alms, don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing."³⁶ And again he displayed his donation only in secret to Him to Whom the all-blessed man prayed, according to His commandments, shut up in the hidden room of his soul³⁷.

As charity shone upon him from the divine light, so he sent from a lighted window a ray of help, and offered a hand of salvation to his neighbour. The poverty-stricken man found the bag of gold on waking from his sleep and shed tears of joy, as he was greatly benefited. Let the listener henceforth consider how many reasons he has to thank the benevolent God by falling on his knees.

11. For this reason let us be attentive, both those who speak and those who listen, about the godly character of charity; that is, how much God is pleased, and how much we owe Him. God's great characteristic is mercy. He created everything out of nothing because of His mercy and goodness³⁸. From the beginning of time, God has been educating us who have strayed from the path, through the patriarchs, the prophets. Finally He Himself became man in every way, – without ceasing to be God – except for sin. It is our duty, and the least of our obligations, to work for His glory. This means, above all, acts of charity and giving to the poor from our possessions, since He is our Creator and Maker, so that His Name may be sanctified through our actions.

12. After strengthening the hand of his soul³⁹ ** with this act, the merciful, God-imitating and glory-avoiding Nicholas caused joy and embarrassment to his neighbour, due to his previous imprudence and poverty, and for these reasons he awakened his soul to offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God.

** This phrase is difficult. Stergioulis indicates that two words in this are unknown to him.

Since he saw that the heavenly gift was a sufficient dowry for one of his daughters, he married her off, after first dressing her as a bride. But he expressed his wonder to God, about this unusual act of an unknown servant of His, and he wanted, although he could not find the right way, to learn who this most benevolent angel of God might be.

13. The humble Nicholas, who was adept at displaying generosity yet skilled at concealing his kindness, after remaining inactive for some days, once again performed the same action but at a

later time of the night. He threw another bag of gold into his neighbour's house through the same window, with the intention of marrying off the second sister as well.

The father of the girls found this bag of gold when he woke up, and he fell on his face on the ground and offered a prayer of thanksgiving to God with tears. Already he could not speak because of the great surprise he felt.

"Who is it, Lord, the one who is benefiting me?" he pondered. "And who is so merciful, O Most Good, to whom You have lent Your mercy, so that He serves you by offering to me, the unworthy, this mercy?"

Nevertheless, O Merciful One, I will remain awake at night and keep watch without sleeping, not of course just to find the one who awakens to deeds of virtue, Your agent, sent by You the Unfathomable for your own reasons, but to see and worship the one who is zealous for you, and imitates you among men, and finally in order to glorify you."

14. While the father of the girls was thinking and preparing in this way⁴⁰, Nicholas, the servant of the Trinity, set out to save the third daughter of his impoverished neighbour from sin with the third gift, by the command of God. And at the moment that he threw his generous donation, the watchful father saw the gleam of the gift. Quickly getting up, he overtook the benefactor sent by God. He recognized him then without a doubt. He fell on his knees, gratefully touching the soles of his feet, thus paying his debt without saying anything more to Nicholas, except for this priceless⁴¹ reward that he had received from God. Having learned in this way who the blessed one was, while he did not expect such a thing, he swore an oath that he would lose his speech if he revealed anything of what happened to anyone as long as Nicholas lives. And after the favoured one gave him this assurance exactly as Nicholas had demanded, he left with his last daughter, to perform another saving marriage, which was brought about by the charity of God through the great Nicholas.

15. As the blessed one was acquiring virtues of this kind and similar, the bishop of Myra, a man of great piety and devotion, departed to the Lord⁴². Because of the admirable life of the deceased bishop, the higher clergy and the neighbouring bishops were divided, as was natural, praying to find his worthy successor. One of them, as if prompted by God, after gaining their trust, advised them all to pray. And as this was done, the way in which they would please God was revealed to each of them individually, since the following voice was heard by the one giving them advice: "Go at night to the temple and keep watch at the entrance. And the one who enters first, before all, after you have detained him, appoint him as bishop. Nicholas is his name." And after announcing the divine command to the rest of the bishops, with whom he was praying, he himself went outside, from the place where they were meeting, while they remained inside the church praying.

16. Indeed, in the early hours of the morning, after he caught the one who entered the temple earlier than all others and after asking him what his name was, he received the answer very simply: "I am the sinner Nicholas, the servant of your holiness, master." And he answered him: "Come with me, child, I have something to show you." And after taking him with him and leading him before the rest of the bishops, together with them he presented to the people the man whom God had revealed to them. Then since everyone believed the words of the bishops with great eagerness and accepted the divine action, they appointed the great Nicholas as bishop.

17. And God found (by the election of Nicholas) a man, as his heart desired,** to speak in the most holy manner. And Samuel, the prophetic bishop, anoints David, younger only in terms of age than Saul and not inferior to him, as king. He does not place a ridiculous horn above his head; it was important to indicate the one sought by God. Thus he imposes the power of the divine scriptures⁴⁴, and after sealing the ordination with a prayer with the rest of the bishops, he elevated the one already revealed by God to the rank of bishop and presented him to the people.

And the oil (of anointing) placed on his head did not gush forth from an external source, but from himself, as if it was poured out abundantly from God, inexhaustible from within his soul⁴⁵, like a tenth of an ephah⁴⁶ of fine flour (=two kilograms)⁴⁷, just like the gift of sacrifice. The oil that was poured on him was like a sweet fragrance, a sacrifice to the Lord⁴⁸, shared with all who received the anointing; an oil of good quality and purity from a rich and joyful heart.

And after he was placed as a lamp – through his election by the other bishops – on the lampstand of the church⁴⁹, he lit the wick of teaching with his faith, which was revealed and poured out along with his oil. Nicholas has no equal example in history. The new anointer of Nicholas even surpassed the one who earlier saw and anointed David⁵⁰, since he learned the name of the anointed one, that is, Nicholas, before the anointing. That was something that Samuel had not learned, even though he was such a great man, the name of the one he was looking for, that is, David the son of Jesse.

** Bard: a reference to Ps. 37:4, "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart."

18. And having confirmed his elevation to the rank of the high priesthood by presenting this miracle, I shorten my speech, with your consent, since it was you who urged me to speak. But notice how he displays the mark of the Trinity in every kind of saving action. He saved three girls from spiritual death and physical dishonour, as I mentioned earlier. And he performed a greater operation than that of the three girls in the case of some men⁵¹, rescuing them from certain death by beheading, as recounted in the well-known "Acts"⁵².

Then, from the most glorious to the most obscure, and from the rulers to the kings, and from the insignificant to the important, and from the one who quickly them too quickly to the one who was terrified in a dream (i.e. the king), and from the demonic rulers to the enemy generals, and the madness of the existing power, he has been blessed by God to become renowned in every situation, and for his name to be exalted. And this is what the "Acts" report.

19. Since I told you about the above incident, this is an opportunity to tell you one more. After the liberation and salvation of the three generals, to which I have just referred, he becomes a visible helper, as he was asked to, and also to the multitude of ordinary people, not only those who are on land, but also those who travel with enormous difficulties at sea⁵³. So when some fell into very great danger, and were now threatened with the worst possible drowning at sea, he immediately appeared before them – by them only invoking his name – to whoever needed him, in every plank and rope of the ship where there was a sailor, offering his help, and he said to them: "You called me. I have come to help you to be saved easily."

20. After seeing the saint, after the help offered, after their salvation, as soon as they got out on land, they began to look for their God-sent saviour. They moved towards the temple to find him.

And when they saw the great man enter the temple like an ordinary person, humble, like a cleric, whom they had never met before except when he offered them his help during the storm at sea, they recognized him with complete certainty, and they approached the blessed one because he had immediately interceded with God for their salvation. They thanked him and spoke to him about the help and assistance he offered them, at the moment when they were in need, through sincere appeal to his face, similar to that received by the generals, who were also sent to Nicholas by the king, according to the "Acts", in order to thank him with all their hearts⁵⁴, and then they heard from Nicholas words that were both admonishing and at the same time divinely inspired, as well as words of instruction:

"Know yourselves, brothers, and live rightly. Drive away violently any addiction to injustice and greed, which go together with filthy fornication. Pursue the Christian education that the philanthropic God prescribes, like doctors drive away disease. Therefore, better understand the good and acquire holiness, because otherwise you will not see the Lord.⁵⁵ Then you will richly reap the fruits of salvation⁵⁶ from the seeds of virtue."

21. I have told you these few things, dear friend, and I have presented the essentials of these words because they have sprung up in our memory from the muddy swamp of our useless mind through reading⁵⁷ the "Life". But we have also communicated the same to another brother, so that they may not slip into oblivion once more. And please do not reject the delicious meal because you are wary of the wretched plate. Instead eat and drink the food offered with great eagerness, and, above all, engage in those actions through which the glory of the saint was revealed. For both in the case of the first narrative, the one concerning the daughters (of his neighbour), and in the case of the final narrative, the salvation of the sailors, it is shown that Nicholas cares about chastity, and stops the pollution of the flesh, and restrains it by giving money, and stands against it, opposing it with rational argument.

As for the intermediate narrative, that of the men condemned to death, first in Myra,⁵⁸ and then in capital, as preserved in the "Acts", he severely checks the king's avarice and mistakes, which none but the just dare to check, and he humiliates the rulers and authorities⁵⁹, in order to redeem the souls of both the same rulers and of those who unjustly sentenced to death from eternal and temporal death.

22. Since you admire him for all this, and have him always before you as a guide, consider Nicholas as a safe refuge, an obedient⁶⁰ intercessor to God for the purpose of redemption from temptations, a rich medicine for cleansing⁶¹ from diseases, an invincible adversary in the carnal war, an incorruptible (genuine) image of friendship with God, a firm support⁶² in the war against the demons, an upright rule in the observance of doctrine, a God-inspired⁶³ lyre in the teaching of meekness, a drum of mortification⁶⁴ in the struggle to acquire chastity, a coolness in the struggle to preserve purity, a blameless⁶⁵ fighter in the taming of the body, a profitable merchant in the acquisition of wisdom, a firm bond of courageous restraint, the master of our fierce desire to speak hurtful words, a wise⁶⁶ man in the way of doing deeds, a straight guide-rope⁶⁷ on the law to be kept, a sober soul against the perverted mind, a means of realising one's impotence in the face of the audacity of folly, a speedy helper in the manifestation of a good disposition, the most alive of the dead in preserving the memory of death, an invited attendant at the first sign of spiritual awakening, a counsellor in the spreading of love and similar things, an example of contempt for the present

time, with the hope of future blessings, and an example of voluntary self-mortification for the acquisition of eternal life⁶⁸.

23. Make, therefore, the whole life of the wisest Nicholas your own private alphabet, remaining close to him as his true disciple. And since you mould⁶⁹ your own heart, based on the words that have been said, for everything that you want to do or do or say or think, bring to mind the great Nicholas, and consider whether he himself did it, or said it, or thought it, and act as he did; that is, as he thought or spoke or acted. Indeed, the saints, because they have become precise imitators of the Lord, make us imitators as well, as God has characterized them, and as the great apostle asserts: "Be imitators of me, just as I also became, and am an imitator of Christ."⁷⁰ And having the life of the saint recorded, as we have presented it, taking examples from him, arrange your life. To show zeal in imitating his works, and imitate with paternal desire throughout your life the one whom you love with your soul and have enclosed inside you, Nicholas. And from now on have a worthy common share in the victory with him, when you are among your people and become a namesake⁷¹ of the gift of God⁷²,** praying that we too may be entitled to the same blessings, by the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom belongs glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

** "gift of God" = Theodore, so a pun on the name of the dedicatee.