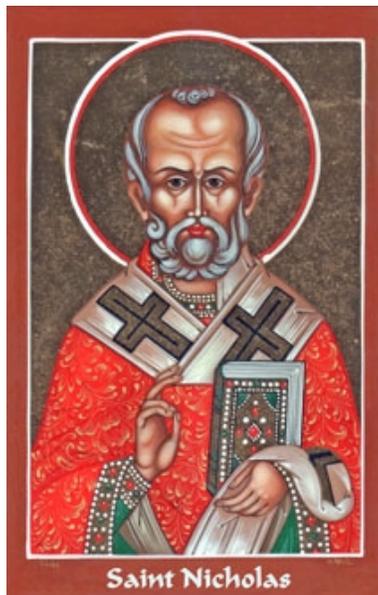


What Would St. Nicholas Do?

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



On Sunday December 6th we celebrate the beloved Nicholas of Myra in Lycia. We know the stories of his saving miracles, his love of children, and the gifts he gave in secret. There is another story, one which seems less in character. Hearing Arius profess his heretical beliefs with smooth, convincing language at the Council of Nicaea, Nicholas finally had had enough. He struck Arius to keep him from speaking more blasphemy. As a result he lost his position as a bishop, and it was not restored until the Theotokos directed that it should be.

If the saint had a hard time listening to Arius, what would he do with Bill Maher, a social and political commentator, stand-up comic, and opponent of religion? Maher's film "Religulous" (a play on the words "religion" and "ridiculous") might draw St. Nicholas' ire, but perhaps it would merely elicit a resigned sigh at its silly pretentiousness.

Like many people who criticize religion, Maher is articulate, but has only a superficial understanding of his subject, and is deeply impressed with his own opinions. He constantly interrupts the people he is interviewing in the film to interject his own ideas. One rabbi asks him at least four times to "let me finish", but Maher continues to break in. He demonstrates his disagreement with what the rabbi is saying by walking out on him, on camera. This kind of petulance is unbecoming to any interviewer and especially one who constantly claims, as Maher does, that he is completely objective and "only wants to ask questions."

One person interviewed is Francis Collins, a leading geneticist who was raised as an atheist but found his way to faith. Maher tells Collins that he is in a distinct minority as a scientist who is also a believer. The soft-spoken Collins tries to disagree. Maher again interrupts, insisting that few scientists have ever been people of faith (conveniently ignoring Einstein, Mendel and Johannes Kepler, among others). Since Maher talks several times about his own abandonment of his childhood Catholic faith, it would have been fascinating to hear a prominent scientist tell how he went in the other direction, from atheism to belief. But that journey, which could have made the movie more even-handed, doesn't interest Maher. The Collins interview is considerably shorter than those he conducts with inarticulate and foolish-seeming believers, obvious charlatans, and people who agree with him.

Bill Maher doesn't possess the dangerous power Arius had in the fourth century. But he appears often on television, and is regarded as a serious commentator and even an intellectual by some. We should be ready, especially in talking with young people, to give a solid and authentic exposition of the faith, and to point out errors and pretense in those who attack it.

St. Nicholas wouldn't give in to people with half-baked ideas. Neither should we, though it would probably be advisable for us to keep our hands in our pockets.

Troparion - Tone 4

In truth you were revealed to your flock as a rule of faith,
an image of humility and a teacher of abstinence;
your humility exalted you;
your poverty enriched you.
Hierarch Father Nicholas,
entreat Christ our God
that our souls may be saved.