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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | December 24, 2009

Most people know that Santa Claus is derived from St. Nicholas, an early Christian saint beloved for his kindness and generosity. What hardly anyone knows is that Nicholas acquired sainthood not by giving alms, but by performing a miracle that more or less amounted to breaking out of solitary confinement.

George Pappas Sr., writing in Ohio's [Zanesville Times Recorder](#), tells the full story:

[St. Nicholas] was a 4th-century Greek Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor who is mostly associated with the legends of his tireless work to help the poor families during the great famine (342 AD) which plagued this part of Turkey. The Jolly Old Bishop was known for his nightly and anonymous distribution of gold coins to aid starving families who were no longer able to afford to feed their children.

A lesser known legend is more serious and very relevant to the issues facing our American way of life in 2009.

It turns out that St. Nicholas had some serious theological differences with Arius, the Bishop of Alexandria, over the exact nature of the divinity of Jesus Christ. (Arius believed he was not made of the same stuff as God.) They argued over it at the First Council of Nicaea, in 325 A.D. According to Pappas:

The debate proceeded with required decorum until St. Nicholas became so enraged that he walked across the room and slapped Arius to the floor.

It was a sin in Canon Law to strike another bishop. St. Nicholas was excommunicated, stripped of his vestment (ornate individually handcrafted bishop robes) and locked in solitary confinement under guard.

The council could now proceed without this very troublesome and now excommunicated bishop. It appeared certain that Arius would have a majority of the 299 remaining bishops support his Arian philosophy.

The next morning, as the session of the council was beginning, it was interrupted. A guard had come from the prison where St. Nicholas was jailed and reported that he had gone to check on the prisoner and found the door of St. Nicholas cell open, his chains removed and he was kneeling in prayer fully clothed in his bishop's vestments. The immediate response of the council was to find who had committed this act of defiance against the will of the council. Investigation yielded no one who could have done this and the vestments stripped from St. Nicholas were exactly where they had been placed. St. Nicholas wore the exact same ornate vestments. It would have taken months to fabricate new vestments.

Pappas finds a moral in this story that might well apply to advocates who work for the often unpopular cause of prison reform.

St. Nicholas believed so much and cared so much that he was willing to risk all to challenge the politically correct notion of decorum to defend and expound true and honest beliefs. He was ahead of his time and teaches us a timeless lesson about integrity and passion for the truth.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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