

“Bei uns ist immer los!“

VORWEIHNACHTENSITTEN (PRE-CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS)

bringer of gifts: der Gabenbringer, die Gabenbringer

Who comes bearing gifts?

For German children, it's always a puzzle on Christmas Eve: Who put all the presents under the tree? Father Christmas or the Christ Child?

Germany can look back on a long tradition of figures bearing gifts: If St. Nicolaus, who fills children's boots with sweets or even presents on the eve of December 6th, is taken into account, there are three of them altogether.

It all began with Nicholas, a legendary fourth-century bishop from Asia Minor who is still revered by the Orthodox Church. This holy man, historic traces of whom are few and far between, has become the patron of children, bringing gifts on the day that bears his name.

The first Bringers of Gifts before Christmas

Processions by night
The Saint's life
The Martinmas fire
Gifts on St. Martin's Day
From house to house
Heathen forerunners
Martin the proud horseman

Yet in his new set of rules for the faithful, the Protestant reformer Martin Luther did away with the reverence for holy figures around 1535 — and robbed Nicholas of his role as a bringer of gifts.

He created instead the figure of the Christ Child, who from that time onward has become the provider of presents on Christmas Eve in predominately protestant parts of Germany.

Roman Catholics gradually took to this arrangement, indeed to such an extent that this angelic figure has more or ousted the Father Christmas-like white-bearded man dressed in a red gown.

Nicholas continues to play a role in Protestant religion, as Catholic theologian Manfred Becker-Huberti of Cologne pointed out: "In Holland the reformists refused to give up their Nicholas." To this day, he still brings them presents on December 6th. He has also long been a feature of the German seasonal calendar.

When the inhabitants of the Low Countries emigrated to America, they brought with them their "Sinterklaas" (Nicholas), as he is known in Dutch, who later turned into Santa Claus. He became Father Christmas and has been bringing presents to people in the Anglo-American cultures on December 25 ever since.

In Europe, Father Christmas has long since gained in status as a bringer of gifts alongside the Christ Child, regardless of religious confession. He can be seen beaming from placards up and down the country and handing out presents to children in department stores as a symbol of the festive season.