



# St Nicholas News

A communication channel to keep in touch with St Nicholas' Friends  
around the world

From Fr Gerardo Cioffari, o.p.,  
director of the  
**St Nicholas Research Center in Bari**

December 1st, 2011

## WHAT HAS BECOME OF ST NICHOLAS' ARM LEFT OUTSIDE OF THE SHRINE IN 1089 ?

Surfing the Net you meet many stories about St Nicholas relics. Are they true ? are they false ? Really they make miracles ? I am not able to answer to all these questions (often linked to personal emotionality). I'll try occasionally, as in this case, to satisfy some curiosities especially in the field of history.

**The Russian "Slovo"** (Historical sermon) on St Nicholas translation from Myra (today Turkey) to Bari, written in the Kiev Černigov area (Ukraine) around the **year 1095** (first ms, XIV c) speaks clearly that, when the Pope put the relics under the altar of the Crypt in Bari, a **"bone of the hand"** of the Saint was left outside.



**The Slovo is not always reliable** because, although well-informed of the facts, the author puts everything in the context of the divine providence. He doesn't speak of a strike on the part of the Barian sailors, but affirms that the monks of Myra committed spontaneously St Nicholas body to them in order to save it from Turkish plundering. Now, the danger was real (especially from the moment the Turks, less than two years before, had become rulers of Antioch), nevertheless the inhabitants of Myra had no will to stint themselves of that treasury.

**About this arm** or "bone of the hand" the sources of Bari keep themselves silent. Having written in 1088 (one year before Pope Urban II put the relics under the altar of the Crypt), Nicephorus and John the Archdeacon could not speak about it. Other sources, being mainly concise chronicles, did not note this detail.

However, the detail of the arm left outside of the tomb is **confirmed by two authors** who wrote few decades afterwards: the Norman historian Orderic Vitalis and Robert, monk at the Bec monastery (Northern Normandy). For both of them the sources were the pilgrims who, coming back from Jerusalem, passed through Bari.

The **Slovo** of 1095 was inserted in the monumental *Illustrated Life* of St Nicholas of the XVI century, recently edited in facsimile by "Фирма АКТЕОН", e.mail : kh-mstf@akado.ru

This is my translation of the text written by Robert the Monk at Bec Monastery between 1135 and 1140 (only the titles in the insets are mine).

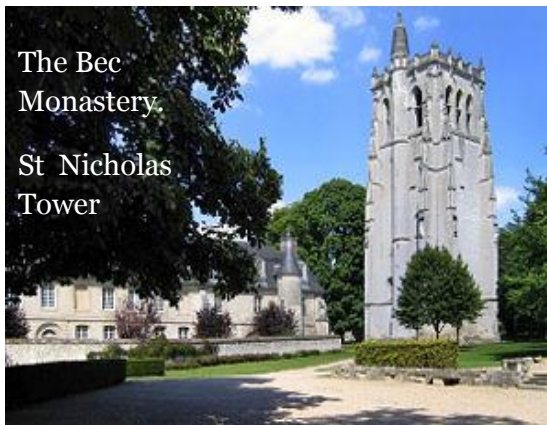
***Miracula  
de Sancto Nicholao***  
**by Robert the Monk (1135-1140):**

**The “arm”  
for the blessing of the faithful**

After that, according to the divine will, the body of St Nicholas was transported from Myra to the western city of Bari, many people both in Italy and in France affirmed to have some particle of the body of the saint Confessor. But this is false.

In fact, in the writings that have dealt with the translation you find that nobody, before or after the translation, could obtain any kind of relic, but only the oil pouring out of his sacred bones. Furthermore, it is proved through many and certain miracles that this Saint in no way would have permitted his body to be divided, as it happened with many bodies of Saints. What is the reason for this I wouldn't know, but I am absolutely sure that this is the truth according the Saint's will. In fact, if he wanted that no relic would remain in the city and in the church of Myra, although here, both during his life and after death he made many miracles, even more so he doesn't want that other places have them.

In this context I believe useful to relate an event that recently happened twice in the church of Bari. After the Barians had translated him from Myra to the city of Bari, as everybody can learn by reading the



The Bec  
Monastery.  
St Nicholas  
Tower

writings telling this praiseworthy and memorable event, they incurred heavy costs to build a temple close to the sea. With great care and honor they put his body under the altar of the magnificent Crypta, as it was convenient for such a patron and advocate before God.

While all the bones were closed inside, an arm was left outside for the blessing of the faithful. It was put in a golden box under this same altar in a place convenient to keep such a treasury.

**The failed theft  
of the goldsmith of Trani**

Some years later a rich man, moved by love toward the Saint, decided to give this arm a more honorable and precious arrangement. He gave to the secretary of the church, in charge of the custody of such a treasury, an amount of gold of the best quality beside very precious gems, in order to decorate the box containing the precious arm.

The secretary went to speak to a well-known goldsmith who was considered very expert. All the arrangements taken, the secretary prepared for him a room so he could work close to the church. Finally, he gave him the gold and the gems.

Working day after day the goldsmith often went to visit the secretary who lived near to his workshop, trying cautiously to worm out his secrets. The secretary was glad to accompany him through the church, closing imprudently in his presence the door of the place where the arm was guarded. The secretary brought always the key with him, instead of hiding it in some

secret place. Slowly the goldsmith's mind began to be tempted by the avidity and by the desire to gain possession of that sacred treasury and to take it to his city. He was a native of Trani.

One day the goldsmith was working in his laboratory, when the secretary came to see how the work was progressing. After a good chat the secretary fell asleep. As soon as the goldsmith saw him sleeping and noticed that he carried keys on his belt, rapidly heated the wax and with care impressed the key on it. When the secretary went away, from the print on the wax he made an iron key. From that moment he was waiting for an occasion

to carry out his purpose. When, several days afterwards, he heard that the secretary was out of the city, he entered the church in order to verify the situation and see whether

it was the favorable time to act. Noticing that the clerics were busy in other works, he went rapidly to the place and opened with his key. He took the sacred treasury, locked the door and went out. Gathering the gold and the gems, that he should have used to make the reliquary, he took flight.

When the secretary came back, some pilgrims asked him to bless them with the sacred arm, as it was usual with the pilgrims. The secretary entered the place and did not find the relic. Terror caught him and started

crying out and beating his breast, saying that he was guilty for the loss of such a treasury.

All the inhabitants came to see what had happened, and everybody was shocked at the news. Some of them put the question about the person who could have done such a crime. From certain clues they inferred that the thief was the goldsmith. They set off in pursuit and found him in the surroundings of his city.

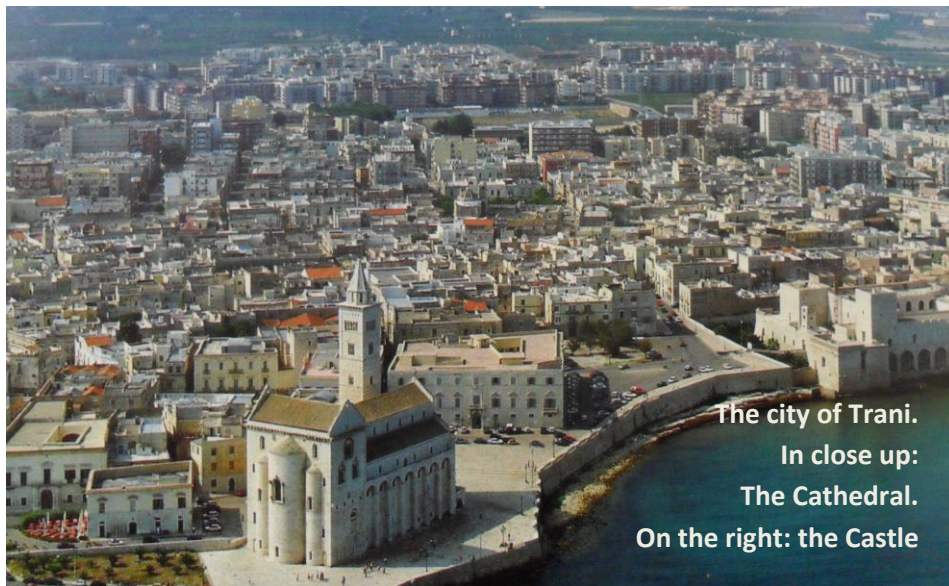
God really takes care of the humbles and hears the heart of those who are repented of their sins. He heard the cries and moans of

the secretary as well as of the faithful of Bari who had fallen into a great affliction for the loss of their treasury.

In fact, the thief, when arrived close to his city,

because of the divine will, could not proceed anymore. He could not take a step forward. Those who were at his pursuit found him that way, that is without any possibility of moving himself. When he saw them, he called for help and crying confessed his sin.

What should I say more ? The Barians, having recuperated what they had lost, with great joy thanking God went back to their city. Seeing them, all the city went to meet them, and everybody manifested his great joy for the marvelous treasury that had been found again.



### **The churchman's theft: his flight toward Giovinazzo**

After many years, one of the churchmen of the Basilica, who had the office of custodian, using a trick that I ignore, robbed that same arm.

He went out of the city and, nobody noticing him, walked hastily toward the destination he had in mind. He followed the road along the sea, but could not reach the place, because at a certain point he was forced to stop, having lost his sight and his legs could not move anymore. By chance, in those same hours seven ships passed close directed to the port of Bari. When they arrived near to the place where that man was immobilized, they too were unable to go on, as it were anchored. The men on the ships were amazed and could not understand the cause of that strange phenomenon. Ignoring what to do they carried out several manoeuvres to let the ships move, but with no results.

The man who had stolen the arm, having understood that all this happened by divine disposition, started to call for help like a man out of mind.

Then, some men who were ploughing up nearby, having heard his cries, went to him and asked what was the problem and where he was coming from. When they learnt the cause and what he had done, soon they went to Giovinazzo, the city where they lived, some three miles from Bari.

They went to the bishop and told him what they had seen and heard. Without losing time the bishop, accompanied by his clergy with many people who brought candles and incensories, left the city and made his way towards the place where that man was.

In the meantime, the clergy of Bari too came to know what had happened. In great distress for the lost treasury, they rung the bells to call the people to the church. As soon as the news spread throughout the city, everybody was upset.

After a brief assembly it was decided to go on the traces of the thief.

Others started to pray, asking God not to punish them for such a carelessness and help to recover that precious treasury. Listening to their prayers and tears, and considering the merits of his loved Nicholas, in his compassion God fulfilled their wish.

Giovinazzo. Procession of the Virgin of Corsignano (E. Bernich, 1897). Pro Loco.





**Prince Grimoaldus  
in pursuit of the thief**

The ruler of the city of Bari, whose name was Grimoaldus, after gathering many soldiers, set off in pursuit of the thief, through all the possible places he could have chosen.

So it happened that, while combing the coast lands, they met the bishop of Giovinazzo with his clergy and people. The Barians asked questions to know who were all those people and the reason of that procession. When the Barians learnt that those people were coming from Giovinazzo and where they were directed, they went joyfully with them.

Their joy however was soon quenched by the fear that the bishop with his people could take for them the relic and take it to their city.

And this would certainly happened if in that moment would not arrived the Duke Grimoaldus with his soldiers. The two groups, of Bari and Giovinazzo, went together to the place where the man was still immobilized and blind. The bishop and prince Grimoaldus went to him and asked him what had he carried out. Beating his breast with many sighs he confessed in front of everybody his crime. Soon the Duke ordered to hang him on the place.

The bishop however took a step forward and contrasted his decision by making a good case with these arguments:

Beginning of the famous blue parchment of Grimoaldus Alferanites  
*Gratia Dei et beati Nikolai  
Barensis Princeps*

Written with golden ink and dated 1123  
it contains the donation of a church  
to the St Nicholas' Basilica.

**The speech of [Urson],  
the bishop of Giovinazzo**

*“O lord Duke, this judgment of yours is not right neither opportune. God, who doesn't want the death of the sinner, but that the sinner would convert and live, as he said through the prophet, He himself stretched out his hand on this man and He has not yet liberated him. How it is possible that a man superimposes his sentence to that of God when this latter's is not yet over.*

Struck by these and similar words the Duke changed his mind and left the decision to the bishop and to the clergy.

Then the bishop, addressing himself to the Duke and all the people, said: *Beloved brothers and sons, this man certainly has caused to you a great damage and an immense sorrow in your hearts. Don't see the things from this point of view, but consider the honor God bestowed on you by his mercy and for the merits of his beloved confessor Nicholas. Therefore, if you want that the glory of God will shine forth on you and even more would be praised the merits of your advocate and defender before God, let's pray together in order that on this wicked man too God would show his mercy*

in the same way He stretched his potency on him.

Once the Lord, through Moses, said: "I kill and I bring back to life, I beat and I heal". Given that He already has beaten this man with his strong hand, now graciously let he be healed by His great mercy.

Going near that man the bishop took from him what he had stolen and put it in a place expressly and properly prepared. All the people prostrated themselves till the ground, prayed God's clemency and the help of his beloved Confessor, in order that they would give back to that man the faculty of walking and seeing. When the prayer was over, while they got up, the man was healed.

Seeing such a miracle, with joyful cries everybody praised the Lord. The bishop took the sacred relic and moved towards the city. While they moved away from that place, the ships on the sea that could not move till that moment, started to advance again. And so, while the people entered the city of Bari the ships entered the harbor.

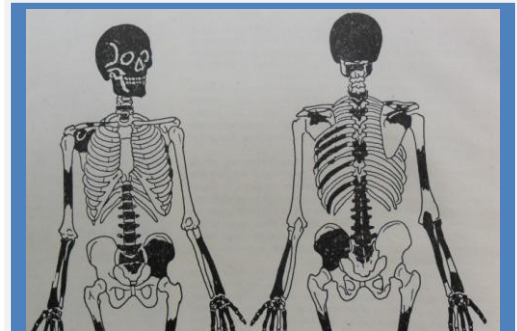
The inhabitants, having heard that the fellow citizens were back with the found treasury, went to meet them with an undescrivable joy and praising the Lord. Joyfully they arrived together to the St Nicholas church, praising and gloryfying the Lord for the many benefices He bestowed on them because of the merits of His beloved confessor Nicholas. They put the sacred treasury to its place and, from that moment on, they guarded it with more care. The man who had done all this became servant of the blessed Confessor and remained at the service of the church.

The source of what I have here related is a faithful and good man whose name is Rainerius, native of the city of Poniera.

He had been present to the event because it happened while he was there, coming back from Jerusalem. ☆



1953. *During the Crypt Restoration.* Prof. Luigi Martino, under the watchful eye of the archbishop of Bari Enrico Nicodemo, looks at St Nicholas' skull.



**Bones of St Nicholas** according the skeleton recomposition by prof. Luigi Martino (1957). **In black are the bones still existing** in the tomb of Bari. Given that the ulna of the left arm is missing, the story of Robert the Monk enjoys a good degree of trustworthiness.

**What happened with that bone? Who took it away? And where it is now ?**



**Best greetings from Bari to all St Nicholas friends**