



St Nicholas News

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

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A LITTLE DICTIONARY FOR ST NICHOLAS' HISTORIANS

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MANLIO SIMONETTI:

**SOME OBSERVATIONS ON ST NICHOLAS' HAGIOGRAPHY
AND FR CIOFFARI'S ANSWERS.**

In order to give to St Nicholas friends the instruments to better follow the debates about St Nicholas, I have thought useful to offer a **basic historical Dictionary**.

Constantine. The great Emperor who in 313 gave freedom of cult to the Christians. The influence on him on the part of the prefect Ablabios is described in detail 50 years afterwards by the pagan Eunapius.



Nicaea. Town of Bitinia (Asia Minor, today Turkey) where the Emperor Constantine summoned the bishops to overcome their divi-

sions that endangered the unity of the Empire. The main theme was the controversy on the perfect divinity of Christ. It was resolved by the Emperor's authority, but the divisions in the Church continued for centuries.

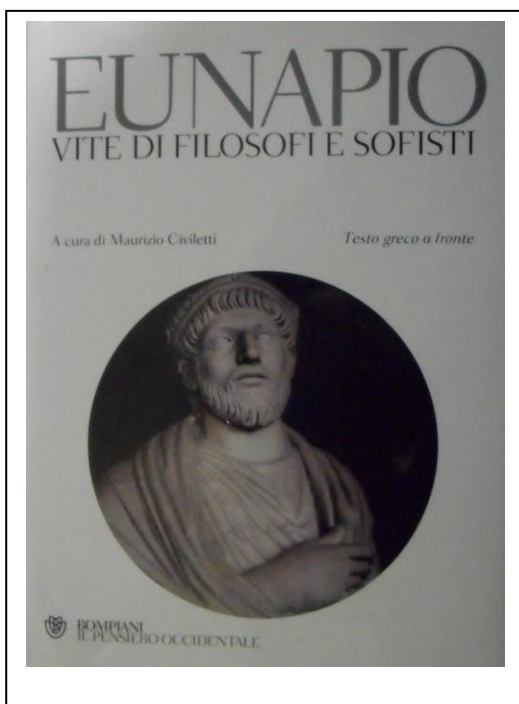
List of the Nicaean Fathers. No original list of signatures of that Council (325) arrived to us. Of about 20 lists (and 50 manuscripts), some have about 200 names, others more than 300. Scholars believe that the most probable are those with 200 names (according to the *Index restitutus*, established by Gelzer, Hilgenfeld and Cuntz in their *Patrum Nicaenorum nomina*). St Nicholas is in the Greek lists of Theodorus Lector (about 520 after Christ) and the Synaitic Anonymous prior to 713 (both with 318 names).

Vladimir Nikolaevič Beneševič (+ 1938), a major Russian byzantinist, who discovered the *Sinajskij spisok* prior to 713.



Eusebius of Caesarea. The first important historian of the Church. He gives of Constantine, bypassing all his shortcomings, the image of a man adopted by the divine providence in order to spread Christianity in the world.

Praxis de stratelatis (The affair of the army commanders). The most ancient text about St Nicholas, written between 336 and 350. It narrates: 1st the liberation of three innocent citizens of Myra, and 2nd: the liberation of three army commanders from imperial prisons. Especially the second part arrived to us in an hagiographical style or mythicizing, composed in the first half of fifth century.



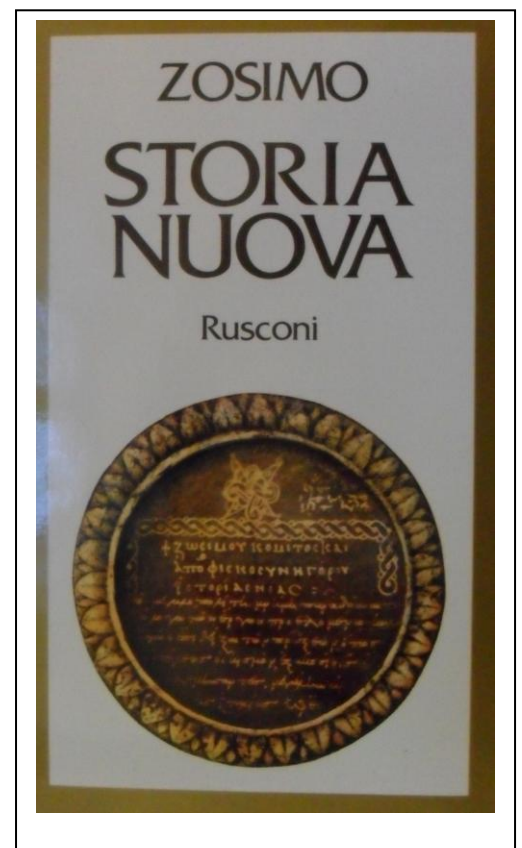
Eunapius. Pagan historian, author of *The Lives of philosophers and sophists*, written about 390 after Christ. He is very precious for the historicity of St Nicholas because many details referred by him correspond to the milieu of St Nicholas' most ancient story (= *Praxis de stratelatis*). Fundamental are the killing of Sopatros, the faith in magics of Constantine, the bad influence on Constantine on the part of his prefect Ablabios.

Socrates. Christian historian of the Vth century who, about the year 430, continued the history of Eusebius. He is very important for St Nicholas history because narrates the episode of Eutichianos (Lib. I, c. XIII, vv. 4-10) very similar to the one with St Nicholas facing Constantine

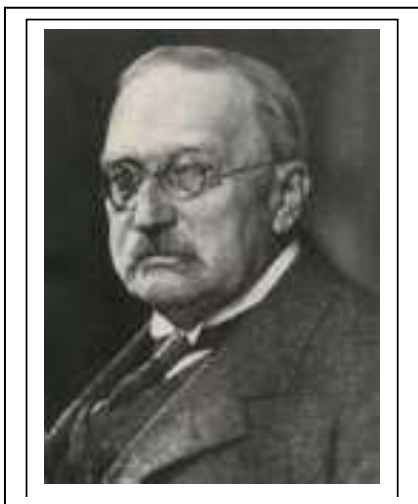
and liberating prisoners. He is also very important because introduces the list of the fathers participating in the Council of Nicaea with a strange phrase mentioning the *Synodikon* (a list of bishops made by Athanasius, protagonist of that Council). The introducing phrase is literally reproduced by Theodorus Lector, listing 318 fathers (and St Nicholas is there).

Sozomen. Christian historian of the Church, who wrote about the year 440. For the history of St Nicholas is important because shows that no list of the Nicaean fathers is completely authentic, because *Paphnutius*, a protagonist in that Council for the question of celibacy, is not mentioned in lists with 200 names.

Zosimos. Pagan historian, depending almost completely on the (lost) *Historical Memoirs* of Eunapius. He wrote his *New History* about 490/500 after Christ. He is important for St Nicholas historicity because gives details on the Goths in Phrygia (V, 13, n. 2) and on Constantine's milieu in line with the *Praxis de stratelatis*.



Theodorus Lector. Around the year 520 this archivist of the Church of S. Sophia in Constantinople wrote an *Ecclesiastical History*, known as *Tripartita*, because depending almost completely on three historians: Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret. He gives a list of the Nicaean fathers in which the name of St Nicholas appears in the 151^o place. In 1917 the editor of Greek texts (Anrich), on the ground that the manuscript goes back to the XIII century, affirmed that St Nicholas name was inserted by a late copist. This thesis, accepted by hasty St Nicholas biographers, has to be refuted and rejected on the basis of Schwartz' statement on this question, as well as on Benešević's discovering of a second Greek list prior to the year 713).



Eduard Schwartz (+1940), the greatest among the experts of the lists of fathers who participated in the first Ecumenical Councils. Against G. Anrich's doubts he asserted the authenticity of the list given by Theodorus Lector in his *Historia Tripartita*. Although he too inclined towards about 200 bishops present at Nicaea, he was convinced that Theodorus Lector knew a source from which he inserted the name of St Nicholas.

Vita Nicolai Sionitae. Is the *Life* of a monk Nicholas lived in the surroundings of Myra about 480-560 after Christ. In spite of the fact that three times speaks clearly of a preceding Saint Nicholas, many actions of this man (archimandrite of Sion and bishop of Pinara) in the Xth century were attributed to St Nicholas of the IVth century, thus creating incredible

anachronisms, that were employed in XVIII century to call into question St Nicholas historicity.

Eustratius of Constantinople. A priest who about 583 wrote a work (*Refutation*) to demonstrate that the souls, even after death, have a certain activity. Among the authoritative fathers he quotes the author of the *Praxis de stratelatis*. Nobody has questioned the authenticity of Estratius' fragment, therefore it has a great importance for the historicity of St Nicholas.

Michael the Archimandrite. This unknown monk (once wrongly identified with Patriarch Methodius) wrote in the VIIIth or at the beginning of IXth century the most ancient *Life of St Nicholas* arrived to us. It is not a real *Life*, but a collection of episodes. The most important is the dowry given to the three girls. In the amount of legendary stories there can be some truth, because he seems to have collected these episodes from the oral tradition of Myra.

Metaphrastes (Symeon). The most famous of the Byzantine Hagiographers, author around the year 960 of many *Lives of Saints*, among which St Nicholas'. He is responsible of all the troubles St Nicholas met with historical criticism of XVII-XVIII century. He included in the *Life of St Nicholas* four or five elements from the *Life of the monk Nicholas*, thus creating the conviction that it was the same person. The contradictions deriving from this confusion were the main arguments against St Nicholas' historicity.

Anrich Gustav. German protestant scholar who in 1913 published a great number of St. Nicholas Greek Lives and Encomia. He denied authenticity to many texts. He believed in the existence of St Nicholas (as afterwards the bollandist Delehaye), but the philological severe language was misunderstood, and many interpreted as if he would call into question even the existence of the Saint. He is also important, because after him is no more possible to identify Nicholas of Myra and Nicholas of Sion.

ST NICHOLAS BETWEEN HISTORY AND LEGEND

SIMONETTI'S CRITICISM AND CIOFFARI'S ANSWERS

Usually fr Cioffari tries to avoid boring St Nicholas friends with scholarly discussions. Scholars who write about St Nicholas are often specialized in fields distant from St Nicholas. Sometimes however the debate is interesting, because it is liven up by scholars in fields very close to our subject. This is the case with prof. Manlio Simonetti, a major Italian specialist on the Arian heresy of the IV century with an international renown (his work on the Pseudo-Athanasian *De Trinitate*, 1956, is quoted in Quasten's *Patrology*). And we know that St Nicholas lived at that time. Therefore he had to face the Arian controversy on the divinity of Christ (although later Lives and liturgical texts incorrectly speak of his defence of Trinity), although we have no evidence about his attitude in the controversy. The fact that Athanasius, the protagonist of the Arian controversy, never mentions him shows that he had no prominent role in it. A thing that agrees with his image of a man of action (see the *Praxis de stratelatis*) rather than of a man of thought.

Simonetti's article *Some observations on St Nicholas' hagiography* (Qualche osservazione sull'agiografia di S. Nicola), appeared few days ago in the well known *Vetera Christianorum*, Revue of the Department of Classic and Christian Studies of Bari University, issue 2011/1, 115-126. Referring his critical observations together with fr. Cioffari's answers to them is a good way to acquire an appropriate overall picture of the grounds on which the critical history of St Nicholas is based.

Prof. Simonetti opens his article by mentioning the French-Italian meeting of December 2010 organized by the Department of Classic and Christian Studies of Bari University together with the St Nicholas Research Center. He takes into account some works of Fr Cioffari (especially "St Nicholas in the historical criticism", 1987). He mentions Victor Saxer's statement in the *New Dictionary of Patristics and Christian Antiquities*, underlining the fact

that *although he includes the Saint among the subscribers of the Nicaean Council of 325, he recognizes that his legend has no historical value*. Here, as everybody can see, Simonetti creates a relationship between Saxer's two independent statements. While according to Saxer, St Nicholas was surely among the fathers who left their signatures at the Council of Nicaea, in spite of the fact that his legend has no historical value; according to Simonetti the lack of historical value of St Nicholas' legend has its weight in judging the signatures. In other words the signatures have to be considered in the light of the legend. A connection that shall influence and mortgage all the following Simonetti's reasonings.

As for Fr. Cioffari's work, prof. Simonetti characterizes it as follows: he aims to *individuate in the great amount of legendary dates those that emerge with concrete admissible details and to concentrate on them the critical analysis*. Three are his main subjects: 1. the lost *Life* of the IV-V century, 2. the *Praxis de stratelatis* or the story of the three army commanders, and 3. St Nicholas' participation to the *Council of Nicaea* of the year 325.

This is a correct interpretation. In fact Cioffari is convinced that all the previous failures of St Nicholas' apologists were caused by the desire to defend the *entire* tradition including the apocryphal episodes borrowed from the *Life* of the monk Nicholas of Sion, bishop of Pinara in the VI century (*Vita Nicolai Sionitae*), that is 200 years after the bishop of Myra. It would be the same as to affirm that Napoleon used the computer.

Therefore, if you don't exclude all the episodes (birth, name of parents, pilgrimages, monastic life) borrowed from this *Life*, even the existence of a bishop of Myra could be rightly called into question. In the critical debate all the hagiographical writings (Michael Archimandrite, Methodius of Constantinople, John the Deacon, and especially Metaphrastes, the great Byzantine hagiographer, main responsible for all St

Nicholas troubles), have to be left equally out because their historical consistency is by far weaker than the Praxis..

The list of Nicaean Fathers. Following the common opinion in the west, prof. Simonetti assumes as valid criterion the *Index restitutus*, edited by the German scholars Gelzer, Hilgenfeld and Cuntz (*Patrum Nicaenorum nomina*) on the basis of a comparison among the most ancient Nicaean lists. It excludes the Greek one of Theodorus Lector (inserted about 520 after Christ in his *Historia tripartita*), on the ground that it reflects the symbolic number of the 318 servants of Abraham.

Simonetti defines as “ghost work” the *Synodikon* of Athanasius, a list prepared by Athanasius around 362 collecting all the bishops in favour of the Nicaean decrees. The reason why he doubts even of its existence is based on the fact that besides the historian Socrates, nobody mentions it. How this denial rebounds on St Nicholas question ? The answer is obvious. If St Nicholas’ name was in the list prepared by the protagonist of the council of Nicaea, his presence at the Council was practically sure. Now, scholars (but not Simonetti) believe that Theodorus’ list is Athanasius’ *Synodikon* because Socrates refers to it after a particular phrase. Theodorus makes literally his own this particular phrase (related to the *Synodikon*) and reports the entire list. In other words, throwing doubts on the existence of Athanasius’ *Synodikon*, Simonetti deprives Theodorus’ list of much strength.

Although very much surprised by this way of reasoning, Cioffari makes no comment on it, because, as we shall see with the Paphnutius’ affair, Simonetti goes much further in “destroying” the *Ecclesiastical Histories* of the V century. Delaying this question, it has to be noted that Cioffari’s main interest lies elsewhere, that is in the “fact” that it was personally Theodore to insert St Nicholas’ name in his list, and not a late copist of the XIIIth century. Cioffari’s authority for this is Eduard Schwartz (*Über die Bischoflisten*, 1937, p. 63) who on this subject harshly criticized Gustav Anrich. As a matter of fact, prof. Simonetti at the beginning seems to be in line with Schwartz, but afterwards gives in to temptation of repeating Anrich’s mistakes about a possible later interpolation.

Who was present and who didn’t at the Nicaean Council ? Simonetti distinguishes

three categories of names related to the participation in the Council of 325: 1. those who attended actively in the assemblies, 2. those who set their signatures and are known only by these signatures, and 3. those who did not put their signatures, but whose names were inserted from other sources in order to give them a major glory. About the presence at the Council of the persons included in the first category, there can be no doubt. The presence of those belonging to the second category is more or less “probable”, according the solidity of the documentation. The names of the third group belong to people who did not attend to the Council.

In order to stress how this latter criterion does allow no exception, Simonetti (with A. Martin) excludes even St. **Paphnutius**, attested by Rufinus and Socrates. Simonetti forgets (but Cioffari would add) that St Paphnutius is not simply mentioned, but, according to Sozomen, was the one who in the Council of Nicaea opposed himself successfully to priestly obligatory celibacy.

Naturally, if Simonetti were right in excluding St Paphnutius, Fr Cioffari would have no objection in excluding St Nicholas. The problem is whether he is justified in drawing this conclusion in spite of such strong historical witnesses. If Rufinus was alone, fr Cioffari too would have doubted (because Rufinus sometimes makes mistakes). But here there is Socrates and Sozomen too. In other words even if Rufinus, Socrates and Sozomen would have narrated St Nicholas actions in the Council, Simonetti (and Martin) would have excluded him without appeal on the ground that his name is not in the *Index restitutus* by Gelzer-Hilgenfeld-Cuntz. Exactly the contrary made a renowned specialist of the lists of Nicaea, E. Honigmann, who, on the ground of Paphnutius mentioned by Socrates and Sozomen, distanced himself from the other experts, and turned over the scale of values of the latin lists, putting in the first line the ΛV (where Paphnutius appears), instead than ΛI , ΛII , ΛIII or ΛIV , as the other scholars do.

Lack of knowledge of some data, not prejudice. However curious Simonetti’s approach to historians and history may appear, the (unacceptable) exclusion of Paphnutius stands for his impartiality. In other words, he is not spurred on by prejudice against St Nicholas or fr Cioffari. His conclusions derive from his historiographical criteria. But, if he is within his

own right to deny St Nicholas presence at the Council on the above mentioned standards, he is not correct when he repeats Anrich's mistakes. In fact, it is not justified when he goes on affirming that probably St Nicholas name was inserted in Theodorus' manuscript in the XIIIth century, borrowing it from Metaphrastes (see page 119 with the note 9, the worst passage of all his observations). A scholar like he is cannot ignore that, after Schwartz' statement on Theodorus, is not possible to connect the name of St Nicholas to hagiographical works (or like Simonetti prefers, "St Nicholas legend").

Furthermore, although Simonetti is not required to know Russian, he cannot ignore that Russian scholars (Lebedev and especially Benešević) have discovered new lists unknown to Gelzer-Hilgenfeld and Cuntz. In particular, the Synaitic one, *Sinajskij Spisok* (that includes St Nicholas name), was written (and scholars without exception recognize) certainly before the year 713. By the way, Vladimir Benešević is able to stand comparison not only with Gelzer-Hilgenfeld and Cuntz, but even with Schwartz. Consequently, following Schwartz-Benešević's statements, the name of **St Nicholas was in the Greek Nicaean lists** (two not one) many **centuries before all the known Lives** of the Saint ("St Nicholas legend"). Therefore it is better to let Metaphrastes rest in peace (if he can, after the so many troubles created to St Nicholas).

Simonetti cannot be surprised if biographers did not mention St Nicholas presence at the Council. They were all monks with an edifying purpose, and they did not shine for historical learning or criticism. Even to our days you may find writers who see Nicholas as defender of the Trinitarian dogma, ignoring that this was the problem of the second Ecumenical Council (381). Therefore, it is useless to ask them to know Nicaean Lists.

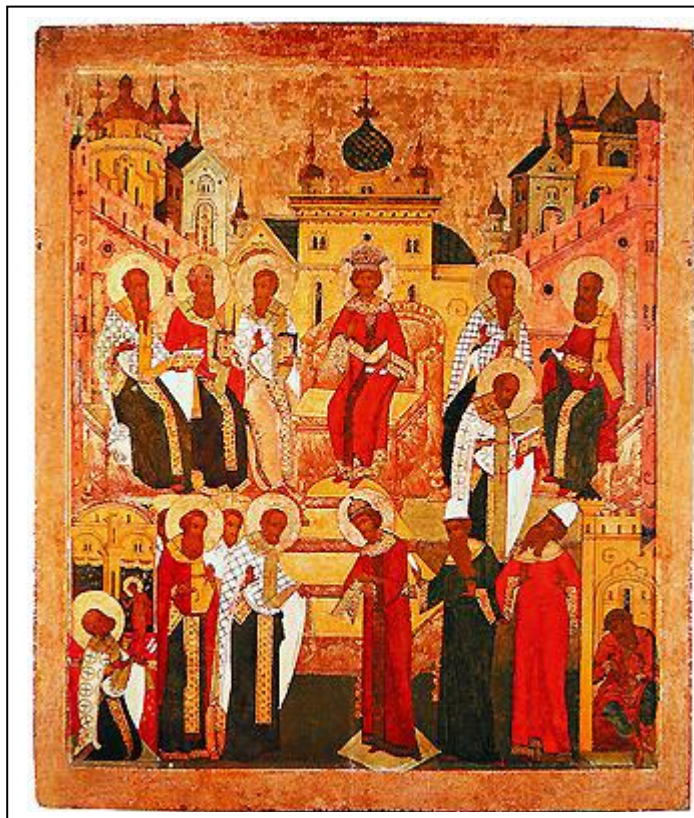
The manuscripts chronology is a slippery ground. In Cioffari's opinion, Simonetti's approach to history, although legitimate, is a slippery one, and often he falls into absolute statements instead than cautious conjectures. For example, he is convinced and writes that Gelzer excludes St Nicholas from the number of the participants in the Council of Nicaea. But this is not true. Gelzer prudently excludes St Nicholas from the *Index restitutus*, and personally does lean towards a negative opinion, but he goes no further (like Simonetti does). He takes no final position about his being at the Council. In fact, in the plans given in the Appendix, among the sees represented in the Council is present Myra too, only with a question

mark. In other words, the equation "absence in the *Index restitutus*" = "absence in Nicaea" is not correct. Doubts deriving from the late age of the Theodorus' manuscript are unjustified after Benešević's list prior to 713 and after Schwartz' statement against Anrich: *Dass "die in Frage kommenden griechischen Listen nicht über das 13 Jahrhundert hinaufgehen", kann ich nicht zugeben. Theodorus Lector gehört ins VI.*

To remember that Theodorus' manuscript goes back to XIIIth century is very dangerous for anybody

engaged in literary and cultural history. The *De Bello Gallico* would be not Cesar's (because written 9 centuries afterwards), and the Catullus' poems would be not Catullus' (because written 14 centuries afterwards).

The Taiphales: Fr Cioffari's strong point. The St Nicholas friends by now are very well informed about the Taiphales because to them was dedicated the entire issue 23 of the *St Nicholas News*. But Simonetti doesn't receive the *St Nicholas News*, therefore he could not know very much about this half-gothic barbarian tribe. His lack of knowledge, however, has not to be considered in itself, but in its relevance for



the implications to make a good case for historicity of St Nicholas' *Praxis*. But, let's proceed in the right order.

The expert of Arian heresy makes three statements questioning Fr Cioffari's positions. According to him, 1. The story of the three army commanders is unbelievable because of the incredible presence of the Taiphales in Phrygia, instead than in Dacia; 2. it is unbelievable that Constantine would give to a bishop the power to revoke a lawful death sentence; and 3. it is unbelievable that Constantine would be influenced by anyone, included his prefect. The entire episode, according to him, seems to be a result of a *typical fable procedure* (tipico procedimento favolistico).

Besides the Taiphales affair, Simonetti's idea of Constantine is in sharp contrast with Cioffari's idea. But, first the Taiphales.

The question is not a secondary one. In fact, putting aside the obstacles deriving from the *Life of St Nicholas of Sion*, the Taiphales would be the only remaining obstacle underlined by Tillemont, Baillet, Falcone (and now Simonetti), against the credibility of St Nicholas history. In fact, if the Taiphales were in Dacia and not in Phrygia, all St Nicholas' history falls into complete falsehood. If, on the contrary, the Taiphales were in Phrygia, there is no way out: the *Praxis* narrates absolutely true facts. Let's put it this other way: if great historians like Tillemont, Baillet, Falcone, Anrich and Simonetti ignore the fact that Constantine in the year 332 transported the Taiphales from Dacia to Phrygia (exactly as the *Praxis* states), how could a poor hagiographer know a fact so unbelievable and, at the same time, so true? Now, that this fact is true anybody can verify by reading Zosimos' *New History*, or the greatest scholar on this subject, Herwig Wolfram and his *History of the Goths* (original edition in German, edited in Italian by Salerno editrice, 1985, p. 114). On the ground of the *Origo Gothica*, the *Valesian Anonymous*, Zosimos' *New History*, Jordanes' *Getica*, Wolfram writes: *Constantine send beyond the Danubius river his omonymous son with a strong army that attacked the Tervingi in the back and inflicted on them a tremendous defeat. While the Thaiphalic prisoners were transported and settled in Phrygia, the Tervingi, who penetrated the lands of the Sarmatians, perished completely.*

And with this quotation, everybody can understand that the question of the historicity of St Nicholas' *Praxis* is definitely settled.

Constantine's personality according to Simonetti and to Cioffari. In order to have a close knowledge of the personality of Constantine the Great it is necessary to forget his greatness, that is his relevance for the following development of history, and see him with the eyes of his contemporaries. It is necessary to put aside the Christian writers (like Eusebius, precious to establish Constantine's greatness) and read Ammianus Marcellinus (*Res gestae*), Eunapius (*Lives of philosophers and Sophists*) and Zosimos (*New History*). If Simonetti would have read these historians, he never would have objected to Fr. Cioffari's attribution to Constantine of so many shortcomings. Certainly, they were pagans, but the facts are facts. The *Praxis*, although deriving from a Christian author, reflects a widespread criticism to Constantine's politics, and criticizes imperial authorities (Eustathius, Ablabios, even Constantine, to whom Nicholas addresses himself with harsh words).

On the contrary Simonetti seems to believe in the image of the emperor given by Eusebius, forgetting many facts like these: *without any trial* Constantine killed his wife and his son in 326, and *without any trial* he killed the philosopher Sopatros *exactly in the same circumstance as he was about to kill the Nepotianus* of St Nicholas story, that is *pushed by Ablabios* (!) and because he *believed in magics*. Like Herod the Great or Peter the Great, in his private life Constantine acted with passion and ruthlessness. And Fr Cioffari would never dispute Peter the Great greatness only because in private was cruel, blasphemous and for the reason of state would kill everybody.

Ignoring all these fundamental details, Simonetti affirms that Fr Cioffari's arguments are based on the historicity of Ablabios and Nepotianus: *The presence of the historical datum given by figures like Nepotianus and Ablabios is not sufficient, in my opinion, to recognize the aura of authenticity to a story, whose specific character seems to derive from the employment of a typical fable motive to the St Nicholas legend.* It is strange that even Simonetti falls in such a misunderstanding. Fr. Cioffari's arguments are based not on Ablabios and Nepotianus historical figures. For this it would have been no necessary three decades of

researches, it would have been enough a normal World History Encyclopedia. Fr. Cioffari's arguments in order to demonstrate the historicity of the *Praxis* derive from the great amount of *details, circumstances and characters*, that the normal historians ignore, and that only an eyewitness or contemporary writer could know. That's why he refers to Eunapius, Socrates and Zosimos as the true sources of St Nicholas history. In them he has found the the tesseras to reconstruct the mosaic of St Nicholas' real history. In other words, if these details (Taiphales in Frygia, the affair Ablabios-Sopatros, Nepotianus' conspiracy, and so on) are ignored by normal historians, it does mean that the first writer was not an hagiographer (like Simonetti assumes), but one who lived those events.

Affinities between Simonetti and Cioffari.

Up to this point, Simonetti's positions have been in contrast with Cioffari's. From this moment up till the end of the article it has to be registered a complete agreement. After accepting the idea of a lost *Life* of the IV-V century, Simonetti tries to imagine a reconstruction of historical truth by eliminating the hagiographical mantle deriving from the early mythicizing.

Although he is convinced of the contrary, Fr Cioffari agrees 100% about this. The Dominican father nowhere has written that he believes that *objectively* St Nicholas appeared to Constantine, nowhere has written that he believes that the grain arrived *miraculously* to Constantinople with the same weight, nowhere he has written that he believes that the reduction of taxes happened *through the miracle* narrated in the *Praxis de tributo*. Fr. Cioffari has no difficulty even to suppose, following Simonetti's guessworks, that the bishop of Myra at the time of Constantine reached many results thanks to his wealth and even by corrupting the captains to let them leave a quantity of grain in Myra. The aim of fr Cioffari's research has never had an hagiographic character. His researches aimed to discover the historical Nicholas of Myra, that is the man that at the time of Constantine occupied the see of Myra. His purpose is to show that, once taken away the episodes from the Life of Nicholas of Sion, the bishop of Myra is no more enshrouded in an impenetrable haze or darkness, but emerges through few, but well defined actions.

GREETINGS

FROM

BARI

TO ALL

ST NICHOLAS'

FRIENDS

