



# St Nicholas News

A paper sent free to the St Nicholas' friends  
all around the world

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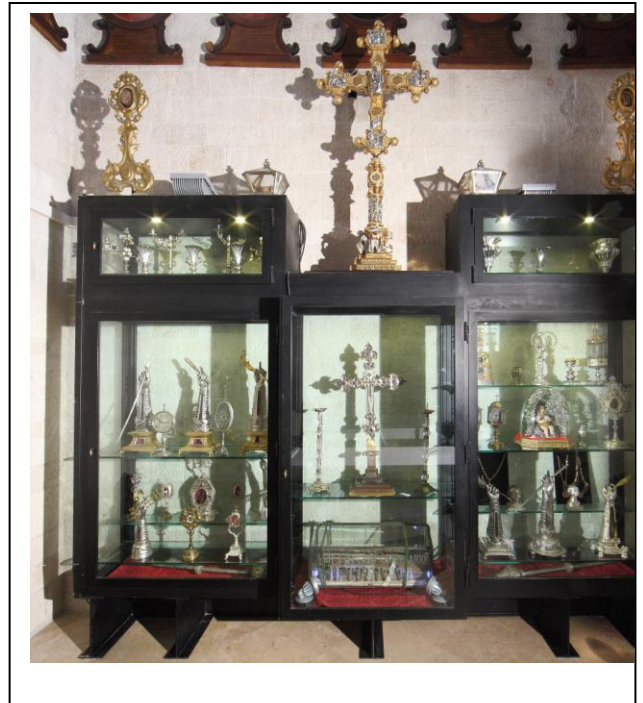
## SOME MASTERPIECES OF THE INTERIOR OF ST NICHOLAS' BASILICA

# 44

**DESCRIBED  
IN THEIR HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

### CHAPEL OF THE RELICS

At the entrance of the Church, soon at right, in the Catepan's Tower is located the Chapel of the Relics (the medieval chapel of St Peter and Paul and recently Treasury Hall). Their acquisition by St Nicholas Basilica is linked to its central place on the road to Jerusalem in the period of the First Crusade (when received the relics of *St Vincent the Martyr* from Valencia/Spain and *St Thomas the Apostle* from Edessa/Syria) and to the donations by Charles II, the Angevin King of Naples (1285-1309). Among the gifts of this great benefactor are worthy of mention the *wood of the holy Cross* (reliquary 1301, the relic is inside a second inner Greek reliquary of the IX or X century), the *thorn* of the crown of Christ's Passion (1301) and *two toots* of St Mary Magdalene.



Other relics: *Apostles*: James of Zebedee and James of Alphaeus (the Less). *Martyrs*: St. Longinus the Centurion, St. Lawrence, St. Sebastian, St. Vincent Martyr, St. Blaise of Sebaste, St Lucia (Lucy) of Syracuse. *And*: St Gregory the Great.

## GOLDEN CEILING OF CARLO ROSA

St Anselm at the Council of Bari (1098). The left transept shows various legends, included the central one with Nicholas who, going through Bari, foretold: *Here my bones shall rest* (Photo here below).



With the great realization of the ceiling in the Basilica of St Nicholas the city intended to react to the recent devastating calamity. In the year 1656 many people died from the plague. The Prior Juan Montero with this work wanted to give the sign of the rebirth.

He entrusted to Carlo Rosa of Bitonto, a renowned painter of that time, to carry out the decoration of the ceiling. With his disciples he worked in three stages between 1661 and 1673. At first was finished the dome above the presbytery, containing images of the Eternal Father, patriarchs and founders of religious orders. The right transept illustrates events related to the Translation, like pope Urban II taking processionally the relics under the altar of the Crypt (1089). Among other scenes:

The central nave presents three main squares surrounded by minor scenes.

The first one (above, at the entrance of the church) has St Nicholas grasping a child by the hairs, freeing him from Saracen captivity in Crete and bringing him back to the parents.

The second one shows St Nicholas saving sailors during a tempest, and above is the Immaculate Conception (the Spanish kings promoted this devotion centuries before the proclamation of the dogma).

The third one (just before the presbytery) illustrates the Council of Nicea (325 AD) where St Nicholas under the watchful eye of the Emperor Constantine tried to convince the heretic Arius about the Trinitarian dogma.

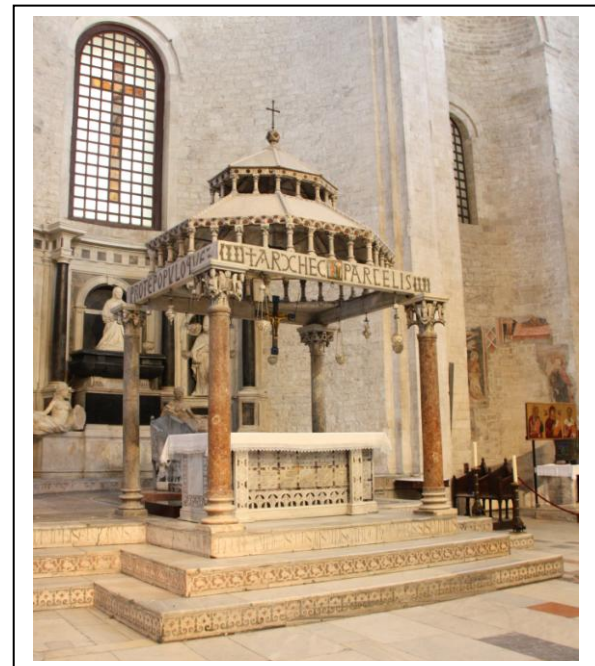
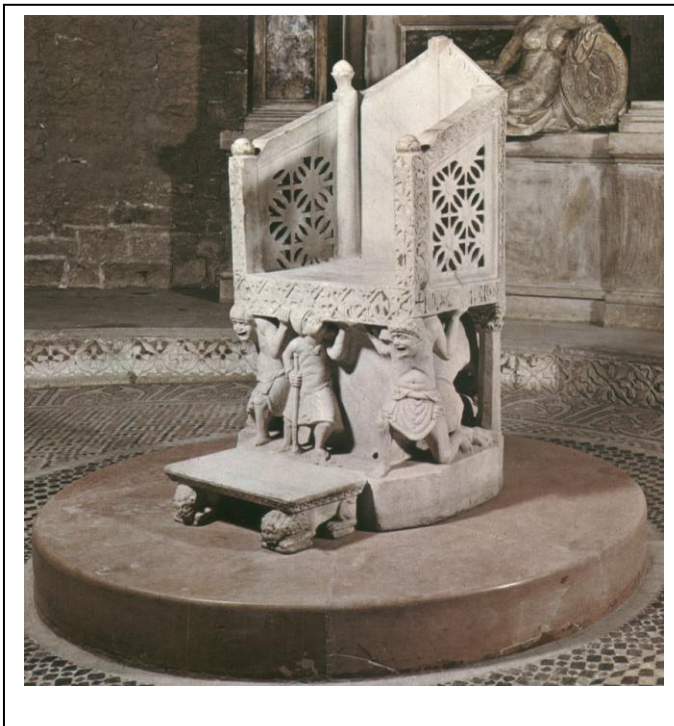
All around are the legends linked to St Nicholas sufferings in consequence of his slapping the heretic Arius across the face.



**EPISCOPAL CHAIR  
OF THE ABBOT ELIAS  
(1098)  
AND CIBORIUM  
OF THE ABBOT EUSTACE  
(1115)**

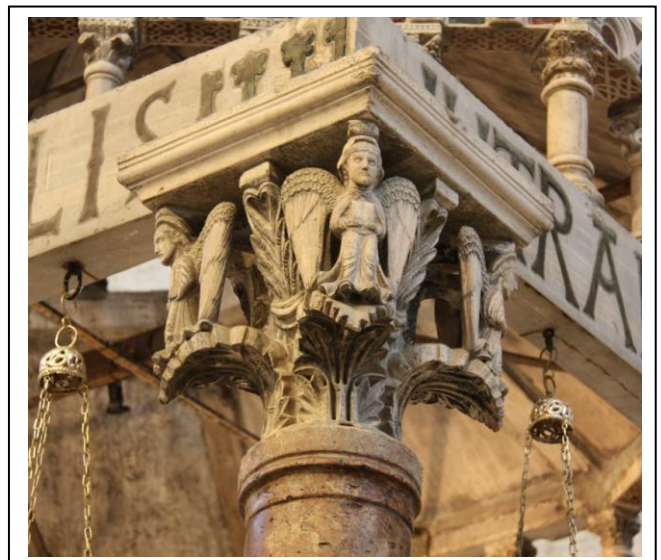
After Elias' death (+ 1105) it was his successor abbot Eustace (+ 1123) to continue his work. To him has to be ascribed the Ciborium of great artistic value and sacred atmosphere: The inscription invites to prayer, and makes us acquainted with Eustace's decoration.

The Mosaic probably goes back to the Catepan Basile Mesardonites (1013), who reinforced the entire fortress that in 1087 was transformed into St Nicholas' Basilica. According to someone, the exterior decoration of the Mosaic is Allah's monogram.



In the years of the construction of the Basilica of St Nicholas (1087-1120 circa), sculptors carried out real masterpieces like the Episcopial Chair of the Abbot Elias, the Lions Portal and the Ciborium on the main altar.

The beautiful episcopial throne was realized by the abbot Elias in the context of the council of Bari (1098), in which were present the pope Urban II and St Anselm of Canterbury. The Romanesque style is prevailing over the Byzantine. The visible strain on the slaves' faces is counterbalanced by the pilgrim's serenity: the road to Jerusalem is to become sure.





## FRESCO OF THE CRUCIFIXION

BY JOHN OF TARANTO (1304)

## TRIPTYCH OF THE VIRGIN OF THE PASSION

BY ANDREW RIZO OF CRETE (1451)



In the year 1301 Charles II of Anjou, king of Naples, visited the St Nicholas Basilica in Bari. Leaving the city he took many initiatives to make the church more spiritual and more beautiful. The decoration program was entrusted to John of Taranto, who already was working at the royal court of Naples. He frescoed therefore the Basilica of St Nicholas in the same years Giotto was frescoing the Basilica of Assisi, and he too worked according the Byzantine-Tuscan style. Unfortunately, out of all that Artistic season only this fresco (hidden behind an organ that covered the apse in modern times) has resisted the waste of the centuries. The chapel was dedicated to St Martin of Tours and the central scene illustrates the Crucifixion.

The Triptych was the first painting by the Cretan byzantine artist Andrew Rizo (1420-1500 circa). It is uncertain however whether Andrew went through Bari or the painting was brought here by the Incuria family at the beginning of XVI century. The *Virgin of the Passion* of Andrew is to be found in many places, like Parma, Fiesole, Ferrara, Florence, Ston, Princeton. In the Bari triptych the Virgin has at her side St Nicholas (right) and St John the Theologian (Evangelist) (left).



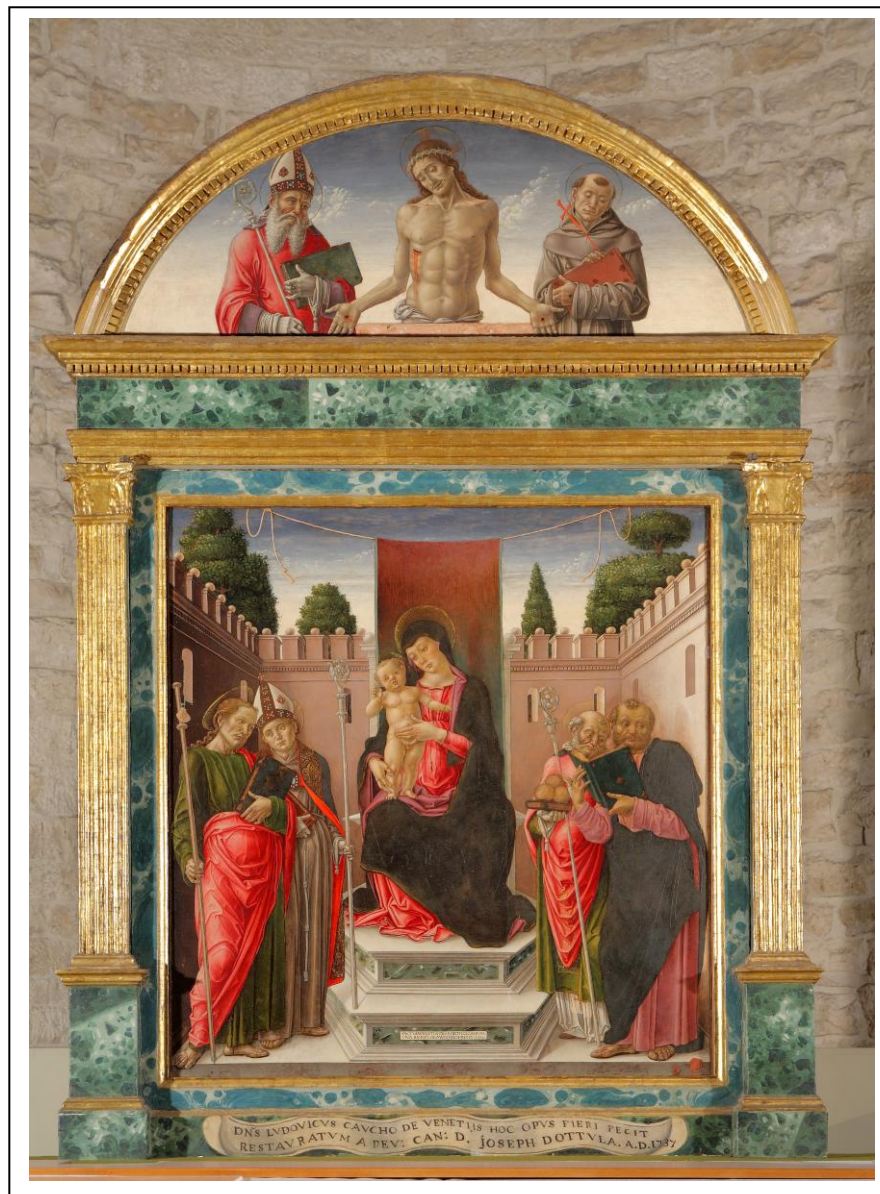


**ALTAR PIECE  
BY BARTOLOMEO  
VIVARINI  
(1476)**

At the right entrance to the Church is the painting *St Jerome studying in his cell* (1510) and, on the other side *St Philip of Argyra* (Sicily) (1554).

In the altar piece by Vivarini on high can be seen the *Image of Piety* with the Saints Augustin and Francis. At the centre is the Virgin with the Child. A sacred visit of the year 1602 identifies the Saints at her side with St James and Martin (at left) and Nicholas and Bartholomew (at right). Restoration works were promoted in 1737 by the Venetian Ludovicus Caucho.

The *Sacred Conversation* by the Venetian painter Bartolomeo Vivarini is the best example in our Church of the Venetian artistic beginnings in Apulia, after the long period of the Byzantine style.





## THE BAROQUE SILVER ALTAR (1684)

In the context of the Baroque decoration of the second half of XVIIth century, after the golden ceiling by Carlo Rosa of Bitonto (1671), the most important initiative was the silver altar (1684), a masterpiece by the Neapolitan artists Domenico Marinelli and Ennio Avitabile. It was melted the entire silver altar donated by the Serbian King Uroš II Milutin in 1319, and made this new one.

Because it was destined to cover the altar of St Nicholas' relics, the front side was provi-

ded with two little doors opening on the urn, in order to permit to extract the water that forms inside (manna, miro). Proceeding to the right it is chiseled first the *birth* of the Saint, then (sideways) the liberation of *Adeodatus*. On the backside, above are the scenes of the *Perjurer Christian*, the *Saint in Jail*, and the *Saint tearing down the malefic tree*; below are the scenes of the *Saint foretelling: Bari shall be my resting place*, the *Deposition of the relics* and the *Arrival of the relics to Bari*. On the left side is the story of the three *Boys killed by the innkeeper* and resurrected by Nicholas, and finally in the front left the *Saint's death*.

This altar often drew the attention of mystery lovers because on the sacred table, on which it was used to celebrate the Mass, there is all around a cryptogram with 650 letters without any apparent order.





## CRYPT:

## THE SAINT'S ALTAR AND TOMB

(1089)

The Barian sailors who with three ships at the end of February 1087 had gone to Antioch for commercial purposes. Because Antioch had fallen into Muslim hands in 1085, with the purpose to give prestige to their city and to free St Nicholas body from Turkish danger, on the way back (sailing along the southern coasts of Asia Minor, today Turkey) got hold of St Nicholas relics. They entered the harbor of Bari Sunday the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, and entrusted the relics to the abbot Elias (his sepulchre is just before the entrance into the crypt), who within two years restructured the Catepan's palace transforming it into a church.

First was ready the underground Church, where Pope Urban II October 1<sup>st</sup> 1089 put the relics under the central altar. Inside are carved the names of the duchess Sykelgaita and of the count Godfrey.

Relics include the head and the major part of the skeleton; the other bones were lost through the centuries. A slight slope permits the gathering of a little quantity of water (the manna, or miro) that is collected the evening of May the 9<sup>th</sup> by the Rector. Then, poured into blessed normal water, is given to the pilgrims who ask for it.

Behind the altar-tomb of St Nicholas is the precious and very beautiful large icon donated by the saint orthodox tsar of Serbia Stephen Uroš III Dečanski (1327)



**CRYPT**  
**THE**  
**MIRACULOUS**  
**COLUMN**



The Crypt has been the first part of the Basilica to be built, because it was necessary to custody St Nicholas body and to avoid any danger of theft. It is very likely that it was not built anew, but that was transformed into a church an already existing hall of the Catepan's palace. Here lived the Catepan, that is the Byzantine governor of Southern Italy, between 968 and 1071.

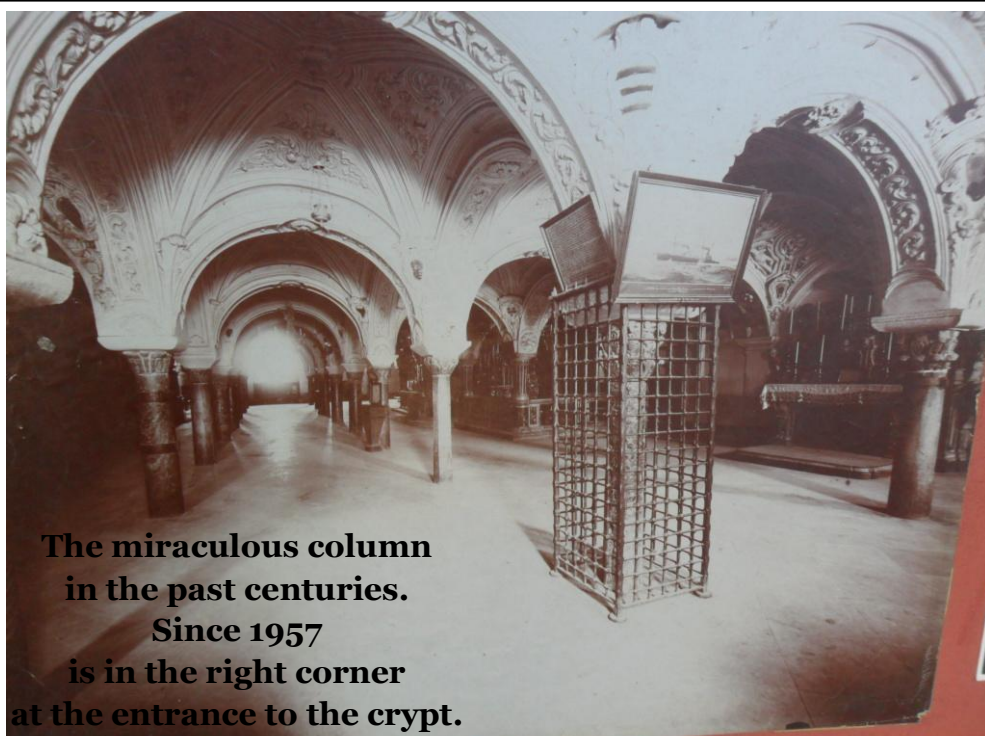
The columns in the crypt are Byzantine, characterized by decorations with leaves, bunches of grapes, racemes. While the four central Norman columns are characterized by assailant animals.

Among the devotional attractions is the *Miraculous Column*, that since 1957 has been put in the right corner when entering the crypt.

The first document mentioning this column is the testament of Niccolò Acciaiuoli (1359), counselor of Giovanna I, the Angevine Queen of Naples. He wrote: *the glorious Confessor put it with his hands when the church and the above mentioned crypt were being constructed.*

The miraculous column, alone among the 26 columns of the crypt, is reddish with white veins. Unreal is the legend about Nicholas going to Rome to the pope Sylvester and pushing this column into the Tiber, from where reached Myra and in 1087 Bari. Bearer of hope is the popular tradition that the girls who touch it or go around it shall meet a good husband.

The lunettes with the life and miracles of the Saint were painted by Nicholas Gliri around 1665.



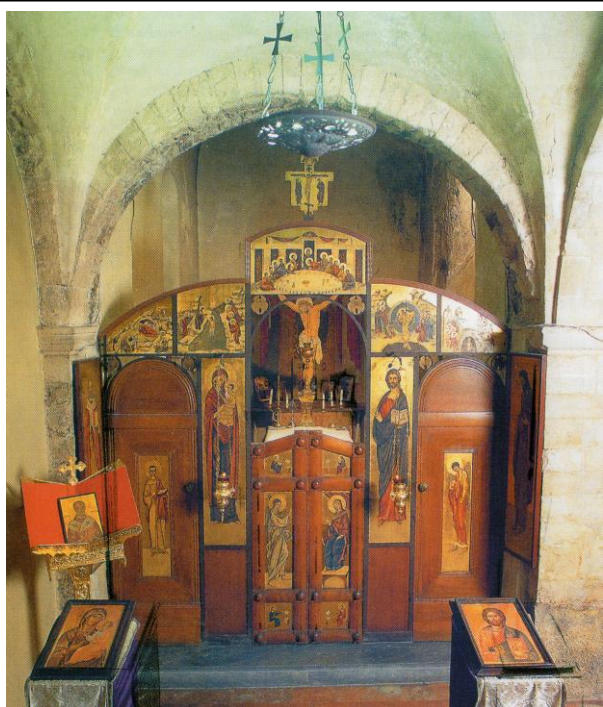
**The miraculous column  
in the past centuries.  
Since 1957  
is in the right corner  
at the entrance to the crypt.**



# CRYPT: ORTHODOX CHAPEL (1966)

The Basilica of St Nicholas is a Roman Catholic Church. Since however our Saint is among the most venerated Saints in the Orthodox world and the most beloved in the Protestant one, this is a meeting place for all the Christians, according Christ's word: *That all may be one*. After the second Vatican Council the Holy See decided to have here an *Orthodox chapel* (1966). Three years later was founded the St Nicholas' Ecumenical Institute (today part of the *Apulian Theological Faculty*).

Till some years ago the Orthodox used to celebrate in this chapel. Afterwards, with the Rector's permission, they have started to celebrate on St Nicholas altar (over the urn with the relics).



Today Orthodox pilgrims from Slavic countries (Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine) come here almost every day. Unlike the Greeks, the Russians have the liturgical feast of the *Translation to Bari* (May 9/22). In 1913 they built in Bari also a Russian Orthodox church and a pilgrim hospice (in Corso Benedetto Croce).

**NB. Catholic and Orthodox Christians** have in common almost the entire theological and liturgical patrimony.

The *main theological differences* are: the Orthodox do not recognize the primacy of the Pope; they believe that the *Filioque* is a mistake (or, for some of them, an heresy); they pray for the deceased, but reject the Purgatory; venerate the Virgin, but have no Immaculate Conception or Assumption dogmas.

The *main canonical and ritual differences* are: the Orthodox custom of allowing the priests to get married (also Roman Catholic priests of Byzantine rite are often married) and to give communion with normal bread and wine.

**GREETINGS  
FROM BARI  
TO ALL  
ST NICHOLAS'  
FRIENDS  
AROUND THE  
WORLD**