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St Nicholas News

A paper sent free to the St Nicholas' friends
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April 6, 2014

FAMOUS MEDIEVAL MONASTIC CENTRES

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S. NICHOLAS OF CASOLE AND THE WORK OF NICHOLAS OF OTRANTO

San Nicola of Casole, a few km south of Otranto (Lecce, Italy) was one of the most important monastic centers of the Middle Age. Today are remaining only few ruins. The message of Casole is the peaceful life between Greeks and Latins, Catholics and Orthodox, both faithful to their doctrinal and ritual traditions. The outstanding figure of this message was Nicholas/Nectarios of Otranto (+ 1235).

The ancient St Nicholas cult in the area is witnessed by a nearby cave church of the VIII or IX century named after St Nicholas, near the farm of Torre Pinta. Other St Nicholas places are included among the monastery properties in a letter of pope Honorius III (January 29, 1218): St Nicholas *de Geminello*, St Nicholas *de Albasciolo*, St. Nicholas *de Piscaria*, and St Nicholas of Brundisium.



The **official history** of St Nicholas of Casole begins with the donation of **Bohemund** (the famous commander of the first Crusade, + 1111) and the activity of the first abbot **Joseph** (1098-1124). But it is probable that a Greek community already existed and that Bohemund and Joseph only started a **new spiritual and cultural age**.

The main source of its history is the *Typikon of Casole* (cod. C III, 17 of the National Library of Turin), written by abbot Nicetas in 1173. In the 183 folios of this **Ritual** of the monastery there are also many precious notes by other writers.

THE CASOLE ST NICHOLAS MONASTERY

The **main source** of the history of the Casole Monastery is the **Typikon** preserved in Torino, a text studied (among others) by M. Ch. Diehl and Apostolos Apostolidis. This Typikon contains prayers for the founder Bohemund and his wife Constance, for Bohemund II, Roger II, William the Bad and William the Good.

At the beginning of XVI century a humanist, Anthony de Ferrariis, named **Galateo**, in his *De situ Japygiae* (pp. 107-109) wrote: *The monastery promoted the Greek erudition, that in our days is declining. At the times of our ancient forefathers, when was still existing the Byzantine empire, lived a philosopher by name Nicholas of Otranto. Many of his books of Logics and Philosophy were preserved in this monastery.*



Cave church of St Nicholas (VIII-IXth centuries), at one km south of Otranto.

In the Otranto area St Nicholas' cult arrived in the VIIIth century and spread throughout southern Apulia (Salento).

All this happened before the Turkish occupation. This man, elected abbot of the monastery taking the name of Nicetas, often was entrusted with missions to the emperor or to the pope in order to foster agreements in a time when between them often arose clashes or about the Orthodox faith or on other subjects. Galateo identifies (and after him several local historians) the copyst of the Typikon Nicetas (1173) and Nicholas of Otranto, who died in 1235.

Under the guidance of Nicholas of Otranto, in the monastery took shape a poetical circle with pro-imperial inspiration. Some verses by John Hydruntinus and George of Gallipoli are against Parma, a city hostile to the Emperor Friedrich II. Other poems are dedicated to the Byzantine Emperor John III Dukas Vatatzes, by the same George. Verses from the Greek mythology composed John Grassus. Promoter of this intellectual life was Nicholas of Otranto. John Grassus wrote: *O Nectarius, you were the seventh abbot of this monastery, that you made famous with golden cups and books. Long live to your works.* (Hoeck Loenertz, 144).

Judging from the quantity of notes about the loan of books it becomes clear that the **Casole Library** was not used only by the monks, but by people around too. The monastery was not only a center of spirituality, but also a seedbed of culture for the entire area. The balance between the Orthodox tradition and the **papal jurisdiction** was saved through a compromise saving monastic freedom and payment of tithes to the Roman Curia. Papal jurisdiction was recognized, and the popes did not interfere in their life confirming without difficulty the elected abbot.

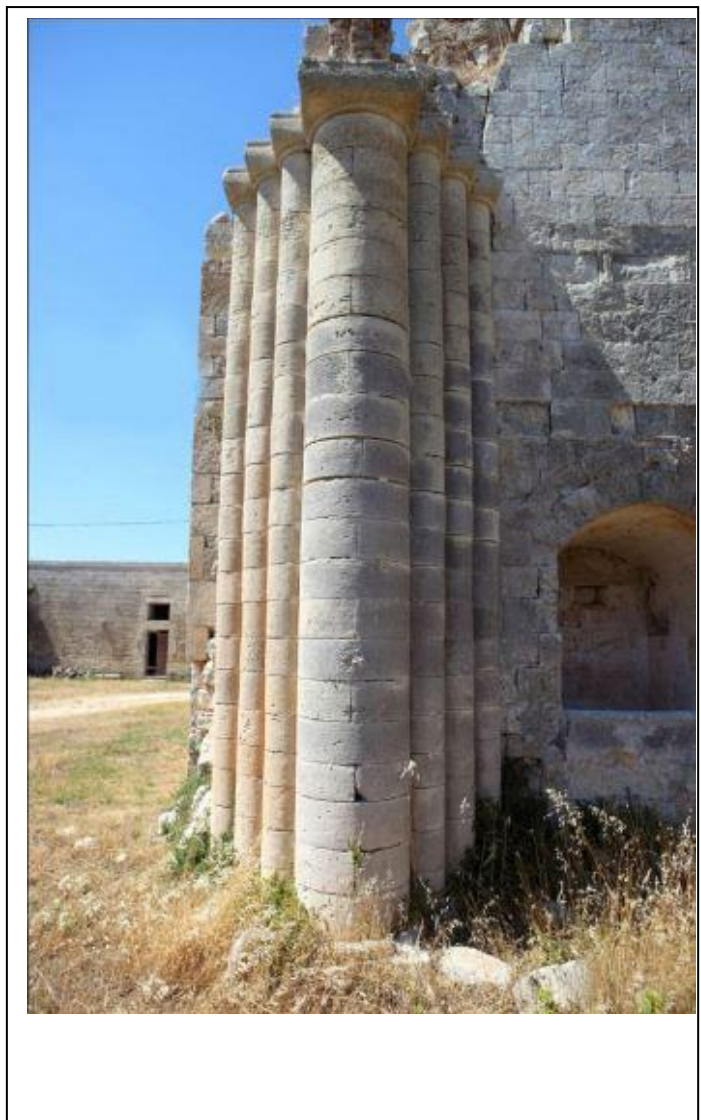
Here is the list of the abbots:

Joseph	(1098-1124),
Victor	(1124-1152),
Nicholas	(1152-1174),
Callinicus	(1174-1195),
Ilarion	(1195-1201),
Nikodemos	(1201-1220),
Nicholas/Nectarius	(1219-1235)
Poimenes	(1235-1256),
Philoteos	(1256-1259),
Basil	(1259-1267),
James	(1267-1274),
Gregory	(1275-1306),
Philoteos	(1306-1342),
Blaise	(1342-1363),
James	(1363-1392),
Peter	(1382-1389)
James	(-1392-),
George	(-1398-),
Matthew	(-1420-),
Zachary	(1438-1469),
named by pope Eugenius IV.	

We do not know who was the abbot between 1469 and 1480, when the monastery was destroyed by the Turks.

With the occupation of Otranto by the **Turks in 1480** everything finished, both the Library and the Monastery.

Fortunately, some twenty years before, the card. **Bessarion**, the promoter of the union between Catholics and Orthodox, the Latin and the Greek churches (at the Council of Florence in 1439), went through Otranto and took away many manuscripts, thus saving them from the Turkish destruction. Many of them can be found in the main European Libraries, like the Vatican Library, Torino, Paris, Venice, Vienna and so on.



NICHOLAS OF OTRANTO, ABBOT NECTARIUS OF CASOLE

NICHOLAS OF OTRANTO. The best known among the abbots was **Nicholas of Otranto, called also Nectarius.** He signed always as Nicholas, although in the Typikon (f. 4) is mentioned as Nectarius. *In the month of February the 9th day died our father Nectarius;* and in another passage (f. 66): *In the same day our father Nectarius, hieromonk, died.*

The date of birth is unknown. In 1223 his friend George Bardanes, archbishop of Kerkyra, wrote to him: *Your spirit throbs and rejoices and the old-age pushes and awakes you* (Hoeck-Loenertz, *Nikolaos Nektarios von Otranto, Abt von Casole, Ettal 1955, 178-179*).

If therefore in 1223 he was already an old man, his birth should be not far away from the year 1150. And therefore it becomes difficult to accept his identification with the Nektarios who participated in the Lateran Council of 1179 (Labbe, XXVIII, 469).

In his native city, Otranto, he taught Greek language and literature. He came into the international limelight after the conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders (1204) and the birth of the Latin Empire of Constantinople.

After reproaching Crusaders for attacking Constantinople (instead than Jerusalem), pope Innocent the III had decided to catch the opportunity for opening dialogues with the Greeks in order to reach the union of Churches.



After the failure of the first mission guided by card. Peter Capuanus, he called card. **Benedict of St. Susanna**, who chose our Nicholas as interpreter. But this second mission in the course of **1207** was equally unsuccessful. In this occasion Nicholas copied the Constantin's Donation taking it from the Nomocanon by Theodore Balsamon. In **1213** the same pope entrusted with a new mission **card. Pelagius** of Albano, who again chose Nicholas as interpreter. Going through Tessalonique they reached Constantinople where **Nicholas Mesarites** arrived too. This latter was the metropolitan of Ephesus that already guided the discussions of 1205-1207. The Nicean emperor Theodore Laskaris (1204-1222), who wanted to be present at the encounter, obtained that the Latin delegation went to Heraclea. However, even these third debates, in which interpreter was still Nicholas of Otranto, had no success.

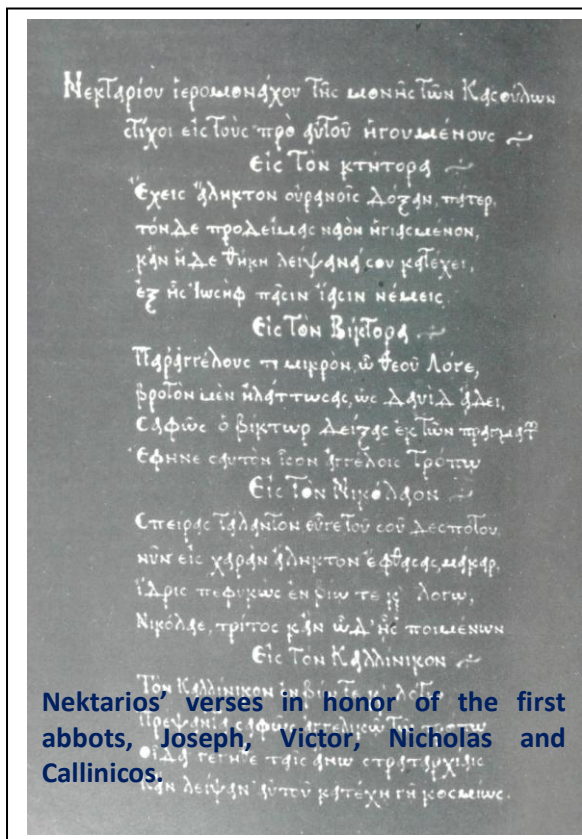
When he was back to Casole, his figure became central in the life of the monastery. In fact, in the meantime he

had **enriched the monastery** with rare **books** and splendid **liturgical furnishings**, so creating a cultural circle both spiritual and cultural.

In **1219** he was elected **abbot** of Casole, and in the *Typikon* is mentioned as **Nectarius**. Probably, because of the pro-imperial tendency of his circle, in 1223 went for another trip in the East, entrusted by the Emperor **Friedrich II**. Later, the despot of Epirus, Manuel Comnene Dukas (1230-1240) wrote to him in order to curb the Emperor's designs on Kerkyra Island. That was the aim of **George Bardanes'** trip to Otranto. This archbishop of Kerkyra was hosted in Casole by Nicholas, and in this monastery he had occasion to debate questions like the Filioque and the unleavened bread of the Eucharist with the **Franciscan friar Bartholomew**.

The conversations were interrupted when they touched subjects like the fire of the **Purgatory** and the immediate remuneration after death. The Latin doctrine appeared to Bardanes similar to the Origen's heresy of apokatastasis.

Very important for the destiny of the Byzantine tradition in southern Italy was his **mission to the pope Gregory IX** (1227-1241), to counteract the initiatives of the archbishop of Bari (Marino Filangieri) who wanted to suppress the Byzantine rite, allowing the Greek language only. At first the pope, who was in Rieti because of a riot of the Roman people) let him act in this direction (12.XI.1231). Before the Archbishop could put into action his ideas, the Italo-Greeks called for help Nicholas of Otranto. In 1232 he went to the pope and succeeded in this very difficult mission. The pope, who then was in Spoleto, stopped the Archbishop of Bari (13.VI.1232) and the Italo-Greeks could go on celebrating the sacraments according to their own traditions.



Nektarios' verses in honor of the first abbots, Joseph, Victor, Nicholas and Callinicos.

Probably Nicholas underscored that different traditions would not compromise the papal jurisdiction, that was not at issue. In order to confirm this latter point in the month of March of 1233 the monastery paid all the due tithes (Turin Typikon, f. 1).

The end of this affair was particularly praised by the archbishop of Kerkyra Bardanes, who pointed out how Nicholas did not yield one inch in doctrinal or ritual field (Hoeck 194).

According to him, Nicholas/Nectarius honored the Prince of the glorious Apostles, while remaining “unshakable column of fire against the enemy”. Nicholas died february the 9th of the year 1235.



ARSENIJ IVAŠČENKO AND NICHOLAS OF OTRANTO.

Three writings of Nicholas of Otranto were discovered in Moscow by the bishop **Arsenij**, that is **Antonij Il'ič Ivaščenko**, who published them in Novgorod. He was born in **1830** at Šamovka, in Cherson district. After the local seminary he attended the Ecclesiastical Academy of Kiev, ending in 1853. He taught in the seminaries of Odessa, Volyn' and Voronež, where he acted as inspector. In 1869 he became rector of the Polock seminary and master of Theology. In 1872 was member of the **Synodal Censorship** Commission in St Petersburg where he remained till 1885 when was appointed rector of the famous Moscow **Zaikonospasskij** monastery.

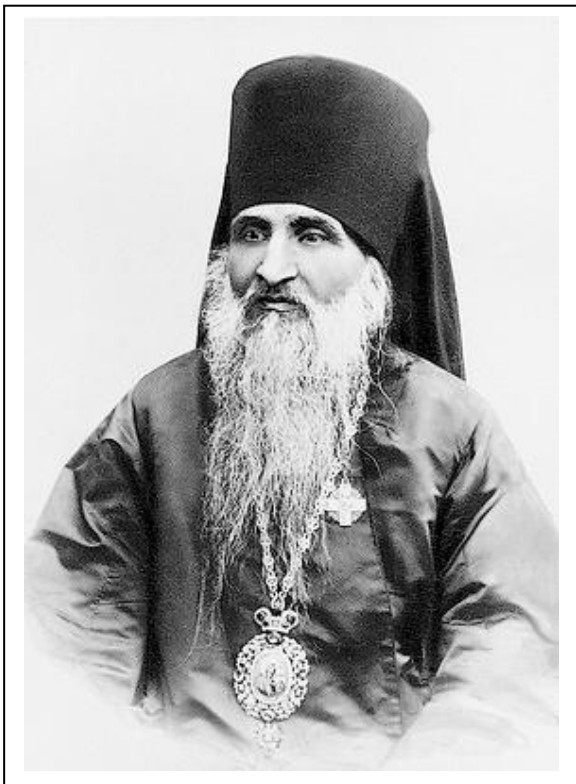
In 1893 he was appointed Vicar bishop of Kaširsk in the Tula diocese, and soon afterwards as **bishop of Kirillov** was vicar of the Novgorod archbishop. And here he remained till the end of his days (1903).

Since his first assignments in the seminaries he dedicated himself to researches in the field of Ecclesiastical history. He knew several languages, like Greek, Latin, German, French, Italian and Spanish. His activity moved in three main fields: translations from the Greek, personal historical researches and text critical editions.

From the Greek into Russian he translated for example Clement of

Alexandria, Michael Psellus, Marc of Ephesus, Gennadios Scholarios and Theophanes Kerameus.

Among his historical works worthy of mention for us are: **Chronicle of Church events, as well as civil ones illustrating the history of the Church** (SPB 1870). **The destiny of the Orthodox Italo-Greek Church** (Судьба православной греко-италийской церкви), in Русская Беседа 1859, кн. 6; **On the relationships of the Greek and Latin Churches at the times of the Crusades** (Об отношениях церкви латинской и греческой в периоде крестовых походов), in ЖМНП, 1867; **Notes on the history of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Island of Sicily** (Очерки истории православной-греческой церкви на острове Сицилии), in Православное Обозрение 1870.



Arsenij Il'ič Ivaščenko (1830-1903)

Among the many text editions for us is important:

Three short treatises of Nicholas of Otranto hegumenon of the Greek

monastery of Casole on the Conversations between Greeks and Latins about the differences of faith and ecclesiastical rites (Николая Гидрунтского (Отрантского), игумена греческого монастыря в Казулах, Три записки о собеседованиях греков с латинянами по поводу разностей в вере и обычаях церковных). Moscow Synodal Library, cod. 240, ff. 30, 51, 58 of the XIV century. Separated edition: Novgorod 1896, pp. 1-76.

The above mentioned treatises were composed in the times following the conquest of Constantinople by the Latins in 1204 and the birth of the Latin Eastern Empire. Nicholas participated as interpreter to several conversations guided by the card. Benedict in Athens, Tesselonique and Constantinople (1205-1207). Several years later Nicholas gathered his notes into short writings, that on card. Benedict's request translated into Latin (may be Ms Vat. Palat. Gr. 232). This trilogy is preserved in a dozen of manuscripts, but besides the Paris. Gr. Suppl. 1232, only the Arsenij's Cod., discovered in the Moscow Synodal Library, is unabridged and with no missing pages.

Nicholas' text is preceded by a fragment of a "Conversation of the card. Benedict with some Greek monks" (cod. 393), dated 6715 (=1207), that could have been written by the same Nicholas. From this fragment we learn that these monks (from Propontide, or from St Auxentius monastery, near Chalcedon) refused to obey the Latin patriarch Thomas Morosini and omitted his name in the Liturgy. Summoned to the Imperial Palace they explained that they would have mentioned the deceased patriarch till the election of the new one.

This attitude was very interesting, because at the same time they did recognize neither the Latin Patriarch nor the Orthodox Patriarch (Michael IV) elected in 1206 in Nicea.

Here the fragment stops, and the rest of the text is missing. Unfortunately, Nicholas' writings are less concerned with the chronicle of the debates than with the exposition of the Orthodox doctrine. Therefore, while the **arguments of the Greeks are well traced**, those of the **Latins are vague**. Although he makes reference to the conversations of Thessalonique and Athens, he gives little information about the progress of the negotiations. According to him the only way to the union of Churches is the Orthodox faith. The **Latins** should therefore abandon their **arrogance** and go back to the old tradition of the Church. Unity of the Church in fact has been broken by the Latins by twisting and **corrupting** the ancient doctrine. On the basis of what he heard in Constantinople, Athens and Thessalonique he criticises the Filioque doctrine. He quotes John of Damascus and Gregory the Theologian, lingering over the syllogistic demonstrations by **Nicholas of Methone**. Other quotations are drawn from Basil the Great, Gregory of Nissa, Epiphanius of Cyprus, Chrysostom and others.

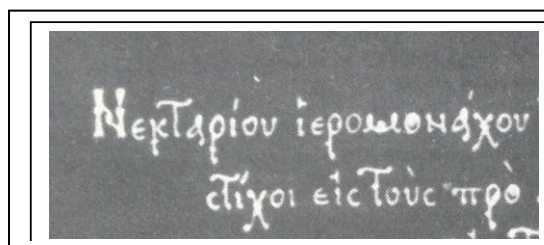
His choice of adopting the arguments of Nicholas of Methone (+ 1165), who qualified as **blasphemy** the Filioque, reveals the personal attitude of Nicholas of Otranto.

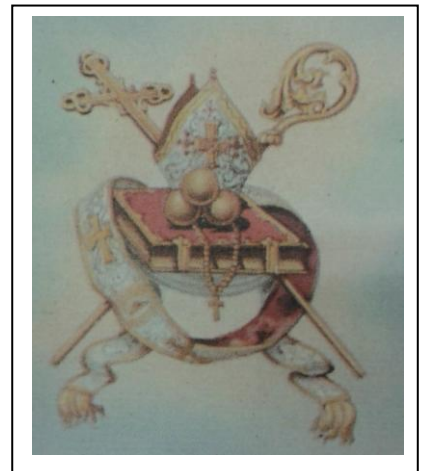
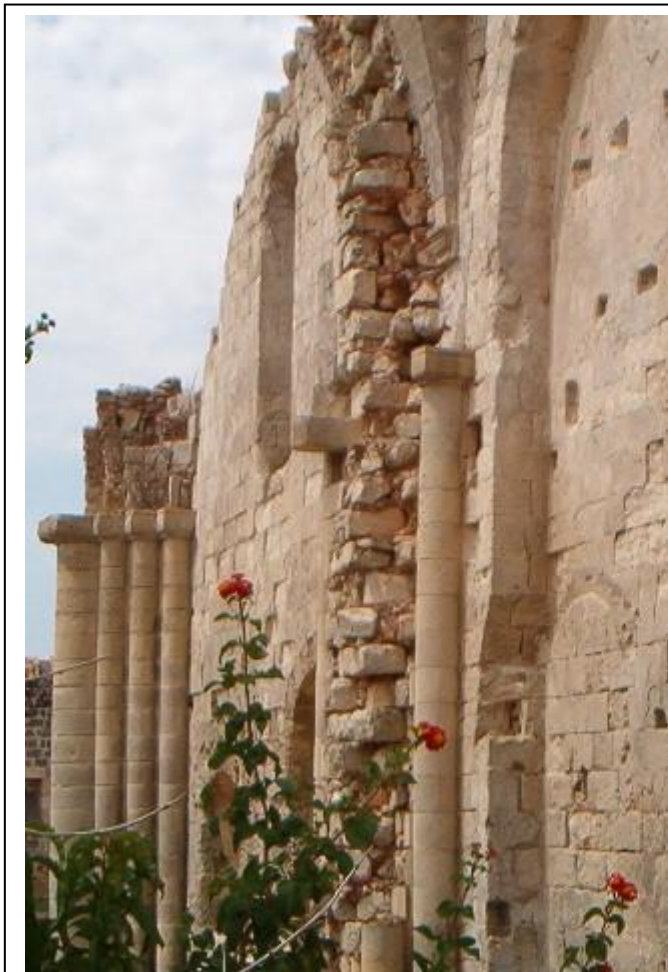
The second writing of Nicholas of Otranto deals with the unleavened bread in the Eucharist. The third one concerns the Lent liturgy and the celibacy of the priests. Unfortunately, like in the previous writings, instead of doing an historical work by reporting the debates with the arguments proposed by the Greeks and by the Latins, again he lines up with the Greeks against the Latins, and relates well only the arguments in favor of the Greeks. The atmosphere is however clear enough, thanks to a sentence by card. Benedict: *I believe that both rites have equal value. Let's take for instance the wine, would be*

white, rosé or red, it's all the same. It is anyway true blood in Christ's chalice. In the same way the bread that is offered, leavened or unleavened, when it is consecrated is transformed into the body of Christ. According Nicholas of Otranto, this way of speaking was received by the Greeks as **shameless sophisms or quibbles** (pp. 36-37).

Although Nicholas of Otranto is not an accurate chronicler of the debates, notes like the card. Benedict's sentence just reported are illuminating. Equally important in order to understand the difficulties of the dialogue are some curiosities. For example, one of the main arguments of the Greeks in these conversations in favor of the leavened Eucharistic bread was a particular relic. While plundering Constantinople the Latins had found a hall in the Imperial Palace where were preserved the ancient relics. Among them they found a little piece of bread from the Last Supper, therefore consecrated by Christ's himself. It was a relic preserved together with the wood of the Cross, the crown of thorns, the sandals of the Lord, and the nails. As they could see, the relic-bread was leavened bread. On this bread reliquary was written: *Here is preserved the divine bread that Christ gave to the disciples in the evening when he said "Take, and eat". This bread was discovered by the bishop of Alverst, delegated by the bishop of Bethlehem, and some others.*

As everybody can understand, this one for the Greeks was a weighty argument, while for the Latins had no weight at all, because Christ followed the Hebrew custom, and could not have used leavened bread.





**GREETINGS
FROM
BARI
TO ALL
ST NICHOLAS'
FRIENDS**