



The Holy Martyr Wenceslaus (Vatslav or Vyacheslav), King of the Czechs

Commemorated September 28/October 11

Of all the ancient stories that surround Christmas, the tale about King Wenceslaus (spelled Vatslav or Vyacheslav) stands out. Though the carol was composed by noted songwriter and priest, John Mason Neale, the song is based on historical fact.

King Wenceslaus was a real member of European royalty, a ruler who daily touched his subjects with Christian kindness and charity. For many in the Dark Ages, this king was the role model for Christian leaders. Today, over a thousand years after his death, King Wenceslaus remains a role model for Christian people everywhere.

The son of Duke Borivoy (Bratislav) of Bohemia, Saint Wenceslaus had the good fortune to be raised by his grandmother, holy Martyr and Princess Ludmilla (commemorated September 16). Ludmilla was a devoted Christian woman who raised Prince Wenceslaus in deep piety, teaching her grandson the meaning of faith, hope, and charity. Wenceslaus took his grandmother's lessons to heart, and in 920, when Duke Borivoy (Bratislav) was killed in battle, the youngster seemed ready to put what he had learned into action. At the age of eighteen, Saint Wenceslaus, just a few minutes older than Boleslaus, was made the leader of Bohemia.

In spite of his youthful age, he ruled wisely and justly and concerned himself much about the Christian enlightenment of the people. The holy prince was a widely educated man, and he studied in the Latin and Greek languages. Saint Wenceslaus was peace-loving. He built and embellished churches, and in Prague, the Czech capital, he raised up a magnificent church in the name of Saint Vitus, and he had respect for the clergy.

Envious nobles decided to murder the saint and, at first, to incite his mother against him, and later to urge his younger brother, Boleslav, to occupy the princely throne. As the young duke attempted to guide the troubled nation, his mother, Drahomira, and his brother, Boleslaus, instituted a pagan revolt. They assassinated Ludmilla as she prayed, then attempted to overthrow Saint Wenceslaus. The teen took charge, put down the rebellion, and in an act of Christian kindness, expelled his mother and brother rather than executing them. The tiny nation was amazed that the boy would react with such great mercy.

With the wisdom of Solomon, the young duke set up a nation built on true justice and mercy. He enacted laws in the manner he thought would best serve his Lord. As king, he labored in the Faith like the great ascetics, and strengthened the Christian Faith among his people. He was strict in ensuring that no innocent person suffer in the courts. In his zeal for the Christian Faith and in his love for his fellow man, Saint Wenceslaus purchased pagan children who were being sold as slaves, and immediately baptized them and raised them as Christians. He translated the Gospel of St. John into the Czech language, and transported the relics of St. Vitus and St. Ludmilla to Prague.

He even journeyed out into the country seeking insight as to what his people needed. When possible, he shared everything from firewood to meat with his subjects. He took pity on the poor and urged those blessed with wealth to reach out to the less fortunate. In large part due to Saint Wenceslaus's example, a host of pagan peasants turned to Christianity. It was a revival unlike any had ever seen in the country.

When Saint Wenceslaus married and had a son, all of Bohemia celebrated. Peasants and powerful landlords sought the man out, offering their prayers for long life and happiness. With a smile on his face, the leader assured them that he was praying for their happiness as well. In the years that followed, the duke and his subjects continued to share both their prayers and their blessings with one another each day. Rarely had a leader been as universally revered as was Wenceslaus.

And Saint Wenceslaus loved Christmas. Centuries before gift giving became a part of the holiday tradition, the young leader embraced the joy of sharing his bounty with others. Inspired by a sincere spirit of compassion, each Christmas Eve the duke sought out the most needy of his subjects and visited them. With his pages at his side, Saint Wenceslaus brought food, firewood, and clothing. After greeting all in the household, the duke would continue to the next stop. Though often faced with harsh weather conditions, Saint Wenceslaus never postponed his rounds. Like a tenth century Saint Nicholas, the kindly young man made the night before Christmas special for scores of families. For many, a Christmas Eve visit from the duke was an answered prayer and a special reason to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Boleslav invited his brother to the dedication of a church, and then asked him to stay another day. In spite of the warnings of his servants, the holy prince Saint Wenceslaus refused to believe in a conspiracy and exposed his life to the will of God. On the following day, September 28, 935, when Saint Wenceslaus went to Matins, he was wickedly murdered at the doors of the church by his own brother and his brother's servants. Falling to his knees on the church steps, the dying ruler looked up and whispered, "Brother, may God forgive you." Then he died. His body was stabbed and discarded without burial.

The mother, hearing of the murder of her son, found and placed his body in a recently consecrated church at the princely court. They were not able to wash off the blood splashed on the church doors, but after three days it disappeared by itself.

Amazingly, when the young man realized what he had done, the new duke turned away from his colleagues and embraced the faith that had guided his brother's life and rule. Though he had planned the revolt that had killed his twin, it was Boleslaus who sustained the memory of Saint Wenceslaus. After repenting of his sin, the murderer transferred the relics of Saint Wenceslaus to Prague, where they were placed in the church of St. Vitus, which the martyr himself had constructed (the transfer of the relics of Saint Wenceslaus is celebrated on March 4). The memory of Saint

Wenceslaus has been honored from of old in the Orthodox Church. Thanks to the man who killed his brother, the Crown of Saint Wenceslaus became the symbol of the Czech nation. Saint Wenceslaus suffered in the year 935 and his relics repose in Prague.

The Christmas Carol “Good King Wenceslaus”

*Good King Wenceslaus looked out, on the Feast of Stephen,
When the snow lay round about, Deep and crisp and even;
Brightly shone the moon that night, Tho’ the frost was cruel,
When a poor man came in sight, Gath’ring winter fuel.*

*“Hither, page, and stand by me, If thou know’st it, telling,
Yonder peasant, who is he? Where and what his dwelling?”
“Sire, he lives a good league hence, Underneath the mountain;
Right against the forest fence, By Saint Agnes’ fountain.”*

*“Bring me flesh, and bring me wine, Bring me pine logs hither:
Thou and I will see him dine, When we bear them thither.”
Page and monarch, forth they went, Forth they went together;
Thro’ the rude wind’s wild lament And the bitter weather.*

*“Sire, the night is darker now, And the wind blows stronger;
Fails my heart, I know not how, I can go no longer.”
“Mark my footsteps, good my page; Tread thou in them boldly:
Thou shalt find the winter’s rage Freeze thy blood less coldly.”*

*In his master’s steps he trod Where the snow lay dinted;
Heat was in the very sod Which the Saint had printed.
Therefore, Christian men, be sure, Wealth or rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor, Shall yourselves find blessing.*

An Orthodox Hymn of Praise

*The Holy Martyr Wenceslaus, King of the Czechs
From a wicked mother, good fruit was born:
Saint Wenceslaus, who pleased God.
His wicked mother gave him only a body,
But his grandmother-light and faith and hope.
The glorious grandmother, pious Ludmilla,
Nurtured Wenceslaus ‘s soul.
As a white lily, Wenceslaus grew,*

*And adorned himself with innocence.
As the king reigned, the people rejoiced,
And with their king they honored God.
Yet the adversary of man never sleeps or dozes,
Laying sinful snares for every soul,
And he incited Boleslav against Wenceslaus.
“For what, my brother, do you want my head?”
Wenceslaus asked, but was still beheaded!
But the evildoer did not escape God.
The soul of Saint Wenceslaus went
Before the Most-high God, the Just,
The One he had always adored,
And with Ludmilla, Wenceslaus now prays
For his people, that they be strengthened in faith.
Saint Wenceslaus, beautiful as an angel!*