Prayer, feasting traditional in south Louisiana Christmas

Both the French and the Spanish brought to America a tradition of Christmas Eve midnight Mass followed by a huge feast.

Christmas Day is the only time when Masses with three different Gospels are celebrated on the same day. The custom was established in the Seventh century, when the Pope traveled to several churches in Rome to celebrate the Nativity. Because of the Gospel stories for each Mass, the first Mass came to be known as the Angel’s Mass, the second the “Shepherd’s Mass, and the third “The Mass of the Divine Word.”

Réveillon, is the French name for the early morning feast that follows midnight Mass on Christmas day — and a feast it was. A simple réveillon for an affluent Creole family in the 1800s, recreated for a 1969 National Home Demonstration Agents convention in New Orleans, included deviled eggs with mushrooms and baked eggs with shrimp; a French loaf of bread laced with dates, apples, almonds, wine, and spices; orange praline rolls; daubée glacée (a jellied meat dish); spiced peaches; dates in port; wine cake; and white, red and dessert wines to drink.

The Creoles’ Acadian cousins gave less attention to Christmas Day. The dinner was like a special Sunday. Children were generally given fruit and a present from l’Enfant Jésus.

In Acadiana, New Year’s Day was the important holiday. It was the day for family reunions, and the time when le bon St. Nicholas brought good children les étrennes.

The word and the celebration on New Year’s day hark to Roman times and the celebration of the Kalends. Wishes of health and prosperity were exchanged on the day. Presents were given to friends and children, and donations were made to the poor. In the earliest celebrations, the presents were said to have been brought from the groves of the goddess Sterea. Sterea, the Roman word for the presents, found its way into English as étrennes.

In Acadiana, older servants were also given étrennes. They wished the givers good health and prosperity in exchange, ending always with, “Paradise to the end of your days.” This was a translation of the customary French New Year salutation between family members for Bonne année, bonne santé, et le paradis à la fin de vos jours.

Celebrations of le jour de l’an, which translates generally as “the day of the year,” started the night before with firecrackers and Roman candles. The day itself began with early morning Mass, followed by a country breakfast that included biscuits and home churned butter, boudin, hogshead cheese, and café au lait.

But the New Year’s dinner was the feast to be remembered. The table was laden with roast sucking pig, chauvin, baked chickens and ducks, ham, rice dressing, store-bought bread, winter vegetables, and baked sweet potatoes. Wine was served, of course, and at the end, a demitasse of pure black coffee made from home roasted beans. For dessert there was ambrosia and an assortment of cakes, as well as pralines. For the children, there was an ample supply of popcorn balls.

Santa didn’t begin to visit Cajun children until the late 1800s. Before then, le petit bonhomme Janvier, sometimes called the Little January Stranger in English, delivered gifts at New Year’s. If the children were good during the year, he left them fruit and perhaps a bauble or two. But if they had been bad, he turned trickster and left them ashes.

There were also some remote places in Louisiana’s bayou country where, until relatively recent times, Christmas was not celebrated until February. Some people may still remember that February 25 was called Trapper’s Christmas.

The real Christmas fell in the middle of the trapping season, when the men of the trappers’ families were out in the marsh. So families waited until after the trapping season to celebrate Christmas. That way Papa was home for the celebration, and so was the money he got for his pelts.

It made for a better celebration.

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