Pre-Santa, Mass held sway at Christmas

Santa Claus didn’t begin to visit Cajun children until the late 1800s. Before then, le petit bethomme d’Anctier — the Little January Stranger — delivered gifts at New Year’s. If the children were good during the year, he left them fruit and a bauble or two. If they were bad, he turned trickster and left them ashes.

Prayer and feasting were the order of the day on Dec. 25, beginning with the tradition of midnight Mass.

Both the French and Spanish brought to America a tradition of Christmas Eve midnight Mass followed by a huge feast. We’re not sure just how a Mass at midnight became customary at Christmas. The reason often cited is that midnight is traditionally thought to be the hour of Jesus’ birth.

The time prescribed by canon law for the first Christmas Day Mass is in noce (while it is still night). During the early years of Christianity, Romans set the proper time for the Mass as that of the first cock-crow, galli cantum, thought to be around 3 a.m. Spanish-speaking people still sometime call this first Christmas Mass Misa del gallo (Mass of the Rooster).

However it began and whatever the Mass was called, Réveillon was the French name for what happened next — an early morning feast that made the table groan.

A simple réveillon for a South Louisiana family in the 1800s, re-created for a 1952 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; praline rolls; daube glace (a jellied meat dish); spiced peaches; dates in port; wine cake; and white, red and dessert wines to drink.

After a meal like that, nobody noticed that there weren’t any presents.

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