Acadiana embraces Italian tradition as church set to host altar for 26th year

BY CHERÉ COEN | Special to The Advocate

Acadiana's Catholics may be predominately Cajun or Creole, but that didn't stop Father Michael Russo from creating the traditionally Italian St. Joseph's Day Altar when he served the congregation of St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church in Rayne.

On March 19 and 20, he will host his 26th St. Joseph's Day Altar at Our Lady of Fatima Roman Catholic Church in Lafayette.

"I think it's successful here in Cajunland because it's all about the food," Russo said.

The altars have roots in Sicily, Italy, when a devastating drought shook the island in the 1800s, causing many residents to rely solely on fava beans, then used as cattle fodder. Sicilians prayed to their patron saint, St. Joseph, and rains followed.

To honor St. Joseph, they created tables of foods they had harvested once the drought had ended, including the lucky fava bean. After their feast, they gave food and money to the poor.

Today, St. Joseph's Day altars are created throughout south Louisiana, but primarily in New Orleans, where a large percentage of its Catholics are of Sicilian descent, Russo said.

"Beginning in the 20th century, there was a direct line from Sicily to Louisiana," he said.

The altars commemorate St. Joseph's Day, or the Feast of St. Joseph, which is held annually on March 19. Joseph was the husband of the Virgin Mary and the foster father of Jesus.

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Fatima's St. Joseph's Day Altar will be on display this weekend, with a Mass recited at 10 a.m. Saturday and related events continuing throughout the afternoon.

Children will perform the "Tupa-Tupa" ritual, in which three will dress as the holy family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus and reenact the family's visit to Bethlehem, where they were refused food and shelter.

Tupa-tupa in Italian means "knock knock."

The children will be served the spaghetti dinner first, then other participants will be served. Treats from the feast, served on side tables so as to not disturb the altar, will also be shared.

Following the weekend feast, the remaining food and money collected will be donated to the less fortunate, Russo said.

Most traditional St. Joseph's Altars are constructed of three steps, Russo explained, to represent the holy trinity. Traditional foods are displayed on the steps in pairs to signify "the beautiful harmony of nature from the beginning of time."

"Some families will add a step in honor of a past saint," he added.

Traditional foods include Italian fig cookies, meatless dishes because the feast occurs during Lent, bread shaped like carpenter's tools in honor of Joseph's profession, and pasta. Altars always include the lucky fava bean.

"It's called a lucky bean because people survived on it through the famine," Russo said. "If it's blessed, you will always have money in your pocket, or food."

Vermilionville will also offer a St. Joseph's Altar on March 15-18 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Because the living history museum cannot offer food, there will be fake representations on the altar, items such as fish, strawberries and pasta.

In both cases, participants will leave with a bag of treats that will include a lucky fava bean and a St. Joseph prayer card.

St. Joseph's Altars were introduced to Acadiana during World War I and II, said organizer Charissa Helluin, and Vermilionville in the past has displayed altar representations of the 1940s.

"This year, we're trying to get up a more historical altar dating back to the 1800s," she said.

Admission is free to the Fatima celebration.

Admission to Vermilionville is the standard: adults — $10 per person; 65 and older — $8 per person; ages 5-18 — $6 per person; and college students (with ID) — $6 per person. Children under 5 are admitted free.