



What's the indelible, 320-year connection between Mardi Gras and the local Catholic church?

The origins are not hard to decipher.

When Iberville and Bienville reached the mouth of the Mississippi River on Sunday, March 1, 1699, they landed, according to Catholic historian Roger Baudier, "a league and a half (about 5 miles) up the river among reeds that lined both banks."

In his diary, Iberville states that on Shrove Tuesday, March 3, 1699, "the party made their cabanage 12 leagues (about 36 miles) above the mouth of the river at a point where the river makes a turn on the west and which they named 'La Pointe du Mardi Gras.'"

At 7 a.m. on Mardi Gras morning – on the bank of the river – Baudier says "Father Anastase offered up the Holy

Sacrifice of the Mass and sang the Te Deum in thanksgiving to God for having recognized the river." Baudier says the exact location of that first Mardi Gras Mass – the first celebrated in the state of Louisiana – has not been determined because of changes in the river.

On the following day, Baudier notes, "Iberville saw to it that the ceremonies of Ash Wednesday were observed."

According to Robert Tallant, the author of "Romantic New Orleans," Mardi Gras was reinforced in New Orleans by the early French settlers and was a well-established custom by 1766.

Even though the Spanish were considered carefree, they suppressed street masking in the late 18th century, but the tradition was revived, only to have it suppressed once again after the Louisiana Purchase. Numerous petitions led to the revelry being renewed by 1823.

Mardi Gras historian Arthur Hardy said the public celebration of Mardi Gras in the early 19th century "consisted mainly of maskers on foot, in carriages and on horseback."

Because of the rowdiness and crime associated with

street celebrations in the early 19th century, Tallant said newspapers in 1857 predicted that would be its last year. But that year the street celebrations seemed to take hold.

Hardy says six New Orleansians who had been members of Mobile's parading organization, the Cowbellions, "saved the New Orleans Mardi Gras" by forming the Comus organization in 1857, proving they could present a themed and safe parade with floats and costumed riders.

In 1872, Rex made his first appearance, Hardy says, tied to a visit to New Orleans by the Russian Grand Duke Alexis Romanoff. Rex selected Carnival's colors – green, gold and purple – and introduced "If Ever I Cease to Love" as its anthem.

Errol Laborde, editor-in-chief of Renaissance Publishing, says his extensive research has indicated that Mardi Gras' three colors "are based on the laws of heraldry" and certainly not as simple as the common explanation that they represent "justice, faith and power."

The Mardi Gras tradition has been carried on in New Orleans for the last 320 years. In 1967, former WDSU-TV broadcaster Mel Leavitt, who freelanced as a Clarion Herald columnist, wrote about the origins of Mardi Gras. Leavitt

interviewed the captain of Rex, whose identity was known only to the members of the krewe.

"It is fair to say the background (of Mardi Gras) is religious," the Rex captain said. "Certainly, it was reasonable to have a day of accepted license before a period of restraint or Lent. ... So, in New Orleans, the European custom of celebrating before Lent was carried on with general enthusiasm as far back as 1837. We probably obtained our scheme of things – our parades, for example – from Mobile, where the Cowbellions paraded even before we did here. However, we have continued the custom with greater enthusiasm. ... It wasn't planned – it happened. It's not a ritual – it's a spirit."

Call it the *storm* before the *calm*.

The French colony of Louisiana recognized only one religion – Catholicism – so it was natural that the early colonists would carry on the traditions of feasting on Mardi Gras in advance of the sacrifices of Lent, said Dr. Emilie Leumas, archivist of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

"Families would eat everything in their pantry because

the next day was the season of Lent," Leumas said. "They would clean out their cupboards because if they left things for six weeks, it would spoil."

The juxtaposition of party and deprivation fit New Orleans well. "New Orleans itself was known as a party city from the beginning," and it was always pervasively Catholic, Leumas said.

The Acadian migration to Louisiana began in earnest in the 1780s, bringing new traditions of the Mardi Gras chicken runs and the "courier de bois," the forest runners who would run "from place to place" and provide a chicken for every pot.

"The church let people celebrate in their own way," Leumas said, laughing, "because they knew the hook would be the next day – Ash Wednesday. And that's still the case. The only time of the year Bourbon Street is cleaned at midnight is on Mardi Gras."





MEL LEAVITT

WHAT'S THIS MARDI GRAS DEAL ALL ABOUT?

Mel Leavitt interviews the captain of Rex Feb. 2, 1967 Clarion Herald

Q. How does our Mardi Gras differ from carnivals around the world?

A. In most places, carnivals are observed mainly by laborers and factory workers. It is their great day to enjoy. In some areas, carnivals are commercial gimmicks to attract visitors. New Orleans' Mardi Gras is neither. It is enjoyed by the haves and have-nots. It is not a tourist attraction, but rather a series of private parties in which others are invited to join. There is no central planning unit, and this is part of its charm. It is spontaneous.

Q. Why so much secrecy about Carnival? Your identity is not known.

A. Mardi Gras is largely built on the psychology of surprise and expectation. No one is seeking fame or prestige by the part. We know that people are more interested – even curious – about things mysterious. Each year there is great speculation over who is king and queen of each ball. There is great interest in learning who will be King of Carnival. If his name were announced in advance of his visit to his favorite capital (as we like to call it), it would be

MR. MARDI GRAS

Before he became known as “Mr. Mardi Gras,” float maker Blaine Kern was a desk-bound student at Holy Name of Mary Elementary School in Algiers, doodling in his notebooks and daydreaming about the world.

“I read more books than any of my classmates, but I was a poor student because all I wanted to do was read and draw pictures,” said Kern during an interview with the Clarion Herald in 2001. “I read a lot of Jules Verne, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and H.G. Wells, so I was traveling to the moon way before Sputnik!” Kern said.

So began the career path of Kern, whose extravagant, colorful and ever-growing floats became the toast of parades not only in

New Orleans, but on several continents.

Kern learned about the power of art early in his life, as an apprentice in his father's sign-painting business during the Great Depression.

At age 19, he would discover the monetary value of his artistic talents: his mother needed an operation, but instead of charging the family in dollars and cents, family friend Dr. Henry La Rocca commissioned Kern to paint a mural for his hospital. Dr. La Rocca also happened to be captain of the Algiers-based Krewe of Alla parade.

“He asked me if I could design the parade,” said Kern of his first job, involving the creation of 11 floats, in 1947.

Over the decades, Kern's company expanded to include building floats and fanciful figures for pageants, parades, sporting events,

theme parks and casinos in Asia, Europe and North America. It also branched out to manufacture items such as parade throws, the tractors that pull floats and even costumes.

“I wouldn't be anything without God almighty,” Kern added. “Whatever you like doing most – whether it's working in charcoal, tempera, acrylics, pen and ink – practice, practice, practice. The only thing that makes you better is tenacity. If you've got that, you can achieve anything with God's help.”



Above: A 1934 children's float depicting the arrival of the Ursuline Sisters. (Courtesy Charles L. Franck Studio at The Historic New Orleans Collection)



CHARLES 'PIE' DUFOUR

FAT TUESDAY PREDATES GREEKS

From a treasury of Mardi Gras facts by columnist Pie Dufour, distributed by the city's public information office in 1966

What is Carnival?

In New Orleans, the Carnival season traditionally starts with Twelfth Night, which is Jan. 6 and, liturgically, the Feast of the Epiphany. It is the traditional date of the arrival of the Magi or Three Kings of the East at the manger in Bethlehem. And Carnival ends in New Orleans on Mardi Gras with the stroke of midnight, which ushers in Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent.

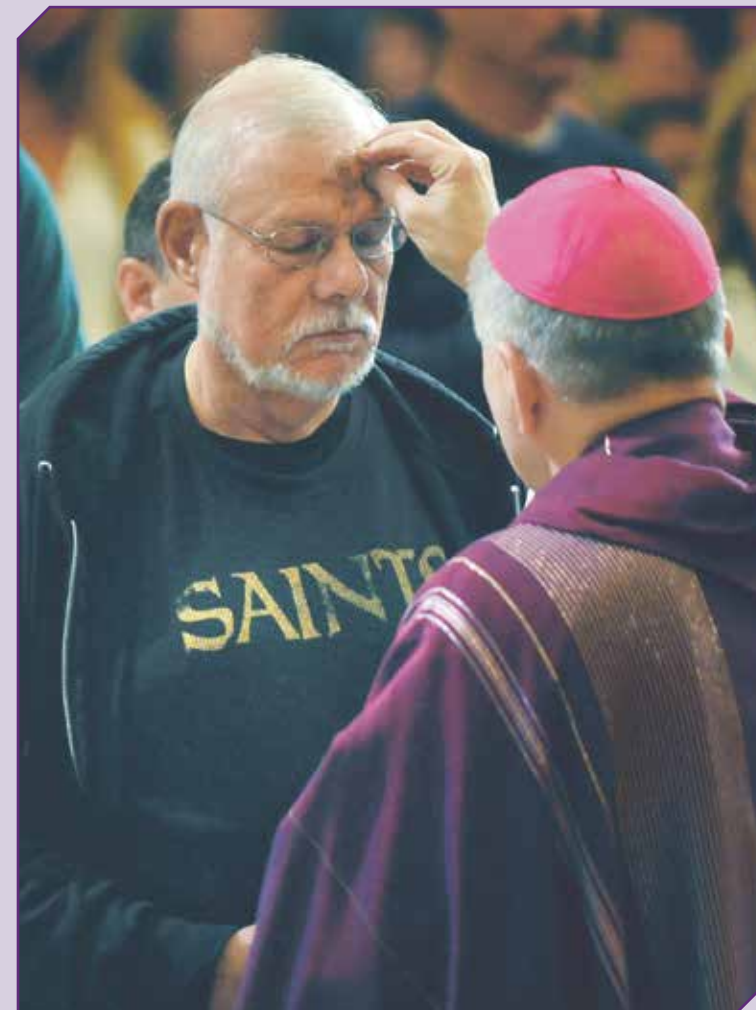
pagan spring festivals that antedated even the Greeks, who transmitted them to the Romans from whom the early Church Fathers borrowed them and recast them in a Christian mold.

was the final fling before the austerities of Lent. The very name in France, “Fat Tuesday,” connoted the day when the “Boeuf Gras” or “Fatted Ox” was slaughtered and feasted upon by the Carnival merry-makers.

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Why is Mardi Gras?
In the Middle Ages it



ASH WEDNESDAY: IT'S NOT JUST FOR CATHOLICS

➤ **ASH WEDNESDAY** is the first day of Lent. Ashes – what remains after a fire – are imposed on the forehead in the sign of the cross to signify the penitential aspect of the Lenten season. The ashes come from burning of blessed palm branches that were used the previous year on Palm Sunday. One of two prayers usually is offered: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return”; or “Repent and believe in the Gospel.” For those who work in downtown New Orleans, here is a list of CBD churches and their Ash Wednesday schedules. **Non-Catholics are welcome to receive ashes during the Ash Wednesday Masses.**

➤ **ST. LOUIS CATHEDRAL** will offer Masses at 12:05 p.m. and 5 p.m. Archbishop Gregory Aymond will preside at the 12:05 p.m. Mass. The sacrament of reconciliation will be available from 11:30-11:50 a.m.

➤ **IMMACULATE CONCEPTION CHURCH**, 130 Baronne St., Masses will be at 7:30 a.m., noon, 4:15 p.m. and 5:30 p.m., with confessions heard from 11 a.m. to noon; 3:15-4:15 p.m.

➤ **OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE CHURCH**, 411 N. Rampart St., will offer Masses at 7 a.m., noon, 4 and 6 p.m. Confessions will be heard at 11:30 a.m.

➤ **ST. JOSEPH CHURCH**, 1802 Tulane Ave: Masses at noon and 6:30 p.m. No confessions on Ash Wednesday.

➤ **ST. PATRICK CHURCH**, 724 Camp St., will have Masses at 11 and 11:45 a.m., and 12:30 and 5:30 p.m. Confession will be available before 11 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. Masses.

WHAT DOES SHROVE TUESDAY MEAN?

➤ **FATHER MARK RAPHAEL**, a church historian, says “Shrove” Tuesday is derived from the old English word “scrifan,” which means “to impose as a penance.” Since the Middle Ages, Catholics ideally would make their individual confessions after feasting on Mardi Gras as a way of preparing for Lent. Catholics who went to confession on Mardi Gras were said to have been “shriven.”

HOW IS THE DATE OF MARDI GRAS DETERMINED?

➤ **MARDI GRAS ALWAYS FALLS 46 DAYS BEFORE EASTER**, which is why it moves from year to year. The Catholic Church's Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) fixed the date of Easter as the first Sunday following the full moon after the vernal equinox. Mardi Gras can fall as early as Feb. 3 and as late as March 9.

WHAT IS LENT?

➤ **LENT IS A 40-DAY LITURGICAL SEASON OF FASTING**, special prayer and almsgiving in preparation for Easter. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the name “Lent” comes from the Middle English *lenten* and Anglo-Saxon *lencten*, meaning spring; its more primitive church name was the “forty days,” *tessarakoste* in Greek – likely in imitation of Jesus' 40-day fast in the desert before beginning his public ministry. Adult Catholics are expected to fast (one full meal with other small sustenance allowed) and abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday; they are asked to abstain from meat on all Fridays of Lent. Many Catholic parishes and schools offer Friday fish fries. A full list is available at www.clarionherald.org. The Clarion Herald also publishes its “Holy Smoke” meatless recipe section in six issues during Lent: www.clarionherald.org.



AS CHRIST FEEDS US, WE FEED OTHERS



During Lent, Second Harvest is partnering with the Archdiocese of New Orleans to collect nonperishable food items for those served by Second Harvest Food Bank. If your parish would like to participate in this food drive, please **visit *no-hunger.org/Lent***



"I was hungry and you gave me food" (MT. 25)

Mercy is Endless



An Affiliated Ministry of the Archdiocese of New Orleans



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To learn more about the mission of Second Harvest, visit *no-hunger.org*