



The enduring traditions of Holy Week in Old New Orleans

By Gayle Nolan
Contributing writer

For 18th-century French and later Creole New Orleanians, Lent was a special time of fast and abstinence, meditation, prayer and good works. Social life closed down entirely during the entire 40-day period: the Old Opera House was shuttered, and music was not heard even in private parlors during Lent.

Almost from the time of its founding, the New Orleans Catholic community looked forward to having special preachers or guest priests for Lenten missions, a custom that remains even today in many New Orleans churches.

Roger Baudier, the premiere mid-20th-century chronicler of Catholic history and customs in New Orleans, portrayed New Orleans Catholic Lenten customs through vignettes based on his own family and



Photo by Peter Finney Jr. | CLARION HERALD

The decades-long Catholic tradition of making the Way of the Cross on Good Friday – and walking to nine churches – has its roots in the early New Orleans Catholic community.

his observations and interviews with colorful characters.

Orphaned at the age of 6, Baudier was raised with the help of elderly aunts who

filled his life with Creole stories and traditions, which later found their way into his weekly column “Historic Old New Orleans” (Catholic Action of the South: 1933-1960).

A popular series entitled “Creole Lenten Customs” appeared in the New Orleans Item newspaper in 1952, causing not a few locals to claim that he had been writing about their own families. Baudier’s unpublished notes and published articles provide for us today a glimpse of New Orleans Lenten customs as they were in the 18th and 19th centuries.

When the Spanish clergy arrived in New Orleans in

1772, they were horrified by practices the French considered “ancient” and “venerable” – such as taking boiled milk in the potent black coffee for which New Orleans is famous. Milk was considered a “food,” and the French cafe au lait was considered a laxity by the Spanish.

Confessional linguistics

What could be done, however, when the friars preached in Spanish and the people confessed their sins in French?

One practice introduced by the Spanish, however, still prevails today in New Orleans – the custom of walking to church on Good Friday. The Spanish soldiers would not allow the French to ride in their carriages to St. Louis Cathedral on that day: On Good Friday, no wheels turn! On that day, el Señor Jesus Cristo walked to Calvary, and on that day also the French would walk!

Eventually, the custom of “making the nine churches on Good Friday” evolved, and it only “counts” if one walks.

With the influx of Americans after 1803, the French and Creoles held even more strongly to their Catholic Lenten traditions, especially during Holy Week, referring to those who ignored the customs as “des Visigoths” and “des gens du Nord” (Northern people).

Holy Week began with selecting “good” palms, those without withered or brown fronds, to bring to St. Louis Cathedral – nothing was

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Congratulations on 300 years of faith!

From Archbishop Paul S. Coakley, Archbishop Emeritus Eusebius J. Beltran, the clergy, religious and the faithful of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City.

Blessed Stanley Rother

1717: The St. Paul's School in Covington opens, Sept. 14.

1718: Bishop John Marius Laval becomes auxiliary bishop, Nov. 29.

1720: Dominicans open Rosaryville.

1722: Groundbreaking for the Poor Clare Monastery on Henry Clay, Aug. 12.

1724: Ursuline Academy moves to new location on State Street, Sept. 7.

1725: The first Louisiana Council of the Knights of Peter Claver is established at Opelousas, Nov. 17.

1726: Archbishop James J. Blenk hosts the National Catholic Educational Association convention in New Orleans, the first major Catholic educational convention to be held in New Orleans.