



New Orleans: A city of paradoxes, vibrant faith

By Bruce Nolan
Contributing writer

Nearly 300 years ago New Orleans drew its first breath as a Catholic city – Catholic by order of the French crown. It drew its second breath as an importer of black slaves kidnapped from western Africa.

Its first citizens were not pious emigrants willing to risk it all for God, like the grim and dutiful Puritans of Massachusetts. Rather, New Orleans began as a state-sponsored real estate scheme; most of its first residents were deadbeats, pickpockets, hookers and whatever other unfortunates the crown could vacuum out of French jails to populate its investment.

Interracial marriage was never legal in colonial New Orleans. Yet its streets quickly filled with mixed-race men and women, free and enslaved. They made its music, hammered its decorative iron and sewed, cooked, drained and planted.

A church dominates

Such were the flaws of a city that nonetheless conspicuously planted a major church dominating its central square.

At once sensuous and pious, tolerant and also sometimes cruel, New Orleans



Photo by Frank J. Methe | CLARION HERALD

Venerable Henriette Delille is memorialized on a plaque behind St. Louis Cathedral.

after 300 years is no longer a majority Catholic city. Yet the Catholic DNA of its birth still shapes its culture – although New Orleans Catholicism is distinctively local, which is to say ... complicated.

Its Catholicism is not the fierce Irish Catholicism of Boston, nor the sweetly devotional Hispanic Catholicism of the American Southwest.

A unique Catholicism

In 1987, near the end of a long and distinguished career as a priest-sociologist, Jesuit Father Joseph Fichter tried to sketch for an interviewer the contours of New Orleans Catholicism: Pious, yes, Father Fichter said. Life-giving and authentic, yes. But wholly unlike, say, stout, square-cornered Midwestern Catholicism.

For in New Orleans faith is infused with European, African and Caribbean sensuality.

“What other people regard as sins of the flesh,” Father Fichter chuckled, “around here they’re not usually at the top of the list.”

Partly he meant that in New Orleans, Catholicism is both reverent and easy-going.

Ashes are serious business

On Good Friday, many hundreds of the faithful still make traditional foot pilgrimages to nine churches. Its Catholic community still produces St. Joseph altars, and on All Saints’ Day freshens the tombs of its departed souls. On Ash Wednesday, thousands still end the work day with the shadow of ashes on their brows. And in the 1990s, many hundreds of its citizens trekked 5,000 miles to Medjugorje, seeking spiritual rejuvenation in a rocky Croatian village where many believed heaven seemed to be reaching down to touch the earth.

Yet faith-driven asceticism gets little traction in New Orleans, which deeply loves pleasures of the flesh. It is the city of Mardi Gras. New Orleans both blesses and is

blessed by the extravagance of its food, whether spilled across newspapers on a backyard table or glistening on fine china over linen. Although traditionally religious, it is the only city in the country that could have birthed jazz – primal, unorthodox, hot and sexy.

Consider that in the first half of the 19th century, two remarkable women lived within blocks of each other. They may have known each other. Quite likely they knew of each other. Both were authentic New Orleans Catholics.

Care for the enslaved

One was Henriette Delille, a French-speaking, mixed-race woman of deep piety. She consecrated her life to the merciful care of the elderly and outcast enslaved. Her image in stained glass graces the baptistry at St. Louis Cathedral, where she frequently stood as godmother to African children. Her legacy lives in the work of the Sisters of the Holy Family.

The other was Marie Laveau, mixed-race and French-speaking as well, baptized by the legendary Père Antoine himself. Laveau likewise godmothered babies and frequently was seen in prayer at the cathedral, even as she also held sway as the legendary voodoo queen of New Orleans.

She, too, was known as a woman of great charity. Her spirituality had two poles: She alternated between Mass at the cathedral and voodoo ceremonies on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain.

Both women endure in the memory of New Orleans which, unlike other cities, finds surprising room for both the sacred and the profane.

Delille is a candidate for canonization as a saint of the Catholic Church. A bronze medallion embedded in the sidewalk behind the cathedral memorializes her work.

And Laveau, the voodoo queen, lies today in consecrated ground in a Catholic cemetery. She is the star attraction in the Archdiocese of New Orleans’ St. Louis No. 1, which jealously guards her vault against depredations of tourists.

Hers is the third most-visited grave in the United States, behind those of John F. Kennedy and Elvis.

New Orleans seems to offer endless possibilities for accommodation between faith and flesh.

Some years ago, a New Orleans Irish heritage organization, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, was planning its major annual St. Patrick’s Day banquet, which, as usual, fell on a Friday in Lent.

In New York, Boston and other Irish strongholds, Hibernians were known to ask their archbishops – who, after all, would be guests at the head table – whether they might grant a dispensation of Lenten discipline to allow a Friday serving of that Irish sacrament, corned beef. Most complied.

Not an issue in New Orleans. In 2000, the Hibernians’ then-president, Judge James McKay, was asked whether he had that year approached the archbishop with such a request.

“Why ask permission to eat corned beef in the seafood capital of the world?” the judge responded.

So, the New Orleans Hibernians that year submitted to the rigor of Catholic Lent. And, in so doing, indulged themselves with blackened red snapper and crab cakes.

“Some penance, huh?” said McKay.

Welcome to New Orleans. Bruce Nolan is a former reporter with *The Times-Picayune* who covered the religious landscape of New Orleans for the last 18 years of his career. He’s currently a part-time tour guide who tries to explain New Orleans to tourists.

Sisters of St. Joseph
first came to New Orleans from France in 1854, establishing schools, hospitals, an orphanage, and other ministries.

Today,
our presence and work in New Orleans continues here and throughout the U.S.

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our dear neighbors!

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