

A Moveable Feast It's Not

Most people in New Orleans think of Ash Wednesday as the day after Mardi Gras, but the proper perspective would be to view the city's most colorful holiday as the day before Ash Wednesday. Although Mardi Gras (also known as Shrove Tuesday) is celebrated on dates ranging from February 3 to as late as March 9, it is not technically a moveable feast at all. There are numerous pronouncements to the contrary, but Mardi Gras is not a holiday on any church calendar. It is the day before one. A moveable feast it's not, and yet it moves.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent and 46 days before Easter, the original moveable feast. So why is it that Christmas and Twelfth Night always fall on the same date each year while Easter and Mardi Gras move? Picture the following elaborate procession:

Resplendent in purple and gold, he made a grand ceremonial entrance. He "proceeded through the midst" of those assembled "clothed in raiment which glittered as it were with rays of light, reflecting the glowing radiance of a purple robe, and adorned with the brilliant splendor of gold and precious stones".

One might think that these were the words of Henri Schindler describing Mardi Gras royalty, but this observation was written by Eusebius of Caesarea (considered the father of Church history) about the Emperor Constantine's majestic presence at an event that happened back in the year 325, the First Council of Nicaea. It was there that the feasts were made to move.

Like so many Christian traditions, the concept of Mardi Gras has even more ancient roots. Many of the customs of Easter have their origins in pagan observances of spring and rebirth. Mardi Gras itself has connections to a variety of pre-Christian sources including the Roman *Lupercalia* (which also has ties to Valentine's Day). Overindulgence was commonplace, and masks were soon introduced to hide misconduct.

Besides formulating the Nicene Creed, the early Church fathers were zealous in attracting Christian converts and they wanted to find a way to compete with existing pagan feasts by benchmarking them to major Christian events. Before 325, there was no official celebration of Christ's birth; and Easter was being observed by some Christians on Passover (a lunar holiday) and by others the Sunday following. This was based on the fact that the Last Supper occurred on or around Passover, with Christ's crucifixion following on Friday and the Resurrection on Sunday.

The First Council of Nicaea wanted to formalize the date of Easter and did so by creating a moveable feast to be celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon after March 21, the start of spring. The Council also decided to link the birth of Christ to the winter solstice and make December 25 the Feast of the Nativity, a non-moveable unambiguous date (except for the fact that they really didn't know the exact birth date). Also considered were the pagan feasts of *Saturnalia* and *Sol Invictus* with which to compete.

Easter, however, started to do some serious moving. The Julian calendar relied on the leap year to keep the seasons from drifting date-wise, but the correction only worked for a while. By the 1500s, the vernal equinox was occurring more than a week before March 21. The Julian calendar had been erring one day for every 310 years.

Pope Gregory XIII solved this by eliminating ten days from the calendar with October 4, 1582, being followed by October 15, 1582. The following spring sprang back to March 21, and Easter was back in place. To rectify future problems, Pope Gregory did away with leap years for every year that is evenly divisible by 100 (unless it is also divisible by 400). That's why there was a February 29 in 2000, but there won't be one in 2100.

Not all countries adopted the Gregorian calendar at the same time. Britain and its empire (including its colonies in what is now the United States) didn't do so until 1752, by which time it needed a correction of 11 days. George Washington was actually born on February 11, which then became February 22 after the change. Today, he and Lincoln share President's Day. Eastern Orthodox churches never adopted Gregory's calendar, so their Easter still follows the Julian calendar.

Theoretically, Easter falls on the Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox. But in practice, the Church's methods are more imprecise. That's because the equinox still doesn't fall precisely on March 21, and the Church uses traditional tables (rather than modern day astronomy) to calculate the dates of those full moons.

Mardi Gras has been observed in Louisiana since Iberville and Bienville entered the mouth of the Mississippi River on March 2, 1699, Lundi Gras (also not technically a moveable feast) and made camp the following day at a place about 60 miles downriver from New Orleans. Iberville recorded in the ship's journal that they had encamped "on a point on the right of the river which we have named Mardi Gras" (the first place name on Louisiana's mainland).

For most New Orleanians the calculations by which Mardi Gras is determined are all too complicated. Some times it's early (February 5 in 2008), while other times it's late (March 8 in 2011). So they read the paper and just show up for the "greatest free show on earth". And what a show it is!

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New Orleans Nostalgia
"The Moveable Feast"
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