

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The 55th Annual Red Mass sponsored by the Catholic Bishops of the State of Louisiana and the Saint Thomas More Catholic Lawyers Association will be held on Monday, October 1, 2007, at 9:30 a.m. at the Saint Louis Cathedral with a reception following in Saint Anthony's Garden behind the Cathedral. This year's celebrant is the Most Reverend Alfred C. Hughes, D.D., Archbishop of New Orleans. The homilist is Bishop Shelton Fabre.

Saint Louis and the Red Mass

Soon after the founding of New Orleans, its new parish church was dedicated to the memory of Louis IX, sainted King of France. Today's Saint Louis Cathedral and the people of an indomitable city continue to remember their patron saint in many meaningful ways.

Born in Poissy (outside of Paris) on April 25, 1214, Louis IX became king in 1226 upon the death of his father, Louis VIII. Blanche of Castile, mother of this young monarch, became regent. Historians generally agree that Louis assumed the throne in his own right in 1234, the same year he married Marguerite of Provence by whom he would father eleven children. France's only king-made-saint (canonized in 1297) led the Seventh Crusade to the Holy Land in 1248-1250 and died on another crusade near Tunis on August 25, 1270.

According to his biographers, Saint Louis led an exemplary life with much time dedicated to fasting, prayer and penance. These long hours were spent in private without the knowledge of his subjects. He was a great believer in justice, and he instituted the *curia regis* (or court of the king) during his reign. This was a fully organized court of justice with competent experts and judicial commissions known as *parlements* meeting at regular periods. In addition, many Europeans willingly accepted the sage judgments of Louis IX as an international judicial arbiter. Treaties and arbitrations in which he participated proved this saintly king to be above all a lover of peace.

Because of his reputation in the field of justice, Saint Louis' portrait hangs in the chamber of the United States House of Representatives. And in the Supreme Court, high above the nine sitting justices' mahogany bench, stands Saint Louis in a white marble frieze among the other great lawgivers of history. There too is Napoleon Bonaparte who said that his glory was "not to have won forty battles" but "what will live eternally, is my Civil Code." Louisiana history is well represented in the marble carvings of our nation's highest court.

Saint Louis was known far and wide for his charity. He gave food to the hungry and cared for the sick. Homeless beggars were fed from the king's table, and he ate after them what remained. He personally cared for their needs, looked after the lepers and fed daily over one hundred of his poor and needy subjects. Saint Thomas Aquinas was in and out of Paris and a frequent guest of Saint Louis.

Saint Louis' biographer, Joinville, has portrayed the king as a man of good common sense, boundless energy, kind yet playful and always guarding against the temptation to be imperious.

Saint Louis was also a great lover of architecture, and it was under his patronage that the *Collège de la Sorbonne* was founded as the seat of the theological faculty of Paris. He also built (with its magnificent stained glass windows) the beautiful *Sainte Chapelle*, chapel of the Order of Advocates and the site of the first recorded Red Mass in the year 1245.

The tradition of the Red Mass goes back many centuries (even before 1245) and was offered to invoke the Holy Spirit as a source of wisdom, understanding, fortitude and justice. It has officially opened the judicial year of the Sacred Roman Rota, the Tribunal of the Holy See. The Mass is so named for the red vestments of the celebrants (as well as the tongues of fire descended upon the Apostles), and also the red robes traditionally worn by medieval judges. The tradition continued in England about 1310 during the reign of Edward II and was attended at the opening of each term of Court by all members of the Bench and Bar. The ceremony was discontinued for many years until 1928 when New York celebrated a Red Mass with Cardinal Patrick Hayes. Sydney, Australia, reinstated the practice in 1931, and the Catholic judges in England gather each year at London's Westminster Cathedral.

One of the better-known Red Masses is celebrated at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington, D.C., on the day before the first Monday in October (the day the Supreme Court convenes). Sponsored by the John Carroll Society, the District of Columbia Red Mass will celebrate its fifty-fourth year in 2007. New Orleans' Red Mass at the St. Louis Cathedral will celebrate its fifty-fifth. In both locations members of all faiths are welcome, and in the Capital many justices, judges, lawyers, the Cabinet and foreign diplomats attend. President Bush (an evangelical Protestant) and Justice Breyer (who is Jewish) have attended. All come together in their capacity as private individuals, rather than government representatives.

The Red Mass has also been celebrated annually in California, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Georgia. Other cities in other states are increasingly following the tradition. The New Orleans observation of the Solemn Votive Red Mass is an opportunity for all who seek justice to pray for God's blessing and spiritual guidance. It is sponsored each year by the Catholic Bishops of the State of Louisiana and the St. Thomas More Catholic Lawyers Association.

Archbishop Francis B. Schulte once said "What is unique here is the presence of so many members of the judiciary, state and federal, who process in their robes into the venerable Cathedral" ... a Cathedral named for a saint who constantly sought justice and loved his fellow man: Saint Louis, King of France.

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