

‘St. Joseph Altars’ resonate for New Orleans native

According to the dictionary, altars are sacred places.

Growing up in New Orleans, altars had a very special place in our young lives. A New Orleans tradition is the erection of the “St. Joseph Altar.” Of course, this altar honors the foster father of Jesus and is a celebration on March 19, his feast. I don’t know how it started, but what I do know is that as long as I can remember, my mother or aunt took the children to visit the St. Joseph altars. These altars were in the homes of various people throughout the city.

The altars were a special way to say “thank you” to St. Joseph for granting a favor or favors. The St. Joseph altar is decorated with food: vegetables, fruits, nuts, various breads, seafood and cooked dishes as well. A prominent place on the table was a St. Joseph’s statue holding the child Jesus. I don’t ever remember seeing any meat on the altar.

In the morning, a priest comes to bless the altar. On the table is an empty glass dish which is used for receiving donations. At the end of the day the money and food are given to the poor. Also, there is always a dish of St. Joseph beans on the altar. Traditionally you are to place a bean in your purse and St. Joseph will see that the purse is never empty.

Every year we visited three or four altars. In recent years, however, St. Joseph altars are erected in parish halls. Another New Orleans event associated with St. Joseph is the return of the Indians. Indians are a big part of the Mardi Gras tradition, and on the feast of St. Joseph, the men again put on the Mardi Gras costumes and parade in the streets of New Orleans.

Yet, another New Orleans tradition in many Catholic homes is the presence of a home altar. This altar is considered a holy object and a place to keep your prayer books, rosary beads and holy cards. And of course, your holy water bottle. Holy water is very popular in New Orleans. Along with an oil lamp, it is always used when

the power goes out and also during the hurricane season.

I remember my family's altar very well. It was made of wood by my maternal grandfather, who gave it to my mom as one of her wedding presents. The altar was approximately 20 inches high, about 13 or 14 inches wide, and about 7 or 8 inches deep with a cross on top.

One of my favorite pictures in the altar was a picture of two little children crossing a wooden bridge with some of the slats missing. Behind them was a guardian angel, protecting them. I grew up saying the Guardian Angel Prayer:

*Angel of God, my guardian dear
To whom God's love commits me here.
Ever this day be at my side
To light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen.*

While going through some material recently, I discovered the Guardian Angel picture. Memories popped through my mind.

In my room, I have a three-shelf wire bookcase. The top shelf holds my current reading material, office book, holy water bottle and a statue of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha given to me by the late Gov. William Donald Schaefer. The thought surfaced: Why not make an altar? I did. Between the statue and the holy water bottle, I placed the picture of the Guardian Angel. Now, the top of my bookshelf is a "Convent Altar." At night when I am ready to go to sleep, along with my angel prayer, I add another from childhood:

*Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord, my soul to keep
If I die before I wake
I pray the Lord, my soul to take. Amen*

St. Joseph, our protector, pray for us!

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