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Catholic Travel

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL IN THE HEART OF FUN-LOVING NEW ORLEANS

BY AARON LEVENTHAL

Any visit to New Orleans must include a tour of St. Louis Cathedral, the Crescent City's iconic architectural gem. Located on Jackson Square in the heart of the French Quarter, it holds the distinction of being the oldest Catholic cathedral in continuous use in the United States.

Dating back to 1727, the cathedral has always been a work in progress. The French originally built it as a triple-spire sanctuary on the highest ground they could find in the city. The church was dedicated to St. Louis in honor of Louis XV, the reigning French king. It was built over several graves, including that of Adrienne de Pauger, who planned the



original city of New Orleans.

Louisiana politically passed to the Spanish in 1766, and the first Spaniard missionaries arrived six years later. In 1793, the church was raised to the status of cathedral (bishop's church) when the Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas was created. From 1727 to the 1840s, it was the only Catholic church in New Orleans.

A devastating fire in 1788 destroyed more than 80 percent of the city's buildings, including the cathedral. Construction of the new church was completed six years later, and the custom of selected burials in the cathedral's walls below the sanctuary was continued.

Louisiana passed to a new nation in 1803, and St. Louis Cathedral became part of the United States, no longer able to rely on the financial resources of a king or royal government for support. During the ensuing decade, the side towers were capped with small spires, and four large granite fire cones were added to the façade's top. A decade later, a belfry was erected in the center of the façade.

In 1850, New Orleans became the seat of an archdiocese which included Louisiana, Alabama, the Florida Panhandle, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Texas. Restoration efforts took more than a half-million bricks, with work done on the interior and altar. Through the next century, major renovations continued to take place because of hurricane damage and various historic celebrations.

In 1964, Pope Paul VI raised St. Louis Cathedral to the rank of minor basilica, citing its antiquity and splendor and the historic events it had hosted. On Sept. 12, 1987, Pope John Paul II worshipped

in the cathedral, which was elevated to Cathedral-Basilica of St. Louis. In 2003, a cultural heritage center was inaugurated, combining the cathedral with the nearby Old Ursuline Convent, the oldest building in the Mississippi Valley.

Recently, Hurricane Katrina's devastation caused only minor damage to the cathedral organ, and no flooding actually occurred. A new Holtkamp organ is used for concerts by world-renowned organists from Europe and the United States. St. Joseph's altar has been restored. Flowers, as well as food for the poor, are brought to St. Anthony's garden behind the cathedral. Excavation, funded by the Getty Foundation at selected sites in the garden, has revealed the city's earliest architectural structure, containing Native American and other religious artifacts.

Mass is celebrated seven days a week at 7:30 a.m., on Saturdays at 5 p.m., and on Sundays at 9 and 11 a.m. All services are in English.

The Cathedral-Basilica of St. Louis is located at 615 Pere Antoine Alley. For more information, visit www.stlouis-cathedral.org or call (504) 525-9585.

Columbus-based travel writer Aaron Leventhal has developed a new small-group travel service to bring people to the destinations he writes about in his travel columns. Check it out at www.leventhaltravel.com. Photos by Beth Ervin Leventhal

Top photo: The Cathedral-Basilica of St. Louis is the oldest Catholic Cathedral in continuous use in the United States

Bottom photo: Dating back to 1727, the cathedral in New Orleans has always been a work in progress

GOOD EATS

in the Big Easy

New Orleans is back. Hurricane Katrina could not damage the indomitable spirit of the residents of this remarkable city dedicated to the pleasures of music, food, and good times.

The city's colorful, historic past has influenced its architecture, its music and, especially, its food. From its founding by French Creoles almost 300 years ago to its Spanish, Yankee, and African influences, the Big Easy is unique in retaining an Old World ambiance and a certain *joie de vivre* found nowhere else in America.

Orleanians have elevated cooking and dining to a fine art. Cajun cooking originates from the French Acadians who migrated from Nova Scotia in the 19th century. Robust, peppery, and loaded with fat and flour, Cajun specialties include crawfish etoufee, andouille sausage, and jambalaya.

Creole cooking, on the other hand, is more urban and less spicy, created by



people of mixed French, Spanish, Caribbean, and African origins. The Creoles have given us red beans and rice, beignets, and gumbo.

Before my wife, Beth, and I recently went to New Orleans, I asked Henry Butcher, owner and chef of the Creole Kitchen in Columbus' Mount Vernon Plaza, for his suggestions about where to eat. Henry is a Louisiana native and former New Orleans cook, and he recommended a half-dozen restaurants, many of which are local favorites.

Mother's could have the best home-style cooking in the city. The laid-back Midtown diner, established in 1938, specializes in gumbo, caramelized black ham, grits, and red beans and rice. According to its owner/chef, Jerry Amato, "New Orleans is unique because it has an authentic regional orientation. All of us use the same basic ingredients – red fish, oysters, crawfish, red beans, rice, and plantains. That makes New Orleans a whole lot different than, let's say, New York or San Francisco." (401 Poydras St., 504-523-9656)

Arnaud's, a French Quarter landmark since 1918, specializes in authentic haute-Creole cookery. Known for its Shrimp Arnaud (remoulade), oyster stew, and rack of lamb, Arnaud's also has a distinguished wine cellar. (813 Bienville St., 504-523-5433)

Camellia Grill is near Tulane University on the St. Charles Avenue streetcar line. This classic, counter-only diner serves what could be the best cheeseburgers and chili-cheese omelets anywhere. (626 S. Carrollton Ave., 504-309-2679)

Court of Two Sisters was the French Quarter residence of the royal governor of colonial Louisiana in 1726. Its daily jazz brunch buffet from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. has more than 60 items, including Eggs Benedict, standing rib roast, and



duck à l'orange. (613 Royal St., 504-522-7261)

Dooky Chase's, established in 1946, is a Creole dining landmark in the heart of the 'hood, with an impressive collection of African American art. It is famous for its fried chicken and catfish, sausages, mac and cheese, greens, and other classic soul food dishes. (2301 Orleans Ave., 504-821-0600)

Gumbo Shop, just around the corner from St. Louis Cathedral, is located in a 1795 French Quarter building. This casual dining favorite serves Creole favorites from seafood okra gumbo, crawfish etoufee, and shrimp Creole to po-boys, macque choux corn, and hot bread pudding with whiskey sauce. (630 St. Peter St., 504-525-1486)

New Orleans attractions: Sightseeing is the perfect way to work up an appetite between meals. Check out the Audubon Zoological Gardens, Jean Lafitte Swamp Tours, the St. Charles Avenue streetcar line, above-ground cemeter-

ies and voodoo temples, Natchez Riverboat Cruises operated by Gray Line Tours (800-233-2628), and the oldest continuously operating street railway in America, dating back 150 years. For more information, contact the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-800-672-6124 or www.neworleanscvb.com.

Hubbard Mansion Bed & Breakfast is our choice for the place to stay in New Orleans. Located on historic St. Charles Avenue, the elegant Greek Revival home features five guest rooms, a carriage house, period antiques, and delectable Continental-plus breakfasts. (504-897-3535, www.hubbardmansion.com)

Top photo: New Orleans' music scene pours out of the clubs and into the streets

Top left: Travel writer Aaron Leventhal chats and dines with Jerry Amato, owner and chef of Mother's restaurant

Bottom left: The stately Hubbard Mansion Bed & Breakfast, on St. Charles Avenue, is located adjacent to the fabled streetcar line, which dates back 150 years



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