

Tridentine Community News

September 24, 2006

Bells

As you visit various Catholic churches, you no doubt have noticed the vast variance in the usage of bells. Many churches don't employ bells at all. Conversely, churches where the Tridentine Mass is offered tend to make extensive use of them. Larger historic churches like St. Josaphat often make good use of their tower bells. And in the extreme, some European churches ring their bells every quarter hour, 24 hours a day. (Note to travelers: If you visit Munich and stay in a hotel anywhere near the Frauenkirche downtown, bring along the best earplugs you can find.)

First, we need to acknowledge the temporal use of tower bells. In the era before clocks and watches were commonplace, tower bells, both in churches and civic buildings, made people aware of the time of day. In North America, those few churches that ring their bells today for timekeeping purposes usually do it only during daytime hours, lest they be accused of disturbing the peace.

Tower bells were also rung to alert the faithful that Holy Mass was about to begin, and to remind them to say the Angelus prayer. Even today, St. Josaphat's bells are set to ring at noon and 6:00 PM for just this purpose.



Sanctus Bells

During Holy Mass in the Tridentine Rite, there is plentiful use of bells. In fact, the Council of Trent mandated their use. The small bell(s) rung by an altar server are called Sanctus Bells, so named because they are rung three times at the beginning of the Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy), once with each of

the priest's recitation of the word "Sanctus." These may consist of a single bell or a multiple bell set. More bells does not necessarily mean better: St. Michael's has a beautiful six-bell Sanctus Bell set with Latin inscriptions, but despite its gorgeous appearance, it does not make a particularly mellifluous sound, hence a smaller four bell set is usually used.

Sanctus Bells are also rung at other points during the Mass. This is one of the few aspects of the Tridentine Mass where there is considerable, permissible variation from church to church. Most rubricists agree that bells are to be rung at the epiclesis, or *Hanc Ígitur*, of the Canon, where the priest brings his hands together over the chalice and invokes the Holy Ghost. This alerts the faithful of the forthcoming most holy consecration. Bells are also rung at each consecration, although opinions vary as to whether they should be rung 1-3-1 (genuflection, elevation, genuflection), 1-1-1, or 0-3-0. They are to be rung once at each of the celebrant's three *Dómine, non sum dignus* (Lord, I am not worthy) prayers. In practice, it may be impossible for the server to hear the celebrant recite this prayer or see his hand motions, therefore it may be skipped. Certain churches, especially those where the bells are not rung at the celebrant's *Dómine, non sum dignus*, ring them three times when the servers repeat this prayer after the *Ecce Agnus Dei*.

Less frequently, one may hear the bells rung at the Offertory, after the celebrant uncovers the chalice and offers the bread on the paten; at the conclusion of the Canon; and before the celebrant consumes the Precious Blood. Certain of these bell ringing moments are indicated in the margins of the ubiquitous Red Latin/English Missals. The publisher of this missal selected those in concordance with customs in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

During Benediction, Sanctus Bells are rung as the celebrant is blessing the faithful with the Blessed Sacrament, helping the faithful to appreciate the holiness of the action. One bell is rung for each crossing of the monstrance, in honor of the Blessed Trinity.

Originally, Sanctus Bells had a functional purpose: To alert the faithful of various key moments in the sacred liturgy. If people could not easily determine what was happening at the altar, either because of the silence of a Low Mass or because of an elaborate music program at a High Mass, the bells helped to orient them. Today, bells have more of a symbolic role, highlighting the sacred more so than alerting distracted faithful.

Other Bells

Sacristy Bell(s) are typically mounted on a wall outside the sacristy and/or at the rear of the church. They are rung by pulling a cord, to signal that Holy Mass is about to begin.

Some churches fortunate enough to have tower bells, including St. Josaphat, ring them at the consecrations, adding an ethereal dimension to this most solemn of moments, and alerting the neighborhood of something special and divine going on within. This is easy to do in today's era of electrification, but at St. Joseph Church, parishioners have elected to ring their tower bell by hand, bringing new meaning to the notion of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as a spiritual workout!



As a point of trivia, St. Josaphat Church has a unique historical item at the right side first step of the high altar: Underneath a brass plaque is a miniature keyboard, no longer functional. It allowed an altar server to play a melody on bells at the consecration. The Congregation of Sacred Rites issued a ruling that hanging gongs were no longer allowed to be used as Sanctus Bells, and simple hand bells were to be encouraged, thus the mini-carillon is long gone, and the little keyboard is just a historical curiosity.

Churches that don't use bells lose an opportunity to help the faithful appreciate the transcendent. The glory of the Roman Catholic Mass is well communicated by employing all of the "smells and bells" that Holy Mother Church allows. Humans are naturally attracted by beauty; bells are an important tool to remind ourselves of, and evangelize others with, the Real Presence of Our Lord at every Holy Mass.