

# The Ringing of the Bells

*The Roman Missal tolerates options and gives preference to the priest*



## By Father Paul Turner

"If appropriate" and "local custom" are the criteria for ringing bells during the Eucharistic prayer, according to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM). "A little before the consecration, if appropriate, a minister rings a small bell as a signal to the faithful. The minister also rings the small bell at each elevation by the priest, according to local custom" (150).

Predictably, opinions vary on what makes the bell "appropriate" and what constitutes "local custom." At some Masses, the faithful hear these bells; at others, they do not. Ultimately, it probably depends on a third criterion: the preference of the priest.

The reason for the first bell is clear: "a signal to the faithful." In the preconciliar Mass, when every priest recited the canon in Latin, using a low voice, his body turned toward the tabernacle and, concealing his hands from the faithful, the first bell provided an aural cue that the consecration was near.

Ringling a bell for the elevations developed during a period of history when the faithful received Communion only rarely. They fulfilled their obligation to attend

Sunday Mass if they were present for what was then considered the three principal parts: the offertory, the consecration and the priest's Communion. Their own Communion was not integral to the celebration. The bells informed them that one of these principal parts was underway.

Because many of the faithful did not receive Communion, the highlight of the Mass for them was the consecration and

see the elevation. The sound contributed to the celebratory, spiritual moment.

Today, the Missal expects more of the people. References to the three principal parts of the Mass have vanished; people are expected to be present for the entire Mass from start to finish, including the entire Liturgy of the Word and the dismissal. Furthermore, the meaning of the Eucharistic prayer "is that the whole congregation of the faithful joins with Christ in confessing the great deeds of God and in the offering of sacrifice" (GIRM, No. 78). The GIRM expects the people to pay attention throughout the entire Eucharistic prayer, not just at the consecration.

## Both Views Tolerated

In light of this developed perspective on participation, views on bells diverge. Some people favor ringing the first bell because the sound still helps signal the faithful about the upcoming consecration. The subsequent rings then draw attention to a devotional moment in the Mass when showing the elements to the people invites their adoration. Bells provide a mystical aural element, a musical sound that evokes the otherworldly sacramental

*Predictably, opinions vary on what makes the bell "appropriate" and what constitutes "local custom." At some Masses, the faithful hear these bells; at others, they do not. Ultimately, it probably depends on a third criterion: the preference of the priest.*

viewing of the elements. The priest raised them above his head without turning to face the people so that they could more easily adore the presence of Christ under the forms of newly consecrated bread and wine. This ocular Communion largely satisfied the spiritual yearnings of the faithful in ages past. Here, the bell was not so much a "signal" to the faithful, who could

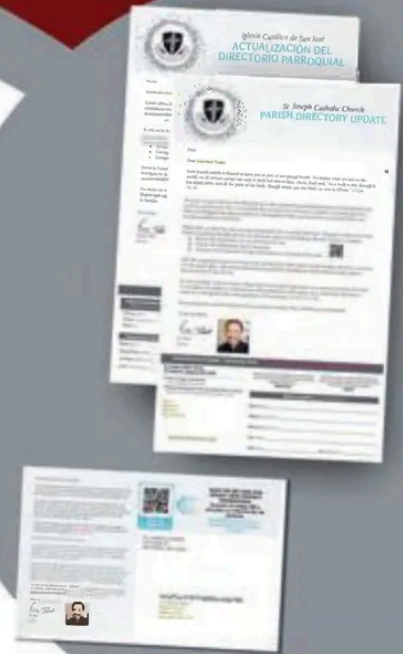
# CONNECTED COMMUNITY: ENHANCE PARISH WITH UP-TO-DATE DATA

In today's fast-paced world, keeping parishioner contact info current is essential.

OSV's **Parish Directory Update** is an 8-week project that ensures accurate data, seamless communication, and minimized returned mail, all managed by our team. Co-branded outreach materials are **designed with your parishioners in mind**, and you'll receive an easy-to-upload file for your church management system upon project completion.

In addition to the series of personalized mailings, you'll receive a parish kit to support your Parish Directory Update project.

**Strengthen your parish community today! Connect with us to begin your transformative journey today.**



Learn more at [reply.osv.com/pdu](https://reply.osv.com/pdu) or request a free consultation by calling 800.348.2886 ext. 3000.



**CHECK OUT FATHER  
TURNER'S BLOG**

Father Paul Turner  
answers questions  
about the liturgy on  
his blog,  
[paulturner.org/blog-2/](http://paulturner.org/blog-2/).  
Email questions to  
Father Turner at  
[paultu1@me.com](mailto:paultu1@me.com).

AdobeStock



presence of Jesus Christ.

Others resist ringing a bell. With Mass in the vernacular, the priest facing the people and speaking the words of the Eucharistic prayer aloud, the congregation knows very well when the consecration is taking place. In this view, the bells have lost their function and draw attention away from other essential elements of the Eucharistic prayer, including its opening words of thanksgiving and praise from which the "Eucharistic" prayer derives its name. After all, it's not the "consecration prayer" or the "elevation prayer," but the "Eucharistic prayer."

Furthermore, the people sing an acclamation after the consecration, a feature

the preconciliar Mass lacked. The words of this acclamation always address Christ, sacramentally present on the altar. The priest pauses his words addressed to the Father long enough for the people to address their words to Christ. The memorial acclamation functions as a kind of verbal bell in which the people declare their belief that the consecration has just taken place.

The Missal tolerates both views. Participants at Mass will, therefore, experience different practices.

**Other Functions**

The presence and absence of bells perform other functions for Catholics. The



Order for the Blessing of Bells notes that the sound summons people to the liturgical assembly and alerts them to various happenings (cf. Book of Blessings, No. 1305). For example, peals may ring out after a wedding to signal a moment of joy. Bells may toll after a funeral to accompany the community's grief.

Although the Missal never calls for the ringing of a bell to start the Mass, the practice derives from the one noted in the Book of Blessings. Instead of ringing a bell outdoors to bring people inside the church, a bell may be rung indoors to summon the previously gathered people into common worship.

AdobeStock



**GOING DEEPER IN THE ROMAN MISSAL**

In the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, we read: "A little before the consecration, when appropriate, a server rings a bell as a signal to the faithful. According to local custom, the server also rings the bell as the priest shows the host and then the chalice" (No. 150).

The Roman Missal is more deliberate about Holy Thursday's Mass of the Lord's Supper: "While the [*Gloria*] is being sung, bells are rung, and when it is finished, they remain silent until the *Gloria in excelsis* of the Easter Vigil, unless, if appropriate, the diocesan bishop has decided otherwise" (No. 7). Whereas bells during the Eucharistic prayer are optional, only the bishop may change the custom of ringing and silencing bells on these days of the Triduum.

The Missal makes no provision for an organist to simulate bells from the keyboard. The GIRM instruction notes, "in the choice of elements attention should be paid to authenticity" (No. 292), and "every effort should be made, even in minor matters, to observe appropriately the requirements of art and to ensure that a noble simplicity is combined with elegance" (No. 351). Authenticity demands that the sound of a bell emanate from a bell.


**Pertinent Words**

To make an informed decision regarding everyday use, a comparison between the wording of the preconciliar and postconciliar missals is worth noting. Here is a complete translation of the pertinent words from the 1962 *Ritus ad servandum*, which the GIRM 150 modified:

"A little before the consecration, a minister may ring a small bell as a signal to the faithful. Then, while the celebrant elevates the host, [the minister] elevates the back hem of the chasuble with his left hand, lest it hinder the celebrant in the elevation of his arms; [the minister] also does this at the elevation of the chalice; and with his right hand he rings the small bell three times at each elevation, or continuously until the priest places the host down upon the corporal, and similarly afterwards at the elevation of the chalice."

The Missal in force retained some parts of this practice and changed others:

- The moment for ringing the first bell remains imprecise. Most people interpret "a little before the consecration"



**SHALOM CENTER**  
A Residential Renewal and Treatment Center  
for Clergy and Men and Women Religious

In a warm, relaxed and retreat-like setting, our program is designed to renew a person's awareness of God's gift of Shalom and to help integrate the spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical dimensions of a person's life.

We treat depression, anxiety, addictions, boundary issues, burnout and more in both English and Spanish.

☎ 281 399 0520 • F 281 399 3366  
13516 Morgan Drive • Splendora, Tx 77372  
P.O. Box 1148 • Splendora, Tx 77372-1148  
info@shalomcenterinc.org  
shalomcenterinc.org

**CLASSIFIEDS**

**Custom Statues  
Cave Company**

**Custom LifeSized**

Marble Statues \$9,750  
Bronze \$16,750

Choose your  
Patron Saint!

**516-456-3663**  
**Caveco33@aol.com**  
**www.statuemaker.us**





Annunciation by Joseph Erns Turner (1830), Chiesa della Trinita dei Monti. Renáta Sedmáková/AdobeStock

### WHY DO CHURCHES RING BELLS FOR THE ANGELUS?

Designed to commemorate the mystery of the Incarnation and pay homage to Mary's role in salvation history, the Angelus can be traced to 11th-century Italy. Originally, monks prayed three Hail Marys in the morning and in the evening. The noontime Angelus derived from praying and meditating on the Lord's passion at midday.

In 1456, Pope Calixtus III directed the ringing of church bells every day at noon and that Catholics pray three Hail Marys. By the end of the 16th century, the Angelus had become the prayer that we know today: three Hail Marys, with short verses in between (called versicles), ending with a prayer.

D.D. Emmons writes at [simplycatholic.com](http://simplycatholic.com): "A significant part of this traditional devotion is not only the ringing of a bell to announce the time of prayer but the manner in which the bell is rung. The ringing consists of three strokes of the bell, each followed by a pause, and then nine strokes. John Sullivan, in his 1917 book, 'Externals of the Catholic Church,' writes: 'The manner of ringing the Angelus seems to have varied little since the beginning of the devotion. ... Old monastic records, going back to the fifteenth century, show that the bell-ringer was directed, "to toll the Ave-bell nine strokes at three times, keeping the space of one Pater and Ave between each of the three tollings."'

to mean the moment when the priest extends his hands over the elements in a gesture of epiclesis, but the Missal does not say that. That interpretation may have gained consensus because it provided a common visual cue, as the words of the various Eucharistic prayers vary so much. A minister could ring the bell at some other time before the consecration and remain faithful

to this rubric, though it is hard to see what that would gain.

- Although the 1962 Missal did not use the expression "if appropriate," it did place the verb "may ring" in the subjunctive, which also made the practice optional. Ringing the first bell was quite common before the liturgical reforms, but even then the rubric did not require it.

- The purpose of the first bell has not changed. It may be rung as a signal to the faithful.
- The server is no longer instructed to raise the hem of the chasuble with the left hand while ringing the bell with the right. Today's servers do not touch the priest's vestment, and they may use either hand to ring a bell.
- Surprising to many people, the number of rings permitted at the consecration has changed. The 1962 Missal clearly called for three, and the current Missal clearly removed the number. The same Missal also permitted a continuous ring through each elevation, but the present Missal removed that option as well. The description of the ring before the consecration and of the ring at the elevation is now identical. This implies a single ring of a small bell in all three instances, in accordance with the wording from the preconciliar Missal to describe the option it offered a little before the consecration.

The current Missal has also removed the bell that used to be rung when the priest received Communion. That bell actually served a rather unhappy function: It told the people that they could now leave Mass. The third principal part had taken place.

The bad habit of leaving Mass early has been practiced for centuries. Removing that bell hasn't reversed the trend, but it has shown greater unity in the communion of the priest and of the people, while permitting bells only to highlight certain elements of the Eucharistic prayer.

By allowing either the presence or absence of bells, the Missal takes a tolerant view of local customs. It invites Catholics to hold the same. **TP**

---

FATHER PAUL TURNER is pastor of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Kansas City, Missouri, and the author of "Light in the Darkness: Preparing Better Catholic Funerals" (Liturgical Press, 2017).