

WHY DO WE USE BELLS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH? WHAT IS THEIR MEANING OR SIGNIFICANCE DURING THE MASS?

The primary purpose of ringing church bells in modern times is to signify the time for worshippers to gather for a church service is near. Many Anglican, Catholic and Lutheran churches also ring their external bells three times a day (at 6 a.m., noon and 6 p.m.), summoning the faithful to recite the Lord's Prayer and within the Roman Catholic Church to pray the Angelus. Bells commonly represent the Christian joy and freedom from sin and death. Historically, within the Church, the bell's pendulous motion represented the extremes of good and evil; death and immortality.

Bells were first introduced into the Christian Church by St. Paulinus of Nola in 400CE. Their use was officially sanctioned in 604CE by Pope Sabinian. Bells first became common in northern Europe due to the Celtic influence, especially from Irish missionaries. Before bells were introduced, Greek monasteries would strike a *semantron* or flat metal plate to announce liturgies.

There are a number of different bells used within the worldwide Catholic Church.

Is there a historical significance or benefit from ringing Church bells?

According to tradition, the ringing of church bells is believed to drive out demons and other unclean spirits. Because of this, the huge, call-to-worship bells are often blessed by the local Bishop before they are hung and placed into service. In the Roman Rite, bells are blessed using the *Ritual of the Baptism of Bells*. In this ritual, the bells are washed inside and outside with Holy Water by the Bishop. They are then anointed on the outside with the Oil of the Infirm (Oil of the Sick) and on the inside with the Sacred Chrism (Chrism Oil). A fuming thurible is then placed inside the bell/s as the bishop prays over it or them.



What is the call-to-worship bell?

Much like the call to worship horn that was blown at the highest point of the Second Temple, likewise for centuries Christian Churches have likewise utilized large, external bells for this same function.



What is a sacristy or sanctuary bell?

One type of Mass-peculiar bells is known as the sacristy or sanctuary bells (which are used depending on whether the Priest enters into the sanctuary area from the side Vesting Sacristy or the back of the church's Worship Space). This is routinely used during daily Masses.

Sanctuary bells are rung at the entrance of the clergy and are used as a warning that the Liturgy of the Mass is about to begin. Simultaneously, it signals for everyone to please stand for the entrance procession. Hand bells may also be used to summon worshippers, though hand bells are generally used in tuned sets (like the Sanctus bells mentioned next).



What are the Sanctus bells?

A second type of Mass-peculiar bells are the altar bells (also known as the Sanctus bells). Sanctus bells are small, handheld bells placed at convenient place near the altar for use by the altar servers.

Before the Second Vatican Council's modifications to liturgical practices in the present day Novus Ordo (the New Order of the Mass), in the Latin Mass the priest would face away from the assembly, in order for all present to face east toward the City of Jerusalem) and the Sanctus bells were used to draw the attention of the gathered assembly to the start of the consecratory prayers and then, the occurrence of the transubstantiation. Sometimes, altar bells are also used to generate a joyful noise (such as during the Christmas and Easter Vigil Masses).

Why are there bells in the Liturgy of the Catholic Mass?

Bells were and continue to be rung to alert people to what they may not easily see or hear, so that they may attend to the important and solemn action occurring on the altar of sacrifice. While the initial liturgical documents of the Second Vatican Council (e.g., Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy), etc.) omitted such references to the need and use of such liturgical bells, they were never officially abolished by the universal Catholic Church however.

What is the Epiclesis in a Catholic Mass?

During the Eucharistic Prayer, the *Epiclesis* (Greek: "invocation") of the Holy Spirit upon the offerings of bread and wine (the *Anaphora* in the Eastern Churches' liturgies) proceeds the words of institution—the words used by Jesus himself in the Upper Room at the Last Supper — "This is my body . . . This is my blood . . ."

At the start of the *Epiclesis*, the Sanctus bells are rung once briefly. After the Epiclesis and the completion of the prescribed Eucharistic Prayer, at the elevations of the Sacred Body and the Precious Blood, the Sanctus bells are rung, sequentially three times.

Are the Church's bells forbidden to be rung?

Yes. The only time the Sanctuary and Sanctus bells are not rung out is immediately following the Holy Thursday Mass until the Easter Vigil Mass. Bells are not used during this mourning period.

Can the Church's bells be rung for funerals also?

Yes. Traditionally, there are three times when a bell may be rung in connection to a death:

- The "*Passing Bell*" to warn of an impending death;
- The "*Death Knell*" upon the death of a person; and
- The "*Funeral Toll*" as the funeral process approaches the Church.