

On the Use of Altar Bells

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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. GIRM (NZ) 150

From a long and attentive catechesis and education in liturgy, a particular liturgical assembly may be able to take part in the Mass with such attention and awareness that it has no need of this signal at the central part of the Mass. This may easily be the case, for example, with religious communities or with particular or small groups. The opposite may be presumed in a parish or public church, where there is a different level of liturgical and religious education and where often people who are visitors or are not regular churchgoers take part. In these cases the bell as a signal is entirely appropriate and is sometimes necessary. To conclude: usually a signal with the bell should be given, at least at the two elevations, in order to elicit joy and attention. Not.8 (1972) Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

The preceding paragraph was written more than 40 years ago. In the meantime, churches have been designed or renovated to allow clear visibility of the liturgical action and, with the use of vernacular language, the need for bells no longer pertains. However, where custom, or architecture, or a poor acoustical environment compromises the ability of the faithful to fully and actively participate in the liturgy, then, for conscious participation, bells may be useful as a signal for the faithful.



Instruction 150 (GIRM NZ)

A little before the Consecration — *No cue is given for when this ringing of the bells may take place, but only the ambiguous “a little before the consecration”. The parallel to the Tridentine practice ... would be the ringing of the bell at the consecratory epiclesis. The problem with such an interpretation, however, is that the consecratory epiclesis is integral to the act of consecration and so does not really signal “a little before the consecration”.1*

if appropriate — the use of bells is not obligatory and may be deemed inappropriate, depending upon the circumstances.

a small bell — denotes a small sound, as a signal. Traditional Sanctus bells, with three or four bells, may still be used, but three fold ringing or continuous ringing must also be considered in reference to appropriateness (pro opportunitate).

according to local custom — must be in accord with the particular custom of the diocese or particular parish/chaplaincy. It is not foreseen that bells should be established as a new custom.

Roman Missal 2010

Bells are rung during the Gloria during the Mass of the Lord's Supper (OM 7) and again during the Gloria at the Easter Vigil (OM 3).

The Roman Missal (2010) does not make provision for the ringing of bells during the Gloria at Mass during the Day on Easter Sunday. Likewise there is no provision for bells to be rung at the Masses of Christmas (Vigil/ During the Night/Dawn/Morning).

Now that the Mass is celebrated in such a way that people can see, hear and understand what is happening at the altar, the need to attract their attention by ringing a bell no longer exists.

In fact, to ring bells may give the wrong impression of the Eucharistic Prayer. The institution narrative (the story of Christ's words and actions at the Last Supper) is one part of the whole prayer of thanksgiving and belongs with the praise of God's wonderful saving deeds, the invocation of the Holy Spirit, the memorial of Jesus' death and resurrection and our joining in Christ's offering.

Theologians no longer talk about a 'moment' of consecration; rather the whole of this great prayer is consecratory. To highlight just one section by the ringing of bells affects the unity and continuity of the Eucharistic Prayer.

Bell ringing during the Liturgy of the Eucharist could also appear to deny that the Liturgy of the Word itself is sacramental. It is not merely a warm-up or an introduction to what follows. Like all other sacramental actions, the Liturgy of the Word in all its parts, including the homily, is an encounter with God through which God enacts the work of salvation. He (*Christ*) is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for he promised: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20). (SC 7).

God, Word made flesh, is really and substantively present in the Word equally to the presence of Christ made present in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and this presence is also in the 'people gathered' and in the 'minister'.

Historically

In the rubrics for the Extraordinary Rite (Missal 1962) the following also applied. "*If there are some to receive Holy Communion during the Mass, the minister signals them a little beforehand with the ring of the bell.*" (Source: *Ritus servandus in celebratione Missae*, X, 6)



This ring of the bells occurred at the priest's communion, to make the congregation aware of Communion. As Mass in the Third Edition of the Roman Rite is most commonly celebrated versus populum (facing the people) rather than ad orientem, a full, active and conscious participation suggests that this signal is unnecessary.

As frequent Communion is to be encouraged (see below) all those who attend Mass, and who have received their first Communion and are of a disposition to receive Communion, should be receiving Communion.

Therefore, this signal bell is no longer necessary.

However, if bells are customary, and considered appropriate as per GIRM (NZ) 150, they are only to be rung a little before the consecration and at the elevations, but in no other place within the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

A deep faith always expresses itself in a fervent love for the Eucharist, for it is at Mass that we hear the word of Life and share in the Body and Blood of Christ our Lord. I urge you therefore to make Sunday Mass and frequent Communion a regular part of your lives; in fact the centre and summit of all you are and do. (John Paul II, 7 July 1986).

(Footnotes) 1 *A Commentary on the General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, eds. Edward Foley, Nathan D. Mitchell, Joanne M Pierce, Liturgical Press 2007