

Traveling Companion: For whom the bell tolls

Fr. Michael Tracey

While on vacation, I was sitting down in the living room enjoying some quiet time. Then it happened, as if on a precise command. The bells of the local church, across the street, began to toll. It was the noon hour. The bells called me to a moment of pause, to a rest in prayer as it rung out the Angelus prayer. First, it beat out three distinctive tolls; then three more, followed by three more. Each set of three was followed by a brief pause. Finally, the bells concluded with nine consecutive strikes.

The tolling of the bells brought back a flurry of memories. I remembered my elementary school days in the nearby school when the headmaster would send a strong young student to go to the church next door to ring the Angelus bell. We all had memorized the sequence of tolls to announce the Angelus.

The large church bell hung in a bell tower. A strong chain crawled its way to the ground. It was hooked to a large eye hook in order to prevent a strong wind from accidentally ringing the bell and confusing the neighborhood. One pulled and tugged at the chain, trying to maximize the loudness of the bell. Often, the gravity of the bell, as it swung away, would pull the bell ringer off the ground. Other times, in order to better anchor oneself to ring the bell, one put one feet on the bell tower as one puffed and tugged at the bell.

The ringing of the bell signaled the neighbors to pause and pray. For the elementary school students, it signaled a more joyful message. It was lunchtime and recess time.

On other occasions, the tolling of the bells took on a more somber note. They were used to announce the immanent arrival of a funeral to the church. It signaled the neighbors to come and pay the final respect to the dead person and their family.

Years later, the ringing of the bells became electronically controlled. The human touch disappeared as well as the memories. Still, they rang out, as they announced the visit of Angel Gabriel with Mary; reminding Mary that the Lord was with her and blessed would be the fruit of her womb, Jesus. It signaled the dawning of a new creation.

Through it all, I began to think of the impact of bells on our society; how they marked our coming and going; our appointed times and our schedules. Now, we have replaced them with alarm clocks, phone alarms, reminder messages, wake-up calls, phone ring tones, and electronic schedulers.

Altar servers loved bells. Once, they discovered the precise moments they were to ring the bells during Mass, they assumed a role of power and authority. During Lent, of course, the bells remained silent as a mark of mortification. The sound of bells were too joyful for a season of penance. Instead, they were replaced of a set of timber clappers.

I found it ironic in the months following Hurricane Katrina to discover an unusual set of clappers at our church in Bay St. Louis. They resembled a timber noisemaker. Of course, I had to indulge my passion for making noise that reflected another time.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, our church bells were silence by the wind and water. Temporarily, they were relegated to a rusty grave. Parishioners commented on how much they missed the sound of the bells and wondered if they would be restored. In my rambling around the church, I heard phantom bells. By some mysterious quirk, our silenced bell would remind me that there was life in the old faithful still. It would generate a single gong on occasion to remind us of our need to pause so we could continue on the long road of recovery.

I finally broke down and signed a contract to allow our church bells to toll once again; to mark the half-hours, hours and Angelus of our day.

Now that they are repaired, they will call the people to pause and pray as they mark their days. They will also signal the beginning of a new marriage as well as the beginning of eternal life at the end of a funeral service. Even though electronically tuned with precision, I still listen to its music, message and reminders.