

Snake Charming, and the Christmas Altar Bells are Ringing



Today begins Holy Week. There is much to say, and little space, so I will focus on just one aspect of the Triduum. On Holy Thursday, during the Gloria, you will hear bells being rung. After that moment, there are no bells or instruments again until the Gloria at the Easter Vigil (See Roman Missal Holy Thursday Rubric #7). Why ring bells? Well, there are many reasons. The bells are a joyous sound - traditionally church bells have been rung to commemorate celebratory moments (think weddings, ending of wars, etc.). Bells are also associated

with protection from the demonic. They are tolled after a funeral as a final send off to help the departed on their final journey. Altar bells are used at various points during the Mass to call attention to important events about to occur, and to add beauty. Exorcists routinely use bells for all these reasons; demons really do not like things that call our minds to God, and bells do just that (very loudly and unapologetically). We even baptize bells (it is not the same kind of baptism that we get, it is actually an elaborate blessing, but the nickname has stuck).

The bells are rung during these two Glorias (and no others during the year) because we are “book-ending” a critically important event. In between Holy Thursday and the Easter Vigil we commemorate the institution of the Eucharist, the death and resurrection of the Lord - just as we do at every consecration - and as at the consecration, we call to mind its importance, in part, through the use of bells. While the bells are silent, we use either a crotalus or a “tric troc” (wooden clapper). These instruments are not festive at all, they have a hard and clipped sound (think opposite of ringing), which is fitting for the Triduum. They also call to mind the sound of rattlesnakes (symbolic of evil) and reference Mark 16:18, where Christ says those who are baptized will handle snakes barehanded and be unharmed by poison. Their use alludes to Christ's triumph, even through death.

Everything about the Mass, even down to the minute details of what instruments are used, how they are used, and when they are used, has deep symbolic meaning. I hope you consider joining us to experience the entire Triduum this year.

St. Cecilia, St. Elizabeth of the Trinity...Pray for us!

--Mark Wozniczka, Music Director (mwozniczka@archchicago.org)

