

“YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST”— “BELLS AND SMELLS”—Fr. Steve Lape

The Catholic Church around the world “pulled out all the stops,” so to speak, with extra pageantry and fanfare during the holiest week of the year, especially during the Sacred Triduum (a Latin word meaning “a period of 3 days,” referring to Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday). Due to the most solemn nature of delving into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ (which refers to His suffering, death & rising), special music, decorations, prayers & rites are offered on those 3 days. An expression that many have used in recent years to describe this extra fanfare at such liturgies is “bells & smells.” This refers to 2 items used with greater prominence during this sacred time—ringing of the bells and the burning of incense, especially at Holy Thursday and Easter Vigil Masses.

First of all, you may have noticed altar servers ringing a handheld set of bells (called “sanctus bells,” with “sanctus” being Latin for “holy.”) The sets we have at our 2 churches are made of brass, with a handle attached to a small cross shape, which has 4 bell domes at the 4 ends of the cross and 3 small, ball-shaped bell knockers under each dome. As is our parish custom at all our Masses, a server briefly shakes these bells twice (at the time of the priest’s separately elevating the Body & Blood of Christ) in the middle of the Eucharistic Prayer (with the Eucharistic Prayer being considered the high point of a Mass). On Holy Thursday and at Easter Vigil, these bells are also rung throughout the singing of the “Gloria.” Many may ask: Why? What’s the point of the bells?

For centuries, bells have been used at Catholic Masses (as well as many Anglican, Lutheran, and Methodist liturgies)



during the Eucharistic Prayer in order to specially attract worshippers’ attention that something extra-special and holy was taking place. This was especially needed from the Middle Ages

times until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, since, before the Council, the celebrating priest at Mass had his back to the worshippers at the altar, while he quietly offered the words of the Eucharistic Prayer in Latin. Since most people didn’t understand Latin and couldn’t hear the priest’s prayer, people often said their own devotional prayers in the pews. Thus, the ringing of the sanctus bells would get their attention that these elevations of Jesus’ Body and Blood were happening—a very special, transcendental moment for all those gathered at

Mass.

When many liturgical changes took place after the Second Vatican Council, including Masses spoken in the vernacular (native tongue of a particular region or country), the priest’s facing the people behind the altar, and advanced technology of speaker & microphone systems, many churches no longer saw a need for the sanctus bells. Although many worshippers around the world are happy about their absence in many churches (finding them outdated, distracting & even annoying), there are also many who enjoy hearing the bells, since they have a 2-fold purpose: to convey something extraordinary occurring and to convey a joyful noise (examples: large bells ringing to celebrate a wedding, or to celebrate a new year, or to celebrate something victorious, like a war’s end, or to call people to worship at church at a certain day & time to offer joyful thanksgiving for what God has lovingly done and continues to do for us). The sanctus bells are rung continuously during the singing of the joyful “Gloria” hymn at Mass on Holy Thursday and at Easter Vigil to heighten the joy of God’s triumph over sin & death through the suffering, dying and rising of Jesus. Since the Holy Thursday Mass (also known as the Mass of the Lord’s Supper) especially celebrates Jesus’ establishing both the Christian priesthood and the Eucharist at the Last Supper, that is also cause for rejoicing, for they are both among the most powerful ways for Jesus to convey His loving presence in the world. To put it plainly, without the priesthood, there would be no Eucharist.



Secondly, the use of incense (coming from a Latin word *incendere*, meaning “to burn”) goes back thousands of years for many religions & cultures for various reasons. For Christians, the sweet fragrance and clouds of smoke from a censer (ours is called a thurible, a metal container on a chain with a rising lid) symbolize the beauty and mystery of God’s word & presence. Incense is often burned at Catholic funerals as a way to honor the deceased loved one’s body, which was a temple of the Holy Spirit, and as a sign of our lifting our prayers to God in heaven (as the smoke rises from the thurible) for the deceased’s eternally peaceful & joyfully sweet repose. So, the “bells & smells” at Mass are to heighten the joy of Christ in our life & to call us to joyfully live our faith.