



Minarets and Bell Towers

Wafting on the afternoon breeze, the melodic chant of the muezzin rings out from the minaret of al Julafá Arrachidin mosque a half-mile from our house. In ages past, the muezzin would mount the circular steps of the minaret to call Muslims to prayer five times a day. Just getting to the top would have left the average person winded, but, once there, the muezzin would belt out his call to each of the four winds, projecting with a volume sufficient to be heard a mile away. With loudspeakers on top of minarets nowadays, muezzins don't have to negotiate those steps, and it may be a tape recording rather than a live voice that I actually hear. Regardless, I find the a capella chant beautiful in its intricacy and uplifting in its simplicity. It is a call for me to pray as well.

Muslims aren't the only ones who call people to prayer from towers. In Old Testament times, Jewish priests mounted the pinnacle of the temple to announce times of prayers with blasts of trumpets. Christian churches opted for bells. By the 8th century, bells were increasing in size to the point that separate facilities were being built to house them. By the 11th century, bell towers, either free-standing like the tower of Pisa or incorporated into the façade of the church, were commonplace. At 371 feet, the bell tower at Mortegliano, Italy, holds the record as the highest, but it's really the angle and closeness to the tower that determine how loudly the bells reverberate. In 1984 I was assigned to St. Wenceslaus in New Prague and given a room directly opposite the drive from the bell tower. At that time, the bells, controlled by an automated clock mechanism, went into action at 6am after taking the night off by municipal decree. First came four doublets from the two larger bells, then six tolls from the big bell. After a brief pause, the big bell rang some 30 more times, long enough for farmers miles away to wake up and pray the Angelus. Needless to say, I was startled from peaceful sleep the first few mornings. On the third day, I awoke to silence. I looked over at my alarm clock. 5:56am. My inner clock was waking me up before the bells. After a few more days, my body adjusted and I slept right through.

On many an occasion since returning to Venezuela I have prayed for that gift to just sleep through as many neighbors like to celebrate and play their music at ear-piercing volumes well into the wee hours of the morning. What affects me most is the relentless reverberating bass that my earplugs can't muffle. Rather than toss and turn and get frustrated, I often take my mattress down to church a few blocks away and sleep in the sacristy. It has been a blessing that this time of quarantine has resulted in fewer such parties as well as the absence of evangelical street rallies which normally are accompanied by loud music and shouting. At least those rallies tend to end earlier in the evening. I guess people have different ways of calling people to prayer, but I prefer church bells and my Muslim neighbors' a capella chants from their minaret tower.

The use of bells is not limited to churches, of course. City halls, pagodas, fire departments, schools, trains and ships all draw people's attention with bells. While the more significant of such bells have titles like World Peace Bell, Liberty Bell, or Great Bell, we Catholics give bells personal names, blessing them with baptismal water and anointing them for their evangelical role of calling people to worship.



Bells tolling in tower at the St. Paul Cathedral



Jesucristo Resucitado with bell tower in back

In 1987, Saints Paul, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, Frances Cabrini and John Vianney arrived from France and took up residence in the tower of the Cathedral in St. Paul. In 1998, Saints Elizabeth Anne Seton, Juan Diego, Katherine Drexel, Kateri Tekakwitha, André Besette and Ven. Pierre Toussaint began calling people from the tower of the Basilica in Minneapolis. Here at Jesucristo Resucitado, Edward, Liguoria and Mary ring people to worship on Sunday. They are named for the parents and sister of Fr. Pat Ryan who built this beautiful church in 2001 with contributions from folks in Minnesota. Through their generosity, the church from which those bells ring out will receive parishioners responding to their call for years to come. From the blessing for bells: *"Lord, accept these bells into your service. May their voice direct our hearts toward you and prompt us to come gladly to this church to experience the presence of Christ, listen to your word, offer you our prayers, and both in joy and in sorrow be friends to one another. This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen."*

Points to ponder

Does your church have bells? Do you know for whom they are named? Can you hear them from your house?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org or 651-368-7324.