

What's with the Altar Bells?

including an article by Rev. Larry Peters (Grace; Clarksville, TN)

This evening, we are incorporating into the Divine Service yet another Christ-centered, cross-focused, old Lutheran tradition by restoring the altar bells, or *Sanctus Bells*, to the consecration. To summarize what follows, the bells have been used throughout much of the history of the Church (and the first three centuries of the Lutheran Church) to both indicate and draw the congregation's attention to the fact that in the consecration, Christ's Body and Blood come and miraculously dwell under the bread and wine for us sinners to eat and drink for the forgiveness of our sins. (Pastor Leigeber)

What follows is an article written by the Rev. Fr. Larry Peters, pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Clarksville, Tennessee:

I have spent most of my life working for the recovery of our lost Lutheran identity on Sunday morning as well as in catechesis and mission....

What many do not understand is that my concern is not simply the restoration of practice but the restoration of the faith which the practice illustrates. I believe that the time has come (maybe long past time) to recover the Sanctus Bell. The point here is not whether I like it or the people like it. The point here is what does the Sanctus Bell illustrate. The Sanctus Bell points to the Real Presence, to the Word that with the element delivers to us what the Word says, where it promises it. I believe that the Real Presence is under attack. Not by intellectuals arguing on the printed page among academics but by the press of Protestant spirituality which not only denies the Real Presence but shifts the whole of faith's piety from the concrete of the sacrament to the virtual reality of feeling or opinion.

Watch how we treat the elements of the Sacrament. We treat the elements (bread and wine) of the Sacrament as if they were really nothing at all. I have watched the routine practices of mingling the consecrated and the unconsecrated, of tossing out the reliquae (what remains after the Distribution) as if it were yesterday's garbage, of using less than substantial means of distribution become the norm in most parishes, of walking through spills or throwing away dropped hosts, of treating the means of grace as if it were merely a snack and the real business was happening in the mind and heart (instead of the mouth)....

The point is that we act as if nothing is really there, as if the remembering were the chief or only thing in the Sacrament (Lutherans have typically replaced the sacrificial character with a memorial) instead of the eating and drinking that characterized the sacramentality of earlier Lutheranism. Ceremonies have meaning not only when they express what it is that we believe but also when they counter our failures and challenge our lack of belief. So the Sanctus Bell calls you to note that something has happened here. Christ is present as His Word has promised, in and with the bread and cup. He does not occupy space in our mind or feelings in our hearts but is corporeally present with these common elements of bread and wine, His very flesh and drink that are indeed real food and real drink.

I am picking on only one ceremony but it points to the reason why these ceremonies are more important to the faith than they are things with certain appeal to us. The *why* of such a ceremony has always to do with the doctrinal truth to which the ceremony points and the faith that it illustrates so that they eye sees what the lips confess.

Another example may be the profound bow or genuflection during the creed or at the consecration. Lord knows that my knees hurt enough to make this a least liked ceremony. What is far more important is the fact that what these ceremonies illustrate is easily either in denial or absent from the center of what we believe, confess, and teach. The incarnation has become a Christmas nod instead of the core and center of our Christian piety and witness. The two natures of Christ is the central stuff of creed and confession but how much of it is central to piety, worship, or witness? We hardly talk about it at all. So also in the consecration, the genuflection or profound bow indicates to the assembled people that Christ is present in and with the bread and wine of the Sacrament, that this is a consequential presence, delivering to us not merely His gifts but His very self to a people unworthy and undeserving of His gracious gift.

One of the things Lutherans were noted for was that we did not mess with the Mass. We kept ceremony, form, and actual words (except those that directly conflicted with the Gospel). We knew that messing with ceremony means messing with the faith. We were not simply concerned with the conscience of the believer in the short term but saw the inseparable tie between act and faith, between ceremony and confession, between worship and witness. The point here was not to keep things people liked or Pastors liked. The point here was to keep that which reflected the evangelical and catholic faith and which witnessed that faith.

At some point in time, we forgot this essential connection. Things began disappearing from the Lutheran Divine Service. At the very same time, the piety shifted from a sacramental piety to one supposedly oriented to the Word but in reality edging more and more toward feeling. We read too much the evangelical authors and we moved too much in the circles of Protestantism to the point where many people began to think that Lutherans were generic Calvinists, Protestants, Fundamentalists, or Evangelicals with a strange affection for an orderly worship service. As many of the more "catholic" practices of the liturgy left, the liturgy became more a tool than an end, governed more by taste or personal appeal than the doctrine confessed in the liturgy, and more personal and individual than churchly.

Of course Lutheranism will not live or die on the basis of the ceremonies or church usages practiced in the liturgy or not. But... a Lutheranism uncomfortable with the practices will soon become a Lutheranism uncomfortable with the truths these ceremonies and practices illustrate. When that happens, Lutheranism is only an *ism* and not a church, merely a legacy and not a future... It is true that chanting, incense, kneeling, genuflection, sanctus bells, eucharistic vestments... We can't say that any of these are in themselves necessary, but neither can we say that these things or their lack do not have an impact upon what is believed, confessed, taught, and witnessed.