

From the Chapel – March 15: For Whom the Bell Tolls



“From the Chapel” is a series of short, daily reflections on life and faith in a time of uncertainty. As people across the world cope with the effects of the coronavirus – including the social isolation necessary to combat its spread – these reflections remind us of the hope that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

The chapel here at OSV has a bell. Or rather, it has a recording of a bell that whoever is serving Mass that day activates by pushing a button in the sacristy five minutes before Mass is scheduled to begin. The recording plays throughout the building on our public-address system, sometimes triggering the prepare-for-an-announcement tone before the bells start ringing, and always ending abruptly in the midst of the last bell.

Still, we at OSV are rather fond of that bell, which reminds all of us, even when we cannot attend Mass, of the sacrifice that is about to take place and calls us to pause, however briefly, to join ourselves spiritually to that sacrifice.

While OSV is less than a mile from downtown, we can't hear the bells of the many churches of Huntington in our office, but it's comforting to know that they, too, continue to ring. The two Catholic churches, Sts. Peter and Paul, and St. Mary's, are just a block apart, and both toll the Angelus three times a day and announce both daily and Sunday Mass two minutes before it begins. St. Mary's also continues a longstanding but now largely forgotten tradition among both Catholic and Protestant churches that meant a lot to me as a child – the tolling of hymns at 3 p.m. every day, in memory of the hour of

Christ's death and our redemption.

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Some of the most moving and poignant moments in the midst of this pandemic can be found in the videos posted to YouTube of entire Italian neighborhoods [joining together](#), from the windows of their respective residences, to [sing patriotic songs](#), and the bells of the churches of [Rome's Trastevere neighborhood](#) being rung in remembrance of the victims of COVID-19.

The phrases “No man is an island” and “for whom the bell tolls” have taken on a life of their own, but there's never been a better time to place them back in their original context. The English Catholic poet John Donne wrote these verses as a meditation on sickness and death while he himself was recovering from a near-fatal illness:

“No man is an island, Entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, A part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less. As well as if a promontory were. As well as if a manor of thine own Or of thine friend's were. Each man's death diminishes me, For I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know For whom the bell tolls, It tolls for thee.”

Four centuries later, Bruce Springsteen, a poet of a different stripe, [echoed Donne's sentiments](#) in “Springsteen on Broadway,” in a meditation on growing up “in the shadow of the steeple,” “surrounded by God”: “And when the church bells rang, the whole clan would hustle up the street to stand witness to every wedding and every funeral that arrived like a state occasion in our neighborhood. We ... had front-row seats to watch the townsmen in their Sunday suits carry out an endless array of dark wooden boxes, to be slipped into the rear of the Freedman's funeral home long, black Cadillac, for the short ride to St. Rose cemetery hill on the edge of town.

And there all our Catholic neighbors ... and all the Springsteens who came before – they patiently waited for us.”

In times like these – but not only in times like these – we need more bells in our lives: not the joyless, alarm-like bells of schools and hospitals and other institutions, but the peals of church bells, both joyful and somber, reminding us that our journey, too, will one day end – while lifting our souls in the hope of the resurrection.

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