

Bell at consecration?/ Children and same-sex marriage

Q. I was in a liturgy committee meeting at my parish, and I suggested that we have the altar server ring the bell at the consecration during the Mass on Easter Sunday. (We don't normally use altar bells at our parish.) One of the committee members said that the use of altar bells has been banned by the church since the Second Vatican Council. Is this true? (Owings Mills, Maryland)

A. The committee member was wrong. The use of altar bells during Mass is neither mandated by the church nor forbidden; it is an option but not an obligation, left to the discretion of the pastor.

Here's what the General Instruction of the Roman Missal says: "A little before the consecration, if appropriate, a minister rings a small bell as a signal to the faithful. The minister also rings the small bell at each elevation by the priest, according to local custom" (No. 150).

The ringing of bells during the consecration has a long history in the church, beginning about the 13th century. In those days, churches were large, the priest faced the altar and Mass was offered in Latin; churches often had raised platforms in front of the altar for the choir, the result being that some worshippers could not see the altar. The ringing of bells served to draw the attention of the congregation to the fact that the sacred act of transubstantiation was taking place.

After the liturgical reforms of Vatican II — with the priest now facing the people and the language in the vernacular — many parishes decided to discontinue the use of altar bells. Bells do, though, add reverence and solemnity to a celebration. (Note that bells are rung at the Gloria during the Easter Vigil Mass to express the joy of the Resurrection.)

Altar bells are commonly used in the basilicas of Rome and, interestingly, in 1972 when asked the question "Is a bell to be rung at Mass?" the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments gave this reply:

“From a long and attentive catechesis and education in liturgy, a particular liturgical assembly may be able to take part in the Mass with such attention and awareness that it has no need of this signal at the central part of the Mass. This may easily be the case, for example, with religious communities or with particular or small groups. The opposite may be presumed in a parish or a public church, where there is a different level of liturgical and religious education and where people who are visitors or are not regular churchgoers take part.”

Q. As a new Catholic (I received my first Communion last August on the feast of the Assumption), “Question Corner” has been a real blessing for me. You address sometimes-uncomfortable topics with honesty and clarity, and I am grateful for the role you’ve played in helping me grow in my faith.

So I would like to ask you a question: For the second time in recent weeks, my 5-year-old son said to me the other day, “Boys can marry boys and girls can marry girls.”

He was clearly looking to me for insight, but what he got was stunned silence. He said something counter to my faith but, at the same time, I don’t want him to judge, hate or fear homosexuals. Do you have any advice for parents on how to have a constructive, faith-filled discussion with their children about gay marriage? (Pennsylvania)

A. I am not a master of pedagogy — particularly when it comes to 5-year-olds! You would have a much better read on what your son can understand. But I think that you might say something like this:

“Some people do think that boys can marry boys and girls can marry girls. But your mom and I — and the religion we belong to — don’t think so. We think that the way God set things up was best: that mommies and daddies can have babies together and help their children to grow up. The luckiest children in the world are the ones who have both a mommy and a daddy.”

You might even add, “Up until just a few years ago, almost the whole world agreed with us, and that’s what your mom and I still think.”

As for guiding your son not to “judge, hate or fear homosexuals,” you are right on target. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that men and women with “deep-seated homosexual tendencies ... must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided” (No. 2358).

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