

# From the Chaplaincy



## SAVED BY THE BELL

By Fr. Francis Ongkingco

“Saved by the bell” is an expression that powerfully punches us to imagine a faltering boxer who barely survives a dreadful round more for the sound of a bell than for his skill. And yet, the bell’s sound – at least for a few seconds – spells some relief and energy to hopefully turn the bout to his advantage.

This same image has been applied to numerous moments in life where we are timely whisked out of challenging, pressing, and even life-threatening situations. There are, however, in some places where the bell’s ring saves us in a totally different way.

Back in Cebu in the early 2000s, I would sometimes pay the Missionaries of Charity a visit. What calls one’s attention at the gate is the absence of a button to ring a doorbell announcing his presence. Instead, one reads a sign posted beneath a slender and sun-bleached blue nylon string: *Ring the bell once and say a Hail Mary.*

Such an original notice speaks so much of St. Teresa of Calcutta's congregation as well as the bell. What was going to call the nuns to answer the door? The bell's sound or the Hail Mary? Frankly, I never dared to try it out. After tugging the bell once and saying a *couple* of Hail Marys, a nun *finally* appears. This remembrance helped me to realize that a 'bell's sound', besides the boxing bout presented previously, can save us spiritually.

In convents and monasteries, the presence of a bell is crucial! Whether it be a big or a small one, a bell within such solitary confines becomes the heart of the place. Every single pealing or clanging, stands for something in the lives of the friars, monks or nuns.

In some communities, given the rigor with which poverty is lived, no one has the luxury of possessing a timepiece. Thus, every bell chime guides and dictates each one through the day's order: morning prayers (*lauds*), Mass, breakfast, community work, relaxation, etc.

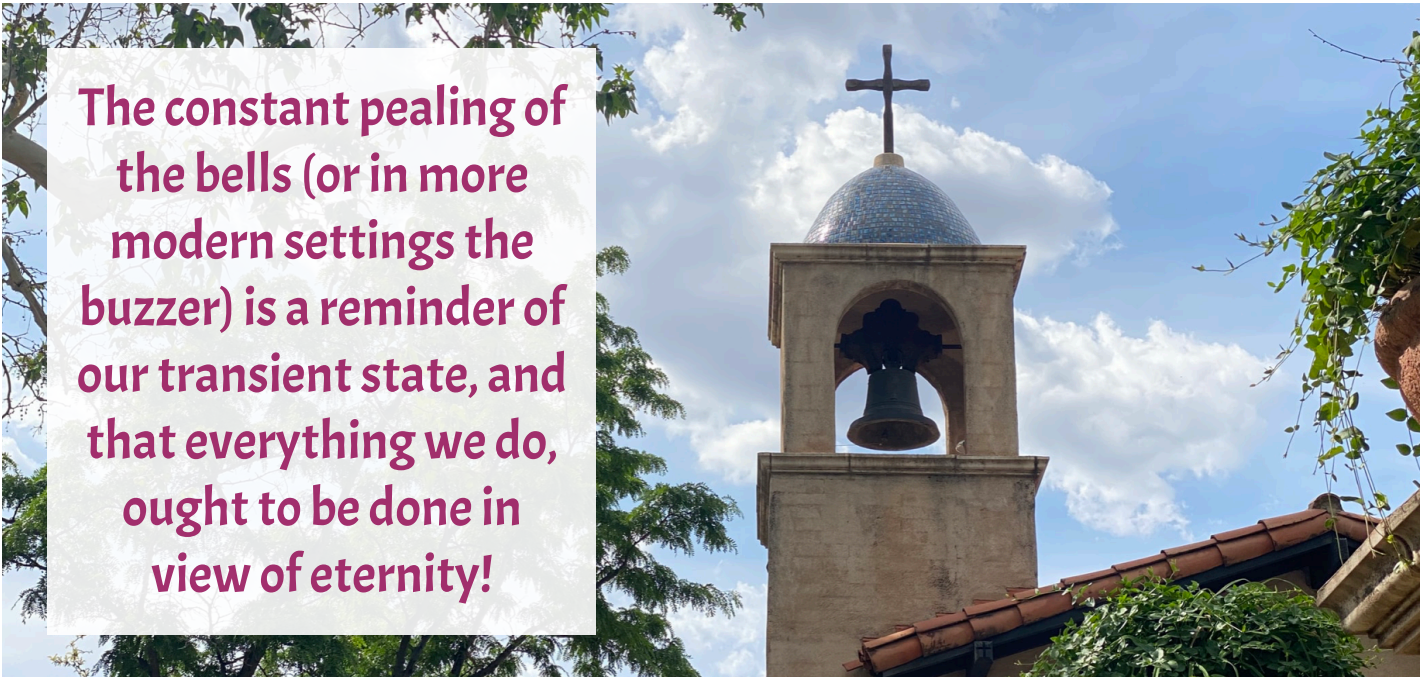
The bell's salvific role is not that of being a primitive clock that ensures everyone not to miss their meagre meals or their much-needed rest after the day's toil. Although these are essential, they are quite secondary in function. For these souls living in such sacred spaces, the bell serves to remind them

that *time is not theirs*. The constant pealing of the bells (or in more modern settings the buzzer) is a reminder of our *transient state*, and that everything we do, ought to be done in view of *eternity!*

Considering all this, we need to creatively come up with a bell or even bells to remind us that time isn't ours, one day we shall run out of it and die. But more than being a macabre reminder, it would be better to *install* spiritual bells that set our divine appointments with God, the saints and our loved ones.

Materially speaking, with smartphones alone we can set hundreds of different *alarms*. But again, it is not simply about being reminded to pray, have a family dinner or to accompany someone who may be sick. More importantly, they must deepen our conviction that *time is brief and that it isn't ours*, that we must put into play eternity in the present.

The lesson of our bell reminds me of what St. Teresa of Calcutta advised priests when celebrating the Holy Sacrifice: "Priest of God, say the Mass as though it were your *first*, your *last* and your *only* Mass. This wise counsel ought to permeate our hearts, minds and hands. Thus, in every moment, the soft pealing of bells will be heard through our hidden small acts of love for God and our loved ones.



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