

When and why do the altar servers ring a bell at Mass?

ALTHOUGH IT IS NOT A REQUIRED PRACTICE, an altar server often rings a small bell or bells during the consecration to draw attention to the precise moment when *transubstantiation* – the conversion of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ – takes place.

The custom originated during the 11th through the 13th centuries, when theologians were attempting to define more precisely the way in which Christ is present in the Eucharist. As Catholics continued to meditate on this profound mystery, various liturgical practices were introduced in order to signal His presence on the altar under the appearance of bread and wine. For example, in the 12th century, priests began the practice of elevating the host following the consecration. In France and England, a dark curtain was sometimes drawn to create a background against which the Eucharistic host could be seen more clearly. At early morning Masses, when it was still dark, a candle was often lit to illuminate the Eucharist at its elevation. Altar servers were even warned not to use too much incense at this part of the Mass so that the faithful's view of the Eucharist wouldn't be obstructed.

In some places, in addition to the ringing of an altar bell after the consecration, the large bells of parish churches were also rung so that those throughout the town or in the fields could pause from their work to kneel and pay honor to the Eucharistic Lord.

Today, the ringing of a small bell or bells at Mass remains a custom in many of our parishes. According to the Church's liturgical books, the first ringing may take place prior to the consecration, as a sign that this important moment in the Mass is about to take place. Typically, this pre-consecratory bell is rung when the Holy Spirit is called upon to sanctify the bread and wine, just before the celebrant begins the Institution narrative, in which Jesus' words at the Last Supper are recounted. Following this, there are usually two more times when the altar bell is rung: after the consecration of the bread and of the wine. In some parishes, the bell is not sounded before the consecration. The bells after each consecration may be rung once or three times.

At the parish where I offer Mass on weekends (St. John Nepomucene Church in Manhattan), not only is the small bell used at Mass, but the large bells of the church are also rung during the elevation of

the Eucharist. This homage to medieval practice serves as a stirring witness to the Church's faith in the Real Presence, as the sound of the church bells resonates through the city streets, inviting all to observe a moment of prayerful gratitude to Christ for making Himself present to us in the Holy Eucharist.

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<https://archwaysmag.org/when-and-why-do-the-altar-servers-ring-a-bell-at-mass#:~:text=ALTHOUGH%20IT%20IS%20NOT%20A,blood%20of%20Christ%20%E2%80%93%20takes%20place>