

## Installation as 10th Bishop of Burlington

Homily by Bishop Christopher J Coyne  
January 29, 2015



There is an inscription that was found on a bell that hung in the tower of a church in Northern Wisconsin that read:

“To the bath and the table,  
To the prayers and the Word,  
I call every seeking soul.”

The ringing of church bells was once something with which Vermonters were very familiar. Whether it was in the small towns of the countryside or the competing calls of the churches of the cities, the Sunday morning call of the bells “to the bath and the table, to the prayers and the Word” were a constant reminder of the presence of God in our midst.

The bells still ring out. Not so numerous and not so often, but they still ring out, their meaning captured in the words of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “for bells are the voice of the church; they have tones that touch and search, the hearts of young and old, one sound to all ... [*The Bells of St. Blas.*] Yes, the bells still ring, the bells still search but not many are answering the call. “Come,” the bells say, “Come and worship with us. Come and hear what God has to say. Come to the table and the bath, to the prayers and the Word.” But not many seem to come anymore. Yes, most of churches are still places of worship and communion where folks still gather, but many of those gatherings grow smaller and grayer every year. Folks look out and say, “Where are the young people and the families? Where have our friends and neighbors gone? Why are there so few answering the call of the Church to the life of the Good News?” In response, one could respond with fatalism, with a shrug of defeat, and a kind of long-term communal hospice as door after door after door of our churches close and the Body is finally laid to rest.

And yet, I like many of you, do not stand here in this cathedral without hope, without the conviction that this need not be. Now more than ever, our community needs to hear the call of the “Good News” proclaimed to a culture that seems to hear so many other voices.

John Henry Newman, now Blessed, once spoke to the wreckage that was the Catholic Church in 19<sup>th</sup> c. England. After years of being legally banned from public life and worship in England, the Catholic faith was finally a legal religion once again. In the face of continuing anti-Catholic prejudice and in the midst of Church with little to build upon, Newman preached his famous sermon entitled, “A Second Spring.” The very title itself invokes hope. He spoke:

What! those few scattered worshippers, the Roman Catholics, to form a

Church! Shall the past be rolled back? Shall the grave open? ... Shall shepherds, watching their poor flocks by night, be visited by a multitude of the heavenly army, and hear how their Lord has been new-born in their own city? Yes; for grace can, where nature cannot. The world grows old, but the Church is ever young.... One thing alone I know — that according to our need, so will be our strength... We shall not be left orphans; we shall have within us the strength of the Paraclete, promised to the Church and to every member of it.”

“We shall not be left orphans, we shall have within us the strength of the Paraclete.” Jesus’ promise of the gift of the Spirit to his disciples is our inheritance as well. In this power, we are not left orphans but are sons and daughters, brought into the communion of love that is the sublime essence of the Trinity. This is the Spirit that St. Paul writes in our reading from Colossians that allows us to put on “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience ... forgiving one another,” binding it all with Christian love. If we fallible and broken humans can unite in such charity, is that not a sign of both hope and a witness that invites others to join us.

There is cause for much hope here in the gift of the Spirit and our communion with the Father. And yet ... this is not something new. The gift of the Spirit and the sublime adoption are realities that we already possess and have possessed throughout the history of the Church. So ... how does this answer the present challenge we face here in Vermont and elsewhere, that of declining membership and a cultural trend away from revealed religion to a personal spirituality at best or no belief at worst?

The gospel we just heard proclaimed points the way. Jesus stood in his home synagogue in the midst of his relatives and neighbors and proclaims himself the one about whom Isaiah prophesized to bring healing to the blind, liberty to prisoners and glad tidings to the poor. His voice rings out as both a challenge and an invitation when he says, “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” It is a challenge that is immediately rejected by some as he is forced out of Nazareth by those irate at his words, but it is also an invitation that some hear and accept as they follow him on the way. Jesus does not stay in the synagogue but he goes out. His voice does not simply ring out from a place of worship like a bell stationary in a church steeple, calling people to come to him. He goes out to them. He goes out to spread the Good News of the Kingdom of God and the offer of eternal salvation.

Just before I left Indiana to come here to Vermont, I was having lunch at "A Nice Restaurant" in New Albany (that's the restaurant's real name, btw) and I was seated right next to a table occupied by two twenty-something young ladies. Now I'm not one to normally eavesdrop on others' conversations. I tend to read my book or newspaper while by myself, but my ears perked up when I heard one of them say, "Catholic Church." It turns out they were talking about how she had been looking for a faith community to join and had finally joined the mega-church down the street

but only after first trying out a Catholic Church. It was what she said about her reason for not staying that really floored me: "It was like they mourn their religion." Wow ... You know the saddest part about that statement? I know what she is talking about ....

No one wants to join a church that lacks joy. When people who leave the Catholic Church to join other churches are asked why did you do so, the number one answer is "They made me feel welcome" followed by "I find the services joyful and uplifting." If we are going to call people to our churches and they do happen to come in, what are they going to find? People who have the joy of the "good news" in their hearts, people who are welcoming and encouraging, who celebrate the Church's liturgy with care and commitment or a people who "mourn their religion. Friends, both inside and outside we have to be about the "Good News."

Besides getting our own selves and our own houses in order, brothers and sisters, I challenge myself and you to follow the Lord's lead to "go out." We are no longer the Church of the establishment in which if we just open our doors and ring the bells people will come. That is not happening. In fact, we are opening our doors and people are not coming. They are leaving. We have to change the paradigm to that of a missionary Church, one that has to go out and engage the wider community in our ongoing acts of Christian mercy and in our words and conversation. Pope Francis calls us to move out to the peripheries. He tells us, his priests and bishops, that it is time to leave the sacristies and go out into the fields as good shepherds who take on the smell of the sheep. In his recent trip to the Philippines, Pope Francis' challenge to do so was echoed in the words of farewell to him spoken by Cardinal Tagle at the final Mass in front of an estimated 7 million people. The Cardinal said that the Filipinos want to follow Francis "to the peripheries — to the shanties, to prison cells, to hospitals, to the world of politics, finance, art, sciences, culture, education, and social communications." They want to follow Francis to those venues, he said, "to bring the light of Jesus."

Can we say the same?

Did you notice the other challenge in Cardinal Tagle's words, beyond just the call to go out to the peripheries. It was the one to bring the "light of Jesus." Now, there's a challenge. You know, we can only bring to someone else what we ourselves possess. Bringing the light of Christ. What a challenge.

One time when I was in Italy, one of my classmates invited me to come to his hometown in southeast Italy for a weekend. While we were there we climbed up into the bell tower of his church because he wanted to show me the view and the bells. The view was spectacular and the bells were big. We climbed down a few levels and he began to pull the rope to ring the bells (goodness knows what the neighbors were thinking). It was loud, but more than that, it was physical. Every time the largest, deepest bell sounded, you could feel the vibrations through your whole body. They say that bass notes travel farther than high notes. It's like that car

with the sound system turned up loud and you hear the “thump, thump” of the bass notes long before you hear anything else as the car gets closer. The lower notes are foundational. The sound of the deep bell calling out is the sound with the deepest roots. The sound of the “light of Christ” within us must be that deep, that foundational. It permeates our very being so that our faith is not just a layer that we put on over lives but is instead, a way of life, a way of being in the world. Being a follower of Jesus Christ is not simply what I believe. It is who I am. It is the deepest bell of my soul. I cannot bring the light of Christ to others unless I first possess it myself, deeply.

My favorite poet is Robert Frost, the first poet laureate of the state of Vermont. He is buried down south in Bennington. Frost wrote many poems with which we are very familiar – “The road less travelled,” “Stopping by the woods on a snowy evening,” – but my favorite is his poem “Directive.” In it he speaks of a walk in the woods that leads him to the ruins of a place that once was: “There is a house that is no more a house, upon a farm that is no more a farm and in a town that is no more a town.” Not much is left - some stonewalls, a few chimneys and cellar holes with trees and vegetation now taking ownership of the ruins. His destination is the remains of a certain house and the brook that was once the source of water for the house. Next to it he has stashed a broken cup that he uses to slake his thirst. Here, though, Frost - gazing at the remains of the hope of small town and all that it once embodied and stood for - picks up the broken cup as “a broken drinking goblet like the grail” and proclaims, “Here are your waters and your watering place. Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.”

Here is our water and our watering place. Here is the bath and the table, the prayer and the words where we are made whole in the love of Christ. Ours is not a place of ruin and lost hope. It is a place of forgiveness, nourishment, and instruction. It is a place of salvation. The bells still ring out from the steeple of this church, even though it is a bit broken and in need of repair. But when the bells ring out from our steeples they are the voice of Christ - He is the bass, midrange and treble that sounds and reverberates in the lives of all whether we know it or not. His bass notes rumble through life moving all to the works of mercy, His midrange voice calls us to be with Him and enjoy his company, His treble notes teach us about a life here as well as above with one He calls Father and teaches us to do the same. They are still bells of invitation to come to Him, yes, but now we hear them as well as an invitation to go out with Him in the power of the Holy Spirit, to spread the Good News of that His Kingdom is at hand at that He, Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of the world. The “bells are the voice of the church” – the Mystical Body of Christ - “they have tones that touch and search, the hearts of young and old, one sound to all ...” One sound to be brought to all.