The Journey of Our Bells

Our invitation to the city

At the 1998 Christmas Eve Midnight Mass, the six bells of The Basilica’s west bell tower were rung for the first time. When composer Anne Kilstofte was commissioned to write a piece to be premiered at that same Mass, she paid careful attention to the pitches of our new bells. Those pitches are the flat keys of the piano, and the hand bells played during the Midnight Mass every year ring those pitches at the end of her magnificent *Mirabile Mysterium*. In 1998, the bells were rung to mirror what the choir was singing, and the doors of The Basilica facing Hennepin Avenue were flung open so everyone could hear the tonalities from the tower and feel the rush the experience evoked.

We came to have these marvelous pealers through the generosity of a parishioner who has wished to remain anonymous, but who was willing to speak with me in person about his gift. Once he found his spiritual home at The Basilica, he wanted to give back. He noticed that there was just one bell in the east tower which was never rung, so he worked with Michael O’Connell, the Pastor at that time, and Johan van Parys, the Director of Liturgy and the Sacred Arts, researching several foundries in Europe before choosing one in the Netherlands. At a crucial moment in the process of making of our bells, a group from The Basilica traveled to the foundry to watch a pouring of bronze over the form created for one of the bells.
When we spoke, the donor pulled a small brown object from his pocket—a tiny blob of dried bronze that he carries as an amulet to remind him of his relationship with God and his faith. When I asked him why he chose to support the bells, rather than some other aspect of The Basilica’s outreach, he spoke clearly and movingly: “Bells remind and invite; they invite us to enter a place where we can find God through liturgy and music. And they are part of a sensory deepening of our understanding of our liturgy.” Surely parishioners and guests respond similarly when we hear our special bells pealing through the day and as we gather to worship.

The bells are named for three women and three men, all of whom lived, worked their missions, and died in the Americas. They were considered everyday saints, people of generous hearts who served and often died for those less fortunate. By naming our bells for these role models, the church suggests that all of us can live saintly lives if we follow the teachings of Jesus. In 1998, only Katherine Drexel was canonized as a saint; but now in 2019, all but Blessed Pierre Toussaint have been canonized.” The largest bell weighs several tons while the smallest is a lightweight—only 900 pounds. A group of bells in a church tower is called a peal, though the word also applies to the bells’ liturgical range.

The process of casting bells of this caliber is neither easy nor quick. Ours were forged at the Royal Eijsbouts foundry in the Netherlands. First a false bell is made to serve as the mold for the final pouring of liquid bronze. To lower tonality, slivers of bronze are shaved off from the interior, and a mistake in this exacting procedure would result in abandoning the bell and beginning anew. Our bells are of such high quality that, though I live about four miles from The Basilica, on a clear, non-humid summer’s day I can hear them peal from my front yard. The sound causes my heart to leap with joy, as I feel mystically connected to my place of worship.

Johan van Parys says our peal is used to mark various sacramental moments such as weddings and funerals. Though they never play any recognizable tune, the electronic system is set so that we hear generous ringings if the event is festive and fewer ringings if the event is penitential. They announce any service about to begin at The Basilica, from a majestic Christmas or Easter Vigil, where many hundreds fill the pews, to an intimate daily Mass. My personal favorite ringing of the bells is just before morning prayer held every Thursday. These peals signal to those entering the sanctuary and to the broader Minneapolis community that something is about to begin at the big beautiful church at the edge of downtown.

Continued
THE BASILICA BELLS

Following ancient tradition, each one of The Basilica bells was given a name.

Bell 1: ELIZABETH ANN SETON (US) 1774-1821, worked tirelessly with the poor and founded the Sisters of Charity, the first group for religious women in the United States. She also established the first Catholic school in the US.

Bell 2: JUAN DIEGO (Mexico) 1474-1548, received a message from Mary, dressed as an Aztec princess, to build a church. She showed him roses growing in winter; when he showed the roses to his bishop, an image of the woman appeared on the cloak he used to carry them. A mosaic of this image is found at The Basilica in the Our Lady of Guadalupe chapel.

Bell 3: KATHERINE DREXEL (US) 1858-1955, from a wealthy Philadelphia family, she helped the poor, especially Native Americans, founding boarding school for Pueblo Indians and a high school for African Americans in New Orleans which became Xavier University.

Bell 4: KATERI TEKAKWITHA (US) 1656-1680, is the first Native American to be named a saint. Her father was chief of the Turtle clan of Mohawks and her mother was Algonquin. She became a Christian at age 17 and her family was so angry that she fled to a settlement in Canada where she did beadwork, cared for the needy, and died at the young age of 24. Her funeral was held on Holy Thursday.

Bell 5: ANDRÉ BESSETTE (Canada) 1845-1937, was able to cure the sick through prayer. Orphaned along with nine siblings, he became the doorkeeper at a high school in Montreal. He also was a religious brother of the Congregation of the Holy Cross. For forty years he was janitor by day, and worked with people who were disabled, blind, or dying at night. He died at age 91, and half a million mourners passed by his coffin.

Bell 6: PIERRE TOUSSAINT (Haiti) 1766-1853, was born into slavery, and became Catholic by reading classical sermons found in his plantation owner’s home. At age 21, he was brought to New York by that owner. In 1807 he was given freedom and became a well-known hairdresser in New York. A devout Catholic, he attended Mass every day and became a benefactor of the Catholic Orphan Asylum and the Church of St. Vincent de Paul. He and his wife provided shelter and education for African American children in need.

Toni McNaron has been an active volunteer and parishioner since 2007.