

Smells and Bells

Have you ever heard the phrase “smells and bells” when referring to the Mass? Curious as to what that means and why we use them? Smells and bells refer to the incense used (smells) and the bells that are rung during Mass, both of which are referenced in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM).

Thurification, or incensation, is an expression of reverence and of prayer, as is signified in Sacred Scripture. The priest, having placed incense into the thurible, blesses it with the Sign of the Cross. While use of incense is not required, it may be used throughout the Mass at specific times (#276 and #277, GIRM):

- During the entrance procession;
- At the beginning of Mass to incense the cross and the altar;
- Before the Proclamation of the Gospel;
- After the bread and the chalice have been placed upon the altar, to incense the offerings, the cross and the altar as well as the priest and the people; and
- At the showing of the Host and the Chalice after the consecration.



The use of incense is rooted deep within the Bible. Revelation 5:8 speaks of “...gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones.” There is an additional reference in Psalm 141:2, “Let my prayer be incense before you; my uplifted hands an evening offering.”

Bells may be used during the Mass to stress the importance of the True Presence of Jesus. According to the GIRM: a little before the consecration, at the “epiclesis” (the calling down of the Holy Spirit, indicated by the outstretched hands of the priest over the offerings), a server rings a bell as a signal to the faithful. Then, to remind the faithful that transubstantiation has taken place and that the Body and Blood of our Lord is truly present on the altar, the server also rings the bell as the priest shows the Host and then the Chalice (#150, GIRM).

Sources:

1. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*
2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. www.usccb.org