

The Church

The Angelus

Like that of many beautiful ceremonies of the Church the history of the Angelus is shrouded in some obscurity. It was not born full-grown, but passed through successive stages of development until it reached its present maturity. While the Jews under the Old Law had certain hours appointed for prayer there is nothing in Jewish or pagan antiquity that resembles the Angelus. It is distinctly Christian in origin and character.

The ringing of the night-bell, the curfew, at a fixed hour—a custom very general throughout Europe as early as the twelfth century—marked an appropriate hour and a regular time for evening devotion. It seems natural that Christians should associate the curfew-bell and evening prayer and that the devotion should endure when the original intention of the curfew declined. Whether the later coincidence of the curfew and the angelus bells was accidental or planned cannot be determined, but the practice of saying three Hail Marys at sunset was quite general early in the fourteenth century.

Some time later the morning Angelus was prescribed, and in some localities was known as the “peace bell”; then the noon-day bell, and through a succession of changes the prayers acquired the present beautiful form. The purpose of the devotion is to commemorate the great mystery of the Incarnation and the virginal maternity of the Blessed Mary. It derives its name from the first word of the prayer: “Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae” (The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary).

The Angelus is an official prayer of the Church and its recitation has been encouraged by indulgences; 100 days for each recitation with a plenary indulgence once a month. It is no longer necessary to recite it at the sound of the bell or to say it kneeling. For sufficient reasons the prayer may be said at approximately the appointed times. Those who do not know the prayer by heart and cannot read may gain the indulgence by reciting five Hail Marys.