

SACRED JOURNEYS: THE BELL THAT PEALS FOR PEACE



BY CATHERINE ANN LOMBARD

When a woman journeyed to Assisi only to find its iconic Peace Bell had been silenced, she made it her mission to hear it ring again.

At one point a few years ago, I felt as if there were a hole in my heart. The news seemed to be only of war, and our political leaders seemed ready to confront conflict with military madness. Longing for peace, I decided to go to Assisi (a short trip from my home in Italy) to ring the Peace Bell. I felt called to perform this symbolic act of hope. *Somebody*, I thought, *has to go and ring that Peace Bell!*

So on a fall day, I drove along a quiet, hilly back road, full of curves and beautiful views of the Apennine Mountains. The fields were dotted with olive groves and vineyards interlaced with woodlands and bed-and-breakfast inns, and the autumn light glowed soft and warm, unlike the torrid summer sun that pricks one's skin.

Assisi, also known as the City of Peace, is the birthplace of Saint Francis. The town feels as if it is piled up upon itself, stone upon stone, shining like rose quartz and nestled into the hillside above the valley of Spoleto. As I approached the city that day, I first caught sight of the Rocca Maggiore, a fortress dating to 1174. Soon afterward, the spectacular 13th-century Basilica of San Francesco came into view.

The Peace Bell is outside the old walls of the city, not far from the basilica. It is supported by four granite columns, each representing a different religion: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. Designed by German artist Gerhard Kadletz, the bell is named *Regina Pacis* (Queen of Peace), and it is meant to unite the four religions to announce peace with one voice.

The Peace Bell's official song is "*Numquam renascantur vis bellum terror*" (Never again violence, war, terror).

This declaration is inscribed on the lower edge of the bell (which was dedicated in 2007), along with the signatures of four religious leaders:

Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI; His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama; Ali Gomaa, then Grand Mufti of Egypt; and Yona Metzger, then Chief Rabbi of Israel.

I have always loved visiting the bell, pulling its rope, and sending its rich full sound from the City of Peace into the world. But to my surprise, upon arriving at the bell on this trip, I discovered there was no longer any rope to pull. Even more alarming, there was no longer any clapper to strike the bell! The Peace Bell, held in the heart of Italy in the City of Peace, was silent. Unringable. Still.

Looking up at the empty bell, I felt utterly despondent. This hollow Peace Bell felt so symbolic of our times. I became determined to find out why the Peace Bell had fallen silent.

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A SEARCH FOR THE CLAPPER

Since the Peace Bell used to be inside the *Bosco di San Francesco* (The Forest of Saint Francis), I first went to its office. A woman explained that the Peace Bell was under

the jurisdiction of the Basilica of Saint Francesco. "If you find out why it can't be rung, please come back and tell me," she said.

Next I went to the information office at the basilica, where a young woman said she didn't know anything about a Peace Bell. As I insisted that there was one and that I knew where it was (even if she didn't) and that it was not ringable and I wanted to know why, she kept making faces as if to say, "Why is this crazy old American woman bothering me with questions about this stupid, nonexistent Peace Bell?" Finally, she tossed a business card for the basilica at me and told me to write and ask them.

Finally, I entered the basilica to ask the friar who sits for hours in a little cabin near the entrance. He is there for pilgrims who have questions or wish to request

prayers. The friar's bulk seemed to fill the little booth. He was absorbed talking to someone on his *telefonino*. Finally, he hung up and looked at me.

I asked about the Peace Bell, and he told me that if I wanted peace I should go pray for it. He then swung his hand toward the nearby chapel as if to sweep me away into the nearest pew.

"But I already pray every day for peace," I said. "I am feeling very sad. I came all the way here to ring the Peace Bell."

"Well, then," he said. "Go find a stick. You can hit the bell with a stick." He then suddenly jumped into action and called for the nearby guard. "Giuseppe, do we have an umbrella? Not a good one, mind you." The guard then ran into a nearby corner room and came out with a small, foldable umbrella. I laughed, relieved to let go of some of my frustration.

"No, no," I said. "That's too small. That will never reach."

"Find something long!" the friar commanded. Giuseppe ran back and emerged with a long plastic tube.

"Oh, that will work!" I said, taking the tubing. "Thank you so much." And off I went.

As I climbed the stairs back toward the Peace Bell, I started to cry. Why was it so hard to ring this bell right at the moment when the world seemed to need peace more than ever?

Upon arriving to the bell, I bowed low, reached up with the plastic tube, and hit the bell three times. As it rung, people started to gather. When the bell stopped after the third time, I

bowed once more and left the tubing nearby for the next bell-ringer to use.

THE POWER OF PRAYER AND ACTION

The first thing I did upon returning home was to write to the Basilica of San Francesco to ask what had happened to the Peace Bell. They told me it had probably been moved from the front of the church and that maybe in the future they would move it back. "We're glad you managed to ring it," they wrote. "But peace is something we must build in our heart and share with our neighbors."

This was a very nice response, but ... First of all, the bell was never in front of the church. The bell is impossible to move. Four massive granite columns hold the heavy brass bell aloft. Secondly, peace *is* in my heart. That's why I went to the City of Peace to ring the bell. Ringing the bell is a symbolic way for me to share peace with my neighbors and with the world.

After all, Saint Francis' life was full of symbolic acts. Of course, he prayed for peace, but in 1219, he also traveled to Egypt and met the Sultan Malik al-Kamil in an attempt to put an end to the Fifth Crusade. He preached to the birds. He built a church.

He kissed lepers' ulcerous sores. Throughout his lifetime, the Poor Man of Assisi lived a symbolic life. While renouncing his father and patrimony, Francis stripped himself naked in front of the Bishop of Assisi. He arranged the first live nativity scene to celebrate Christmas. He and his followers wore coarse woolen tunics and a rope belt with three to five knots, each knot representing a specific vow.

Finally, I had the insight to contact Kadletz, the artist who created the bell. He was surprised and deeply troubled to hear that the Peace Bell in Assisi had fallen silent, especially because he was just completing another work, titled *Wo ist der Frieden?* (Where is the Peace?). Kadletz's new bell was an exact replica of the Peace Bell in Assisi. However, he had deliberately

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silenced his new bell! This bell was tightly wound with barbed wire from the Ganacker concentration camp in Germany. The bell itself precariously hung from a 10,000-year-old bog oak that was partially charred. And the clapper was tightly tied with rope so the bell could not be rung.

Symbolically, a clapper represents power and the bell wisdom. When separated, they both become out of balance and less effective. Power without wisdom can be dominating, reckless, and even abusive. Wisdom without power can be anemic and nothing more than self-affirming.

After many emails, several inquiries, and months of waiting, Kadletz finally received word from the Franciscan friars in Assisi that they found the Peace Bell clapper, which had been discarded nearby in the woods. They promised to restore the clapper, and we both waited a few more months for the repair to be made. Once the Peace Bell was complete again, Kadletz planned to drive to Assisi, his car full of Bavarian beer for the Franciscan friars, to celebrate the bell's renewal.

Perhaps the best part of this story is that exactly one year after my first inquiries, I had the privilege to meet the Peace Bell artist himself and ring the bell alongside him. Upon meeting for the first time, we exchanged a big hug. United in our love for the Peace Bell and our mutual campaign to hear it ring again, we both rejoiced in pulling the cord to have the clapper once more strike the bell. Its sweet song rang over the town and floated out into the world.

Peace—the kind that Saint Francis demonstrated with both prayer and action—could finally be heard again. ☺

