

What Is the Angelus?

Among our many Catholic devotions, few are more beautiful or have been contemplated more often than the Angelus.

Designed to commemorate the mystery of the Incarnation and pay homage to Mary's role in salvation history, it has long been part of Catholic life. Around the world, three times every day, the faithful stop whatever they are doing and with the words "The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary" begin this simple yet beautiful prayer. But why do we say the Angelus at all, much less three times a day?

A review of Church history shows that this devotion did not appear suddenly, but developed over several centuries.

Called By the Bell [As still happens at midday and at 6pm in Portobello, courtesy of Mgr Rae]

Most Church historians agree that the Angelus can be traced back to 11th-century Italy, where Franciscan friars said three Hail Marys during night prayers, at the last bell of the day. Over time, pastors encouraged their Catholic flocks to end each day in a similar fashion by saying three Hail Marys. In the villages, as in the monasteries, a bell was rung at the close of the day reminding the laity of this special prayer time. The evening devotional practice soon spread to other parts of Christendom, including Britain.

Toward the end of the 11th century, the Normans invaded and occupied England. In order to ensure control of the populace, the Normans rang a curfew bell at the end of each day reminding the locals to extinguish all fires, get off the streets and retire to their homes. While not intended to encourage prayer, this bell became associated nevertheless with evening prayer time, which included saying the Hail Mary. Once the curfew requirement ended, a bell continued to be rung at the close of each day and the term curfew bell was widely popular, although in some areas it was known as the "Ave" or the "Gabriel" bell.

Around 1323, the Bishop of Winchester and future Archbishop of Canterbury, Bishop John de Stratford, encouraged those of his diocese to pray the Hail Mary in the evening, writing, "We exhort you every day, when you hear three short interrupted peals of the bell, at the beginning of the curfew (or, in places where you do not hear it, at vesper time or nightfall) you say with all possible devotion, kneeling wherever you may be, the Angelic Salutation three times at each peal, so as to say it nine times in all".

Meanwhile, around 1318 in Italy, Catholics began saying the Hail Mary upon rising in the morning. It is likely that this habit again came from the monks, who included the Hail Mary in the prayers they said before their workday began. The morning devotion spread, and evidence is found in England that in 1399 Archbishop Thomas Arundel ordered church bells be rung at sunrise throughout the country, and he asked the laity to recite five Our Fathers and seven Hail Marys every morning.

The noontime Angelus devotion seems to have derived from the long-standing practice of praying and meditating on Our Lord's passion at midday each Friday. In 1456, Pope Calixtus III directed the ringing of church bells every day at noon and that Catholics pray three Hail Marys. The Pope solicited the faithful to use the noonday prayers to pray for peace in the face of the 15th-century invasion of Europe by the Turks. The bell rung at noontime became known as the "Peace" bell or

“Turkish” bell. In 1481, Pope Sixtus IV was petitioned by Queen Elizabeth of England, wife of King Henry VII, to grant indulgences for those who said at least one Hail Mary at 6am, noon and 6pm. There is evidence that a bell was rung at those times.

The Angelus Today

By the end of the 16th century, the Angelus had become the prayer that we know today: three Hail Marys, with short verses in between (called versicles), ending with a prayer. It was first published in modern form in a catechism around 1560 in Venice. This devotion reminds us of the Angel Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary, Mary’s fiat, the Incarnation and Our Lord’s passion and resurrection. It is repeated as a holy invitation, calling us to prayer and meditation. For centuries the Angelus was always said while kneeling, but Pope Benedict XIV (r.1740-1758) directed that the Angelus should be recited while standing on Saturday evening and all day on Sunday. He also directed that the Regina Coeli (Queen of Heaven) be said instead of the Angelus during the Easter season. Over the years many of the faithful have focused the morning Angelus on the Resurrection, the noon Angelus on the Passion and the evening Angelus on the Incarnation.

It is said that over the centuries workers in the fields halted their labours and prayed when they heard the Angelus bell. This pious practice is depicted by Jean-François Millet’s famous 1857 painting (below) that shows two workers in a potato field stopping to say the Angelus. There are also stories that animals would automatically stop ploughing and stand quietly at the bell. Like a heavenly messenger, the Angelus calls us to interrupt our daily, earthly routines and turn to thoughts of God, of Our Lady, and of eternity. As Pope Benedict XVI taught in 2010 on the feast of the Annunciation: “The Angel’s proclamation was addressed to her; she accepted it, and when she responded from the depths of her heart . . . at that moment the eternal Word began to exist as a human being in time. From generation to generation the wonder evoked by this ineffable mystery never ceases.”
(Taken from the Our Sunday Visitor website)

