

### **December 20, 2015 The Sound of a Bell Homily:**

Brothers and sisters, one of the most notable Catholic thinkers of the last century was Thomas Merton, a Cistercian monk and author of many highly praised books on the spiritual life of Christians. Arguably, he was on a short list of outstanding spiritual writers of the last 75 years.

In one of his poems, "The Quickening of John the Baptist", which is based on the account of one of the Joyful Mysteries, the Visitation, he recalls the lovely story of Mary's visit to her cousin, Elizabeth. Fr. Merton likened Mary's greeting to the distinctive and unforgettable sound of a monastery bell. The ringing of the bell plays an enormous role in the daily life of a monk. He is awakened by the sound of a bell; He is called to pray in the presence of the Lord; and He is invited to participate in an experience of faith.

In the gospel reading (Lk.1:39-45) the unborn child of Elizabeth awakens at the sound of Mary's voice. Elizabeth's reaction? "When the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leapt for joy" (Lk.1:44). He leaps for joy in the presence of the mystery. It is a dance of faith!

What was there about Mary's voice? How did the unborn John come to know the presence of the Messiah cloistered in the womb of Mary? Father Albert McBride writes: "Merton required no words from John. John's movement said it all. It revealed the sheer joy of being filled with God's Spirit".

The gospel teaches us that whoever opens his heart to the mother encounters and welcomes the Son and is surprised by joy. As Christmas draws near the sound of a church bell (or even an alarm clock) can have a salutary effect. It can awaken us to fulfill our Christian duties in life; it can open our hearts to hear the Word of God; and it can remind us of the need to be vigilant and watchful. However, sometimes, even the booming sound of a bell fails to arouse us. We fail to rise from our slumber. Sadly, such is the case with many baptized Christians in our secular culture.

Again I turn to Fr. McBride: "In our secular culture where belief is mocked in movies and on television and in so-called sophisticated news columns and at the podiums of our universities, would it not be a breath of fresh air to hear Elizabeth's '...blessed are you' for believing what your parents taught you, what our Church offered you, what Christ came to foster in you? If we stay near Mary, we will feel a surge of faith in our hearts. Mary is a specialist in the faith department. She knows just how to bring us to faith in Jesus".

Amen!