

THE ANGELUS

What is the Angelus?:

The Angelus is a short practice of devotion in honor of the Incarnation repeated three times each day, morning, noon, and evening, at the sound of the bell. It consists essentially in the triple repetition of the Hail Mary, to which in later times have been added three introductory versicles and a concluding versicle and prayer.

The prayer is that which belongs to the antiphon of Our Lady, *Alma Redemptoris*, and its recitation is not of strict obligation in order to gain the indulgence. The devotion derives its name from the first word of the three versicles, i.e. *Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae* (The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary).

The indulgence of 100 days for each recitation, with a plenary once a month, was granted by Benedict XIII, on 14 September, 1724, but the conditions prescribed have been simplified by Leo XIII.

Originally it was necessary that the Angelus should be said kneeling (except on Sundays and on Saturday evenings, when the rubrics prescribe a standing posture), and also that it should be said at the sound of the bell; but more recent legislation allows these conditions to be dispensed with for any sufficient reason, provided the prayer be said approximately at the proper hours, i.e. in the early morning, or about the hour of noon, or towards evening. In this case, however, the whole Angelus as commonly printed has to be recited, but those who do not know the prayers by heart or who are unable to read them, may say five Hail Marys in their place.

During paschal time the antiphon of Our Lady, *Regina caeli laetare*, with versicle and prayer, is to be substituted for the Angelus. The Angelus indulgence is one of those which are not suspended during the year of Jubilee.

History:

In the first place it is certain that the Angelus at midday and in the morning were of later introduction than the evening Angelus.

Secondly it is certain that the midday Angelus, which is the most recent of the three, was not a mere development or imitation of the morning and evening devotion.

Thirdly, there can be no doubt that the practice of saying three Hail Marys in the evening somewhere about sunset had become general throughout Europe in the first half of the fourteenth century and that it was recommended and indulgenced by Pope John XXII in 1318 and 1327.

- The evening Angelus

We have no certain example of three Hail Marys being recited at the sound of the bell in the evening earlier than a decree of the Provincial Synod of Gran in the year 1307. Many facts suggest that some such practice was current in the thirteenth century. In the time of St Bonaventure (1263), a decree of Franciscan General Chapter directs preachers to encourage the people to say Hail Marys when the Compline bell rang. These indications are confirmed by certain inscriptions still to be read on some few bells of the thirteenth century. We read in the monastic rule of St. Aethelwold of Winchester, c. 975, that certain prayers called the tres orationes, preceded by psalms, were to be said after Compline as well as before Matins and again at Prime, and although there is no express mention of a bell being rung after Compline, there is express mention of the bell being rung for the tres orationes at other hours.

We have not in these earlier examples any mention of the Hail Mary, but it would be the most natural thing in the world that once the Hail Mary had become an everyday prayer, this should for the laity take the place of the more elaborate tres orationes recited by the monks; just as in the case of the Rosary, one hundred and fifty Hail Marys were substituted for the one hundred and fifty psalms of the Psalter.

In the Franciscan decree of St. Bonaventure's time, the laity in general were to be induced to say Hail Marys when the bell rang at Compline, after the office of the friars. A special appropriateness for these greetings of Our Lady was found in the belief that at this very hour she was saluted by the angel.

The Angelus in its origin was certainly an imitation of the monks' night prayers and that it had probably nothing directly to do with the curfew bell, rung as a signal for the extinction of fires and lights. The curfew, however, first meets us in Normandy in 1061 and is then spoken of as a bell which summoned the people to say their prayers, after which summons they should not again go abroad. The curfew was probably grafted upon this primitive prayer-bell rather than vice versa.

- The morning Angelus

The tres orationes also offers some explanation of the fact that shortly after the recital of the three Hail Marys at evening had become familiar, a custom established itself of ringing a bell in the morning and of saying the Ave thrice. The earliest mention seems to be in the chronicle of the city of Parma, 1318. This morning bell was also an imitation of the monastic triple peal for the tres orationes or morning prayers. The morning Ave Maria soon became a familiar custom in all the countries of Europe and was almost as generally observed as that of the evening.

- The midday Angelus

While often spoken of as a peace bell and formally commended by Louis XI of France in 1475, it was closely associated with the veneration of the Passion of Christ.

The fuller form, now universally adopted, cannot be traced back earlier than 1612.

The Prayer:

The Angelus reminds us of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. As we read Luke's Gospel, (Lk 1:26-38).

Mary was the perfect choice. She is truly a model of humility and had been born without the stain of original sin, as defined by the Church's dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

When Mary calls herself the handmaid, the servant of the Lord in the Angelus (Lk 1:38) it is with inspiring humility and sincerity.

She thought of herself first and foremost as God's servant, seeking glory not for herself but rather for Him. In so doing, she became, as St. Augustine said, a "*heavenly ladder, by which God came into the world,*" descending from heaven to earth, to become flesh in her womb.

Mary was happy to have God work through her. As she expressed it most famously in the canticle the Magnificat, "*My soul magnifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior*" (Lk 1:46-47).

The Angelus pays tribute to a crucial aspect of Mary's role in the Incarnation, when it quotes "*be it done to me according to thy word*" (Lk 1:38). This wonderful event could not have happened without her consent, without what is known as her fiat. By saying "*yes*" to God in allowing herself to become His mother, she showed us the ultimate example of trust in our Creator.

Do we say "*yes*" when Christ wants to work through us? Or when He asks us to be graceful in trying situations? The prayer and meditation of the Angelus can help us to do His will.

Finally, the Angelus completes its short summary of the Incarnation with the moving reference to our Lord: "*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us*" (Jn 1:14). St. Bernard noted that our Lord came to show us His love so that He might then experience ours.

The lines that follow about being made worthy of the promises of Christ are also found in the Rosary and tie in well with what follows: an appeal for God's grace to help us in our pilgrimage on earth.

Although the Angelus honors the Resurrection in the morning, the Passion at noon, and the Incarnation in the evening, since the times correspond to the hours at which these great Mysteries actually occurred, you can pray around the prescribed times. It is still usually accompanied by the ringing of the Angelus bell. The Regina Coeli prayer replaces the Angelus during the Easter season.

When prayed in a group setting, a leader recites the verses and everyone recites both the responses and the Hail Mary's in between each verse, as shown above.