

The Angelus¹

Translated by Paul Barrett, O.F.M.Cap.

It seems that the credit for introducing into our countries the daily call to prayer, which we know as the Angelus, belongs to St. Francis of Assisi. In 1220, Francis returned to Europe from the Near East, where he had encountered Islam at close quarters. During the siege of Damietta, in the autumn of 1219, he had boldly and calmly crossed the Saracen lines to meet Al-Malik, the Sultan of Egypt, face to face. While he was there among the Muslims, was he perhaps impressed by the way the muezzins called out from the high minarets several times a day, inviting the faithful sons of Allah to turn to God in prayer? And did this give him the idea of introducing a similar practice into the Christian West? Be that as it may, almost immediately upon his return to Italy, he was inspired to write a letter to "mayors and consuls, magistrates and rulers," suggesting, among other things, that they "should manifest such honor to the Lord among the people entrusted to [them] that every evening an announcement be made by a town crier or some other signal that praise and thanks may be given by all people to the all-powerful Lord God" (*EpRect* 7).

While we don't know for sure whether or not Francis's brothers took up his suggestion, we do know that the Angelus began in 1250 in a Franciscan friary in Arezzo, Italy. As we find detailed in historical documents, a certain Brother Benedict there had an antiphon beginning with the words "The angel of the Lord announced to Mary..." sung or recited every evening when the bells rang. Then other friaries adopted the custom of accompanying the beautiful evening greeting to Mary with the ringing of bells.

Brother Benedict's innovation spread quickly to all the Franciscan friaries. Thus, in 1269, the General Chapter in Assisi, at which St. Bonaventure presided, decided "that in honor of the glorious Virgin, all the brothers shall teach the people to greet the Blessed Virgin several times when the bell rings for Compline." In 1305 the Provincial Chapter in Padua decreed for the Province of Venice: "That every evening, in

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all the friaries, the bell shall be rung three times slowly in honor of the glorious Virgin, and that all the brothers shall then kneel down and say three times: 'Hail Mary, full of grace....' "At about the same time, Bonvicino of Ripa, of the Order of the Humiliati, introduced into Milan and its environs the custom of ringing the bell in the evening. Pope John XXII introduced the same custom into Rome on May 7, 1327.

Soon the Angelus was being said in the morning as well as in the evening. This had been the practice in Pavia from 1330, and by the end of the fourteenth century the usage had spread throughout Christendom. The custom of ringing the bells at midday, too, developed later and was done for various reasons: to honor our Lord's passion on Fridays, and to pray for peace and for victory over the Turks. But these different customs had died out by the end of the fifteenth century, and the Angelus as we know it had evolved. The three triple peals of bells that accompany the recitation of the Hail Mary are intended to honor Mary in the mysteries of the Annunciation and the Incarnation.