



July 4, 2017

Colonel Stacey J. Huser, USAF
Commander, 90th Missile Wing
F.E. Warren Air Force Base
Cheyenne, Wy 82005

Dear Colonel Huser,

Peace in the Lord!

I am writing in regard to two church bells that are presently displayed on your post with the hope that I can work with you to have them returned to the church from which they were taken.

My name is Father Serafin B. Tybaco, Jr., I am the Parish Priest of the Church of San Lorenzo de Martyr in Balangiga, Eastern Samar, Philippines. The church of San Lorenzo was founded in 1854 and over the next three decades, through the sacrifices of our parishioners, acquired three church bells. In 1901, the bells were taken after a military engagement between Filipinos fighting for their independence and the American forces garrisoned in the town. There is much history with some acrimony associated with both the engagement and the bells.

The bells were initially taken and stored in a military camp in Leyte after the encounter, and later in 1904 two of the three bells were carried by the 11th Infantry back to the U.S. where they ended up at Fort D. A. Russell. The third bell was given to the 9th Infantry. The 11th Infantry was decommissioned in 1915. The bells were abandoned by the Army until one of your predecessors found them in 1967 and directed that they be put in display.

As I am sure you are aware, the Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country. As such, church bells are an integral part of our heritage, culture and traditions – especially in smaller towns like Balangiga, where church bells are used to announce weddings, deaths and call parishioners to prayer or announce important community events.

Our church was totally ruined after Super typhoon Yolanda destroyed our town in November 2013. Yolanda not only devastated the lives of so many who had so little, it also destroyed the church which is the center of our spiritual lives when we needed it the most. Thankfully, through the generosity of the U. S. Conference of Catholics Bishops (USCCB), our church was restored in April last year. As part of that effort and to complement the work of the USCCB, our parishioners raised Php500,000 (\$11,000) to acquire two new bells. The fact that people who do not have much money to begin with donated sufficient funds to buy two new church bells, demonstrates just how important bells are to our parishioners. While these bells are functional, they cannot replace the esteem, love and devotion we have for the original bells of San Lorenzo de Martyr that were taken in 1901.

There are substantial precedents I would like to call to your attention. In January 2016, Lieutenant General Robert L. Caslen, Jr., Superintendent of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, approved the return of a similar bell that had also been taken in 1901 from a sister parish, the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Bauang, La Union. It had been on display at West Point since 1915 and on May 23rd of last year, thousands of people attended the church service to witness the return of San Pedro Bell.



Similarly, in 1987, the U. S. Naval Academy returned a bell which sat outside Bancroft Hall to Japan. Another Japanese bell was returned to Okinawa by the Virginia Military Institute in 1991, and in 2007 Harvard University returned 18 bells to Russia which had hung outside of Lowell House. Many cities in the U. S. also returned bells to Japan they inherited from returning ships of the same namesake after WWII. This includes the cities of Duluth, Topeka and Atlanta.

Returning private property, and especially church bells, to their original and rightful owners has been an underlying and recurring theme as evidenced in the above precedents and as illustrated several recent films including the “Monuments Men” and “Woman in Gold” – because it is the right and honorable thing to do. We sincerely hope and pray that you too will honor our request and allow us the opportunity to once again be reunited with our bells – the Bells of San Lorenzo de Martyr.

In closing, I am reminded of a work taken from Meditation 17, written by John Donne, an English cleric and poet in 1624. Ernest Hemingway also borrowed lines for his book and movie “for whom the Bell Tolls.” Donne’s work describes the “interconnectedness” of humanity. It is perhaps most appropriate and relevant then that we reflect on what it says:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less; as well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend’s, or of thine own were.

Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore, never
ask for
Whom the bell tolls, for it tolls for thee.

These words resonated as Filipinos witnessed the first tolling of the San Pedro Bell on May 23rd after 115 years of silence. We hope and pray that one day we will similarly hear the ringing of the Bells of San Lorenzo de Martyr in Balangiga knowing that these bells would be tolling for all of us – the givers and the receivers reinforcing the interconnectedness of our two nations.

Yours in Christ;

Rev. Fr. SERAFIN B. TYBACO, JR.
Parish Priest

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