



September 4, 2017

The Honorable Ryan D. McCarthy
Acting Secretary of the Army
101 Army Pentagon, Room 3E 560
Washington, DC 20310-0101

Dear Mr. Secretary,

Peace in the Lord!

I am writing regarding a Catholic church bell that was taken from my church in 1901. It is presently held by your 9th US Infantry in Korea. I would like to request that it be returned.

My name is Father Serafin B. Tybaco, Jr., I am the Pastor 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, these three church bells were taken after a military engagement between Filipinos fighting for their independence and the American forces garrisoned in the town. There is much rancor associated with both the engagement and the bells.

The bells were initially taken and stored in a military camp in Leyte after the encounter in 1901. The Philippine American War ended in 1902. 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 in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Today they are held hostage at Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne. The third bell was given to the 9th Infantry and is with the unit in Korea. This is the one I am formally asking you to return.

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 Catholic 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 have so little, sacrificed to donate 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 our original bells.

Last year, in January 2016, Lieutenant General Robert L. Caslen, Jr., Superintendent of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, graciously and honorably 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 for over a century and on May 23rd of last year, thousands of people attended the joyous church service to witness the return of San Pedro Bell.

Similarly, in 1987, the Superintendent of the U. S. Naval Academy returned a bell which sat outside Bancroft Hall to Japan and another Japanese bell was returned to Okinawa by the Superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute in 1991.



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 in two recent films the “Monuments Men” and “Woman in Gold” – because it is the right and honorable thing to do. I sincerely hope and pray that you too, like General Caslen, will honor my request and allow us the opportunity to once again be reunited with our bell.

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 described 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 last year, after 115 years in the possession of the US Army. I hope and pray, through your grace and kindness, we will similarly hear the ringing, in our church, of another bell held by the US Army - - knowing that its tolling would be 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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