

## Holy Week Traditions: the *Strepitus* and *Crotalus*



### ***What are the strepitus and crotalus?***

As the Church makes clear in her liturgical documents, normally we are not meant to use percussion instruments at Holy Mass (*Tra le Sollicitudini* no. 19-20, cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium* etc). However, there are at least three noble exceptions to this.

The first one is obviously bells. Already around in the time of Jesus (they were already in use in ancient Egypt and Babylon), they were being used in the first centuries under the different names of *signum*, *campana*, *clocca*, *nola* - all effectively meaning the word 'bell'. While the earliest vague references to them we find is by St. Caesarius of Arles (c. 513) and the Rule of St. Benedict (c. 540), it is St Gregory of Tours (c. 585) who first mentions their explicit use. During Holy Week, we hear the bells rung in a way we never hear the rest of the year - during the whole *Gloria* - and then they are never heard again until Easter Sunday.

The second is the sound of the *strepitus* ("great noise"). For many centuries, and in many places still today (like St Mary's Cathedral and The Maternal Heart, Lewisham), Christians celebrate the office of Tenebrae - a series of readings and prayers on the Friday night or early Saturday morning. As each reading and prayer is completed, one of the series of candles especially set up for this purpose is extinguished until in the end only one is still lit - and the rest of the church is in complete darkness. Finally, at the end of the very last prayer, suddenly out of the darkness is heard a noisy and frightening banging and clashing - of wood, or stamping, or books thumped onto a pew. This is the crash of the earthquake at the death of Jesus on the cross. It is a shocking and moving experience which helps us enter into the significance of what is happening.

There is also a third percussive sound which we can hear in the liturgy. This is made by the *crotalus*. This latin term originates from the Greek "*krotalon*" (κροταλον) meaning "rattle". Usually made from wood, of varying designs, it is a shock to us, at the elevation of the host and the chalice, instead of hearing the bells to hear the hard "crack, crack" of wood on wood, the 'death rattle' of the lurking presence of the Snake (the Devil - Judas the Betrayer is sitting right next to Jesus there at the first mass), and even more so the suffering Jesus would experience in being grabbed roughly, hit, scourged, crowned with thorns (a kind of wood), with nails hammered into his hands and feet, and ultimately his suffering and death on that very same substance - wood.



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### **Bibliography**

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