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Student perspectives on worship services from Instructor Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez's Religious Studies 108 Human Spirituality undergraduate course at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Church of the Ascension

by Erin Spare

On Sunday September 27, I attended a Catholic Church service in Virginia Beach at the Church of the Ascension (4853 Princess Anne Rd Virginia Beach, VA 23462-4446). It was approximately an hour long service that started at 10:30 and ended promptly at 11:30. Mass was led by Father Clark.

When I arrived at Church of the Ascension, I was surprised by how modernized the building looked. I expected it to be a small, traditional looking cathedral with stain glass windows and kneelers on the pews. Contrary to my expectations, the church was very large. It had quite a few windows but they weren't stain glass rather there were multiple large open windows, bringing in a lot of light to the church. The church was constructed with metal paneling and surrounded by a surplus of beautiful greenery. As I was walked through the door, I was immediately greeted by an older lady who was passing out pamphlets that contained the prayers that were going to be said during the service along with summaries of the gospel stories. This was very strange to me because growing up I lived in a different city and the Catholic Church that I regularly attended had actual bibles that the people attending could use during service. Before I walked into the actual room where mass was being held, I dipped my hand in the holy water that was conveniently in the entry way and performed the traditional sign of the cross. As I made my way through the entryway and into the room I was surprised by how full it was!

The pews were completely full of people and there were even people sitting on the floor! Luckily I was able to find a seat in a middle pew.

There was about ten minutes until the mass started so I had some time to fully take in my surroundings. As I looked around, I noticed that there was a large percentage of people from the Filipino ethnicity. The ages of people ranged however there was a significant amount of families and older people in attendance that morning. Everyone seemed to be a part of the middle class; I say this because everyone was dressed in a "dressy casual" manner. The men typically wore khaki pants and button downs and most of the women were wearing sundresses. I didn't notice anyone wearing big designer name brands. Although this particular church is in a different area than where I currently live, I felt very comfortable mingling with the people around me. A majority of the people present that day wore name tags making them easily approachable and making it so that I could have an easier time remembering all the people I came in contact with. Right before Mass began, I decided I would make the effort and try to get to know the person sitting beside me. I started by asking if the church was usually that busy (I was told that the large number of people in attendance was because of the Pope's arrival in the United States) and we ended the conversation by talking about VCU. During that brief time period, I was able to look around

and observe the room. There was not very many decorations, rather all they had was a few crucifixes.

Finally it was time for the service to officially start. The lights flickered to signal for room to get quiet, similar to how it's done in a theatrical play. A middle aged woman walked up to the podium that was on the platform 'stage' in the front of the room. She greeted the crowd and introduced the priest that was going to lead the service that day. She then told us to stand and the band began to play a lively hymn as the altar boys and priest made their way down the aisle to the stage. A little after they were situated on stage, the hymn ended and the crowd was greeted yet again, this time by the priest. Before he officially began the service, he informed us that he wanted to talk briefly about the Pope's arrival. After he conversed with us about some of the things the Pope has said and done since his arrival in the US.

Father Clark began by leading the sign of the cross. This is done by tracing of an upright cross (kind of resembles this icon: +) across the body with the right hand. He said another blessing and asked that we take a moment to silently bow our heads upon reflection. After that, the congregation began to sing "Gloria", an ancient hymn of praise.

Finally the first reading began. A middle aged man walked up to the podium and began the first reading. Once he was finished, the choir sang a responsorial Psalm. The second reading was then read followed by the choir singing Alleluia. The priest then went on to proclaiming the Gospel of the Lord and a Homily. The mass then followed the traditional sermon sequence of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the

communion rite, and finally the concluding rite. The service ended with the choir leading another upbeat hymn and everyone left smiling and singing. As we made our way out of the room, everyone dipped their hands in the holy water and performed the sign of the cross again. The priest even waited outside to shake our hands and try to make sure everyone felt welcomed.

Catholic Church services are very much ritualistic. Based on my experience this weekend at the Church of the Ascension and my childhood experiences attending different Catholic churches, each mass is pretty much the same. The structure of each of these masses is based on centuries of traditions that I do not think will change anytime soon. Overall I enjoyed attending mass this weekend. Despite being a confirmed Catholic, I feel as if I haven't been doing all that I can to honor the commitment that I have made to God. Since I began my college career, I've neglected going to church as often as I used to, however with the help of this course and the two other field trips I go on this semester, I hope I will find my way again. I chose to make the Catholic Church my first field trip because it is where I am most comfortable and I feel like this experience served as a refresher so that I have some central beliefs and customs to compare and contrast my other two field trips off of. •

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