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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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Cathedral of the Sacred Heart

by Jack Burrell

For my first field trip report, I decided to stay close to home and go to the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in the heart of our very own campus. The address was 800 S. Cathedral Place, Richmond, Virginia 23220. I attended an afternoon mass at 5:15 on Sunday September the 20th 2015. The denomination of this particular church is Catholic and The Most Revered Francis X. DiLorenzo Bishop of Richmond led the Mass, which I must say was quite beautiful.

The outside of the cathedral was quite a sight to see; I've seen it personally in passing but never before then had I taken the time to stop and take in all of its beauty. I actually arrived quite early to meander around the grounds to take it all in. I locked my bike up across the street and made my way to the front. I stood on the edge of Laurel Street and gazed up at the dual steeples. The height was the first thing that I noticed then I examined the incredible architecture in detail; the granite and limestone exterior stretched up toward a magnificent domed roof of another steeple stationed in the center of the cathedral at its highest point. The Dome and other parts of the roof were made of copper, turned green by weathering throughout the past hundred plus years. Other details on the exterior included several accents of crosses and stained glass window. Columns surrounded surround the entryway. Next I entered the cathedral where I was consumed with the glory of the artistry that was the interior of the church. The nave

sprawled back towards a pulpit. The interior was so inviting; it was covered in beautiful artwork, it almost reminded me of a museum. The attention to detail was notable; you could tell who ever worked on this masterful piece of architecture put their all into it. The ceiling stretched high into the air in the main hall of the nave and above the pulpit even higher. This detail made it seem as if the dome was like a beacon directing the prayer into the heavens. Massive archways lined the entire interior, and the floor plan looked like a giant cross with more pews jutting out from the pulpit area perpendicular to the main sections of pews in which I was stationed. Grandiose chandeliers lit the room hanging high above the churchgoers heads, also shedding light on the artwork and stained glass covering the inside of the cathedral. I had seen the outside in passing like I mentioned above but never could I imagine the stunning interior.

This mass was indeed quite formal I had been greeted at the door with a packet of songs and a program printed on seemingly expensive card stock. The people inside, including the staff, were dressed well, the majority with collared shirts tucked in many in full suits and the women were mostly in dresses. The diversity of the churchgoers was also striking. I couldn't tell you more than that it mostly consisted of Caucasians and African Americans with other ethnic backgrounds sprinkled in. The gender ratio was pretty close too, I'd say about 60% of the attendees were male the other 40%

female. I honestly felt pretty uncomfortable, I felt very out of place and intrusive. I sat alone, and no one offered to sit with me or explain things to me which made me feel further alienated.

As I sat at my pew in the back couple rows, I saw the Bishop of Richmond and another member of what I presumed to be his holy party, or people who'd be involved in the mass, making their way down the main aisle towards the pulpit. Their outfits were striking, they seemed very regal, I was taken off guard in a way. I had never been to a Christian mass before and had no idea what to expect. I had only attended funerals and weddings before now and most of the time they had been informal and if they were formal they were too long ago for me to remember. The mass started with an entrance song as the Bishop walked made his way down the aisle, we all rose and I watched as the people in attendance sang of worshiping, blessing and loving God. I chose not to sing but just to observe. After this first song, passages from the bible were read aloud by some of those who followed the bishop down the aisle at the start. They spoke of the importance of prayer and asking for mercy from God. More songs followed this; I noticed that was a reoccurring theme throughout the mass. After a while of standing and singing, or in my case observing others sing, we were instructed to kneel and pray. I sat down and pulled a small padded stool and knelt like the others, we listened to the Bishop speak and every once in a while those around me who were obviously used to this would chant back things toward the back of the church. We soon rose and sang some more before kneeling again and then rising once more. Then, the bishop said something I couldn't understand and everyone around me started turning to

each other and shaking hands, I shook some hands but was still mostly confused. I realize now after doing some outside research that this was a sign of peace and wish I could go back and embrace it a little bit more, because that was one thing I did really respect about the mass in retrospect. Soon it was time for everyone to rise and file toward the pulpit to drink the wine and eat the bread that symbolizes the blood and body of Christ. I did not participate in this step of the mass, as I felt I was intruding on the other people's faith in a way. Soon after the communion was the prayer that proceeds it, then some closing rights and finally the closing song. After this song we were okay to leave. I walked back down the aisle out the doorway down the steps and across the street to my bike. As I rode home I thought about what I had just witnessed, and while I thought, I realized that saying I was a witness put me at a distance from their beliefs. This was fine with me, as I see it having no prior belief in God let me go into this experience with an open mind, a clean slate that I laid before this opportunity. I do believe I gained something from this experience which I didn't expect from the beginning, I think by giving it a shot, even if I still don't wish to identify with the denomination of Catholicism, I learned a great deal about the people who follow this religion and the specific things that they value. •

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