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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 Danh Le

I decided to visit the church on Halloween, yes the very last day of the month. The church I entered was the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart right here in Richmond. The address is 800 S. Cathedral Place, Richmond, Virginia 23220. This is a Catholic church. I attended the service at 5:15 pm. The presiding officials were Monsignor Muench (The Father there), and REV. MR. Charles Williams, JR. (The Permanent Deacon).

The outside of the church was very big, there were a few pointed tips and round dome-like head. I can't seem to remember much of the outside because I was not able to see all of it from the bottom of the church. When I walked inside the Cathedral I felt a very weird vibe that I can't really describe. It isn't a bad feeling nor was it good. It was simply different. The inside was just awe inspiring. I saw an image of Jesus on the cross hanging in front of the stage. There were a lot of images on the wall with words written on them. On my right, the words were resurrection, crucifixion, and what I believe said Eucharist. On my left, I saw the word Nativity. There were of course more images and words but those were all I could see from where I was sitting. The place was very well lit too with candles and light everywhere. The images on the windows also seemed to glow.

I was greeted by the Father and the Deacon there. The racial ethnicity was fairly diverse but it was mostly Caucasians. There were a

few Asian, Hispanic, and African American. The average age seemed to be around 30s and up, mostly people in their 40s. It was a big church so there was about 40 or more people. I was not very comfortable talking to people or sitting with them. The reason was probably the strange atmosphere. Everyone was also very quiet and no one talked to each other. It just seemed more serious.

No one offered to sit with me or explain thing but I did ask one woman about some candles on the table. She told me that I could buy the candle and write the name of a loved one who has passed away on the candle. At that point, it was too late because the candle was supposed to be lit that night and will be retrieved after Thanksgiving. She said something about looking forwards to 3 years to come after this practice is over. I took this as being blessed for 3 years or something like that.

Before the service started, I received a paper that had musical lyrics, the Creed, and some information on the church. When the service started, music from what seems to be an organ piano was playing as well as the voice of some man singing along. It was very dramatic and also fairly hard to figure out what this man was saying/singing sometime. Everyone stood up and the Father (holding a book with the image of what seems to be Jesus on it), the Deacon, and some other people each holding a candle was walking toward the stage. The singing continued until the Father stood of

and put his hand on the book. He was saying something that seemed to be a type of vow or creed. I am not sure if it is emotional or reserved. I believe it's somewhere in the middle. There was definitely a very serious atmosphere though. I was sitting too far to hear the words very well. People sat down and someone gave a reading from the Book of Revelation. The reading mentioned something about white robe and it being washed with the blood of the Lamb. I searched online and apparently this means to be washed by the virtue of Jesus. Basically, the death of Jesus cleanse us of our sin. There was more singing and another reading was done, this time, from the first letter of St. John. I found out online that this letter is the fourth of seven catholic or universal letters of the New Testament. In the letter, St. John reassures the people that "God is Love" and that Jesus has come in the flesh. People suddenly stood again and because I didn't know what was going on, I just did what everyone else was doing. The music this time had the lyric Al-le-lu-ia. This was all I could decipher. The father held the book with Jesus on the cover high and walked to the porch. He stood up and said "a reading from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew". I completely missed what he said at this point but I was curious to what this Holy Gospel is so I searched it up. I learned that the Holy Gospel is a reading that describes the life of Jesus and this book was written in the words of Matthew. After the reading, people stood and started to read the Creed. At the end of the Creed, the father was reading prayers. His ending statement for each prayer was "let us pray to the lord". A basket was passed around and I decided to donate a little money. I was supposed to pass the basket if anyone wanted to donate money but I did not see the guy behind me. The basket was taken away from

me before I realized this person wanted to donate money. I think I made him upset from the way he looked at me but I apologized and he walked away, probably to find the donation basket.

Nearing the end of the service, the Father and the Deacon poured some liquid in a two chalice. I believe it was water. They said some lines about chalice of blood and forgiveness of sin. They each drank from the chalice. They are probably talking about drinking the blood of Jesus. I heard about this before. So far, the service seems very ritualistic. The Father thanked everyone for being there to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus. Everyone stood up again and prayers was started. This time, we all held hands. I was sitting with a friend that I dragged along because I didn't want to be alone and grabbed his hand. We were a little separated from others so I did not grab any hands from the regular church goers. I believe the prayer was known as the "Our Father" prayers. It is basically asking the Lord to forgive us and deliver us from evil. After the prayer people started shaking hands. This is part of the "peace be with you" ritual. One woman did walk up to me to wish me peace and I did the same to her. I simply shake the hands of those around me.

At the very end of the service, the Father and Deacon passed the chalice of water around to the people on stage and each took a sip. They then walked down the stage and stood in front of it. Everyone in the stands started to stand up from front row to back and drank from the chalice. I did not go because I did not feel like I belonged in the group or done enough to drink from this cup. Before everything was over, the Director of music introduced himself and I believe he was called Daniel Sañez. At

the end of his announcements, everyone stood up one last time and there was a quick prayer. One person carried a cross of Jesus and two others each carried a candle. They walked in a triangular formation and walked up to the front of the stage. The Father and the Deacon came down and they all walked away together to the front door. The Father and Deacon stood on each side to say goodbye to all the guess. I actually shook hands with and talked to both of them. The Deacon, Mr. Charles Williams even gave me his card.

First time in church and what a day it was. I actually had a really bad cold and I went to the Cathedral anyway. This is one reason why I stood far away from most of the people. That and it feeling so awkward with everyone seeming so serious. The few people I managed to talk to was fairly nice but it was hard to talk to them. It just seems weird when you enter a service and you know right away you don't belong in it. Overall, it was a pretty new and good experience. •

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