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2015

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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 Daija Resurreccion

Wednesday, September 30, 2015 at 12:05 p.m., I attended a Catholic mass at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. The Cathedral is located on campus at 800 S Cathedral Place in Richmond, Virginia. The service was presided over by Father or “Monsignor” Patrick Golden. Following mass I had a few questions that were answered by Joshua Dart, who is very active in the church.

The appearance of the church is beautiful. I passed by many times but this was my first time going inside. I would describe the outside of the Cathedral as museum-like. The architecture was almost entirely stone with enormous pillars and a large welcome banner that does not exactly match the classic beauty of the church but it still hangs from the bike rack. The inside is absolutely grand. The domed ceiling murals were beautiful and I could have looked up at them all day. The surrounding stained glass windows made it as though God himself was shining through them.

Visitors were not overwhelmingly greeted, which I liked. An individual stood on each side of the entrance and gave a simple “hello” or “welcome.” When I sat in a pew, I observed that the majority of those in attendance were Caucasian and quite older than me, about forty and up and possibly professors coming between classes. There were only about five or so individuals that were roughly my age out of around thirty people in attendance. In regards to gender it was equally mixed, I noticed

maybe four or five couples.

I experienced no discomfort sitting with those around me. I attended with a friend so we seated ourselves. There was not exactly room to talk, the service was geared towards listening and prayer, not conversation. As I said though, Joshua Dart was very helpful in explaining anything I wanted to know further about after the service.

This was not my first Catholic mass but it was my first time attending in an analytic perspective. I was baptized Catholic but never attended regularly, at most Christmas and Easter mass. My family and I began attending and becoming active in an apostolic church when I was in high school. I summarize mass to stand, pray, sit, pray, kneel, pray, communion, pray, done. The congregational participation was certainly reserved. There were no real signs of emotion, strictly following along and quiet prayer. I would compare it to the level of quietness during an exam with the exception of Father Golden. The mass flowed in a way that I would describe as a checklist or ritualistic.

I felt like quite the outsider when those around me seemed prepared for what was next, such as when to stand, when to kneel or what to say back during certain portions unless I remembered the response from childhood. Other responses were easier like “Peace be with you, and with you and spirit” and didn’t leave me feeling as lost. In my opinion it

was a service that would be more comfortable for someone who grew up attending mass regularly and not necessarily individuals exploring new beliefs. I felt uncomfortable, not with others around me but rather the style of worship and if I misheard or misunderstood what was said or what was going on it was not an atmosphere open to asking a question or stopping the ritual. I felt that the mass ended abruptly compared to what I am personally accustomed to. I expected a summary however, it ended following communion and a prayer.

I wanted more insight from Father Golden after service but he was busy with another individual. Joshua saw my look of being lost and stepped up to assist me. I am involved with a non-denominational church near campus and since we are non-denominational my pastor broke down that many of us would describe a successful service in completely different ways, therefore, as a church our definition of a successful service is to simply create a Christ centered atmosphere where those who attend feel comfortable, welcome and grow in faith. This led me to want to know what the definition of a successful mass was for the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. Joshua best explained it to me by stating that mass is what is known as a liturgy or “public prayer.” This stems from the church’s growth from Jewish roots. I witnessed the symbolism of communion as being the sacrifice of the blood of the lamb which Joshua described to me further that the meaning behind this was also a symbol for Jesus being the greatest atonement for our sins. Their definition of a successful service is giving an offering of ourselves to God in return for God giving himself.

Though Catholicism is not for me I enjoyed my experience. In my opinion, the Cathedral

accomplished their definition of a successful service. I am much more understanding of the rituals of stand, pray, sit, pray, kneel, pray, that I never saw reason for prior to asking questions. Those that attended practiced worshipping in spirit with their whole hearts. Initially, I thought Catholic service was cold and emotionless however, now that I have done this reflection I have clarity on the bigger concept. Father Golden followed his rituals of scripture, prayer and communion in a manner that can be perceived as emotionless in order to keep focus on the reason everyone was there, God. Those that attended were quiet in prayer and reserved because they were having their own individual experiences and offering themselves, showing their love for the Lord in their hearts. •

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