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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 Andre Santamaria

On the 27th of September 2015 I attended a catholic mass at Sacred Heart Catholic Church. The mass was delivered in Spanish by Reverend Shay Auerbach from 11:00am-12:30pm. The church is located at 1400 Perry Street, Richmond, VA 23224. There are four masses every Sunday as well as Sunday school for the children in the building adjacent to the main church. Upon arrival I developed the impression that the church alone has helped form a community made up of the congregation where everyone knows each other. As far as demographic, about 85% of the congregation is Hispanic while 15% is white. However, many of the white churchgoers attend the Spanish services either because they know Spanish or the mass fits their schedule. As of the building itself, the outside had the structure of what a typical church would look like given the steeples and the crosses placed on the top of the building. It is made of red brick and is a modestly-sized building, however, during the four masses administered during the weekends, close to 1000 people attend and separate masses take place in the Sunday school building across the street. After I took my seat in the church there was a solemn mood that could be felt all through the church and although I was not a frequent attendee at the church I felt compelled to pay attention and have reverence for the service that would take place. Outside of my friend who regularly attends the church, no one volunteered to help explain any of the proceedings that took place inside the church. It seemed to me that

it was not because they were rude towards me. It was more so a matter of them wanting to be immersed into the service and blocking out any distractions.

The mass started in a sort of a ritualistic manner starting with the introduction of the priest and the carrying of the incense. Beyond the smoke and essence given off, the symbolic meaning of incense is to purify and sanctify the building and alter in order to begin the mass. Other symbolic uses of incense are to provide a mysterious ambience to the Mass and remind the congregation that the mass links heaven to the earth in many ways. To a new attendee to the mass, I could understand how the processions could be categorized as dramatic due to the distinguished manner in which the priest entered. Accompanying the priest are the altar servers that are young males that assist the priest in preparing the Eucharist for the congregation. The Eucharist has been a staple in both the Catholic and Christian faiths and symbolize the Last Supper that Jesus Christ had and parted bread and drank wine while saying “do this in memory of me.” The way it is represented in masses today is that they have closed communions and the congregation go to the front and received the bread and wine. As the mass carried on, it began to become apparent that there was a ritualistic manner to how the mass was carried out. There was a small booklet that basically laid out how the service was to be conducted. Upon asking my friend, I learned that the

booklet was the Text of the New English Roman Catholic Mass and that her along with most of the church have memorized the contents of the booklet and have a religious dialogue back and forth with the priest and sing songs that are shown in the booklet. The booklet acted as an agenda to what was to be done during the mass. As far as congregational participation went, the way they were engaged in in hymns and prayers showed the emotional attachment they had to the mass. One sign of this attachment was members raising their hands up as if to receive a blessing while they worshipped. As for the ending of the mass, there were moments in which a knee rest was lowered at our feet for anyone to kneel and pray if they wanted to. After a short and simple sermon about the word of God bringing happiness, the priest ordered the congregation to stand as he gave a final blessing and prayer to all and we finished the mass. There were idols and pieces of art that caught my attention and prompted me to ask my friend the symbolism of the pieces. Some of them were the 14 Stations of the Cross. These plaques depicted the journey Jesus Christ took while he carried the cross to Calvary. As I circled the building and read the plaques the story of Jesus' crucifixion was told and it made me feel as if I was walking the journey to a lesser extent. Another art piece that struck me were the stained glass windows all around that illuminated the building. I did not fully understand the significance of the paintings, they provided a powerful sense of imagery of the building being sanctified. However, the piece of art that had the most impact on me was the circular piece of the 14 Stations of the Cross surrounded by a painting of the Virgin Mary and a model of Jesus on the cross. Even with no prior knowledge of the Catholic religion I sensed that this arrangement of idols served

as the focal point of the worship and were very sacred. Although I had prior knowledge of what the Protestant religion was loosely about, my experience during the mass pointed out many subtle differences on what the Catholic religion deeply entailed. Although I did not really feel compelled to convert to Catholicism during that day, it opened my eyes to further explore the significance of Catholicism in greater detail. •

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