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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 William Van Deusen

The Sacred Heart Cathedral is no more than a two minute walk from where I live so it was pretty easy to make it my chosen destination for my first field trip. It's located right in Monroe Park along S Cathedral Pl. This was a Catholic church so I assumed (correctly) that you should wear no less than business casual, which is what I wore. I went last Sunday, the 27th, during Bike Week for their 11:00am "mass". The mass was led by Father Golden and two others, but I wasn't able to get their names. I don't think the other two were priests but they did do a lot of things on the "alter" up front.

The building was enormous, at least forty feet all with big stone steps leading up to the entrance. The doorways were preceded by huge stone columns and it also had two towers on top with green roofs. The inside was also massive with intricately designed dome ceilings and rows and rows of benches. It probably sat at least 1000 people. All of the windows had stain glass designs of what I'm assuming was Jesus.

I don't remember being greeted when I came into the service but I do remember the Fathers shaking everyone's hands as they left after the service. The service was almost entirely made up of what looked like white, middle-class families. There were also a good number of elderly couples there as well. Everyone was dressed up and a good amount of people were in full suits or dresses. All of the adults for the

most part seemed completely immersed in the service while many of the children seemed relatively uninterested. There were a few playing around on the benches while the service was going on and some were even playing phone games.

Like I said earlier, there were at least 1000 people there and since I got there right before 11:00am I ended up having to sit on the benches along the back wall. I sat by myself since I thought it would be weird if I went up to one of the families and asked to sit with them and have them explain things to me. No one sat with me or explained anything but I did do some research on how mass works and I've seen plenty of shows and movies so I knew most of what was going on.

Growing up, religion was never exposed to me by my family so I had plenty of options to choose from when it came to picking the service I wanted to attend. I chose a Christian "mass" because this was my first time ever attending any sort of religious service before in my life and I felt like I would be most comfortable in a church because I have a lot of friends who are Christians. In addition, both of my parents were raised in Christian families although they never passed their religion onto their children. Because of this, and the brief research I did the day before I attended I thought I had a good idea of how everything worked. Unfortunately, I was wrong and didn't really know much of what the Priests did in

regards to all the rituals. Overall, the service was very ceremonial and formal. The opening was relatively dramatic albeit in a conservative way. Everyone stood up and began singing while the priest and the other guys in robes walked in. Throughout the service the congregation was very emotional and seemed very organized. It wasn't like on TV where everyone was dancing around and singing but all the adults still looked like they were enjoying themselves and everyone sang loudly when it was time to. One of the funnier aspects of the service was that I was sitting behind some older guy who sang louder and more enthusiastically than everyone else there. In fact, he would hold his notes in an almost opera-like way after everyone stopped singing and people would shoot him glances out of the corners of their eyes. I thought it was hysterical.

The service was very ritualistic from beginning to end. It looked like everything the priest did has been done a thousand times before and all of the congregation seemed like they knew exactly what they were doing as well. The service both began and ended with a singing procession that was marked by the entrance and exit of the priest. There was plenty symbolism throughout the service. During the beginning procession, the priest and his "alter-servers" brought in things like a big cross, a bowl of bread, a cup wine, some cloths, and a Bible. I understand the cross is a big deal for Christians because Jesus died by being nailed to a cross. I also know that the Bible is obviously the holy text for Christianity. During my brief research before I attended the service, I learned that the wine is supposed to represent the blood of Jesus and that the bread is the body of Jesus. These two symbols were used during a thing called "communion". I knew that Catholics did communion during

their services but I didn't know exactly how it worked so I made sure to look it up before I went. Fortunately, I learned halfway through reading the Wikipedia article on it, that you didn't have to do it so I didn't worry about researching it further. What I did learn is Catholics believe that during mass, the priest is supposed to turn the wine and bread into the "actual" blood and body of Jesus. When you eat and drink them, it's supposed to bring you closer to God. Throughout the service, we alternated between kneeling, sitting, and standing. I'm pretty sure the kneeling is supposed to represent showing respect to God. There was also a time where everyone stood up and said a prayer and held hands. I'm not sure what it was about but it happened right before the communion. I know that Christians say a prayer before they eat so I assume that the prayer is similar to that since they were about to eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus.

Overall, I thought it was very interesting but seeing as I'm not particularly religious myself, I didn't get too much out of it. I thought some of the rituals, especially the eating and drinking of Jesus, to be a little strange. Then again, it is a foreign religion to me so that's to be expected. I don't plan on converting to Christianity any time soon, but I do think it's pretty cool that I've been to a mass now. It helps give an insight into what others believe about their religion and it was certainly a unique experience. •

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