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Cathedral of the Sacred Heart

by Leonel Alberto

On Sunday, September 27th I attended a Spanish Catholic mass at Sacred Heart Catholic Church located at 1400 Perry St. Richmond, VA 23224. The service took place at 11am and was led by Father Shay Auerbach who has been working with the church since 2008. He is also president of the board of directors of Sacred Heart Center, a non-profit organization whose mission is “to create a hub for the Richmond Hispanic/Latino community which opens opportunities for economic and social integration, self-fulfillment, and community leadership development.” Fr. Auerbach is a member of the Society of Jesus, (the Jesuits) a Roman Catholic religious order known for education, missionary endeavors, and engagement in social justice work.

The church’s Spanish service began promptly at 11am and it was advised to arrive 15 minutes prior to ensure finding parking as the church has limited parking for its members. I arrived to Sacred Heart around 10:55am and the entire street was filled with people heading towards the church building. Being a Richmond native I would have to say that Sacred Heart Church is the most widely known church amongst the Catholic Latin@ community. Because I had arrived so late I was left with no other choice than to park on the street. As I headed to the church I began to compare it to mine, structural wise. Being raised a Christian of Pentecostal denomination; our doctrines are much different to those of the Roman Catholic Church, primarily because of rituals and

traditions and even our buildings tend to look different from one another. This church is an older brick building structure with a bell tower and a cross directly over the main entrance.

As mentioned, this church was the most well-known amongst the Richmond Latin@ Catholic community. Most of my Catholic friends are or were members of this church. Once I entered the church I was not personally greeted but mostly everyone who I made eye contact with just looked at me with a joyful face and a smile accompanying it. It was obvious that many people there knew each other and mostly everyone there seemed to appear like avid church goers. I did receive a few concerned looks implying I was a new face to the church. I was able to find a seat next my friend who attends services regularly with her family and alongside a fellow classmate who also went as a requirement for our class. Once I was seated I looked around and realized at how full the service was; there were approximately 200 people at the service, some members who arrived late had no other choice than to stand without a seat in the back of the room. I saw primarily families, father, mother and almost every time they had more than one child. There were a few women and men who seemed to have gone without anyone else or just with a few friends. Everyone seemed to be wearing regular clothes, not many people were wearing a shirt and tie or a nice dress. Women were dressed regularly in casual clothing and most men had on jeans and a button up. From

what my friend told me, the church's members were primarily from Mexican decent.

Having this being my first time at this church I did feel welcomed, it seemed as though everyone was there for a specific individual purpose and they were not there to judge others. The church had people standing at the doorway that were willing to help those who arrived late to find an open seat if there was one, luckily for me I already had a seat saved so it did not take much to get situated. Once I was at my seat I quickly began to feel the heat and humidity in the room, there were so many people in the room that the temperature difference compared to outside was quite noticeable. I immediately began to roll up my shirt sleeves. The temple had no A/C from what I could see, the only thing providing ventilation were three large fans placed straight down the middle of the ceiling. Everyone was also very close to one another in order to allow more people to fit in the church benches.

The service began shortly I took my seat; it started by a unified prayer said by everyone that was present. The priest began by saying something along the lines of: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." I looked towards the book holder that was on the back of each bench seat and noticed that the outline of the service was in a book placed throughout the church. The book was titled Unidos en Cristo/ United in Christ: Tiempo Ordinario/ Ordinary Time. The book was not split up by chapter but by week, every Sunday had its own service broken down. Following the prayer there was an entrance antiphon which was made up of a small verse in the bible. After the antiphon there was the first bible lecture that was read, this is a larger

passage from the bible, typically a full chapter from any book. Every time the priest would end a passage he would say something and I would hear the entire congregation reply to it together. After the lecture was read, songs and hymns were sung for about 20 minutes, which resulted in the collection of offerings. Two people were sent on each side of the benches with a basket passing it down for people to put in their offerings. After this was done, a second bible passage was read, same length as the first passage. The priest gave a few words regarding how the passage applied to everyone's lives. Following this another hymn was sung before the priest began his sermon. Overall this took about 45 minutes, and the priest's sermon was another 30 minutes. Compared to what I am used to, Catholic mass goes by quite fast, last no more than 1 hour and 45 minutes. Overall this experience was not entirely different from what I am used at my church but it seemed to be more structured in the sense that it was guided from a book. •

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