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Jennifer Jones

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Cathedral of the Sacred Heart

by Jennifer Jones

On Sunday, September 26, 2015 I attended my first Catholic service at Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Richmond, Virginia. The cathedral is located in the heart of Virginia Commonwealth University's Monroe Park campus and adjacent to Floyd and Laurel Streets. I attended the five o'clock evening service which was facilitated by the Rev. Francis X. DiLorenzo, the bishop of Richmond, and Monsignor Patrick D. Golden who was the rector.

I have passed by this cathedral hundreds of times and never once in my three years of being on this campus have I actually went inside, which is quite surprising because the outside is so extravagant that I've always wondered what the inside held sight to. The exterior of the church is very grand, having several tall columns surrounding the entrance of the main door and standing atop of a great set of stairs that lead up to the front door as well. Once inside the main door I see several exhibitions of what look like past reverends, artwork of Jesus, heaven and angels, among other things. There was also this black pit with what looked like water in it, right before entering into the middle aisle. I saw at the end of service I saw what looked like people either putting something into this pit or shaking their hands above it, as if to dry them.

Upon entering the sanctuary of the cathedral I was immediately greeted by one of the parishioners with a welcoming smile and church

program. I politely smiled back, said thank you, and made my way to the end of a pew towards the middle-rear of the enormous sanctuary. Since I arrived rather early, I took a moment to look through the program, which was tri-folded, and saw that it didn't have a clear outline of the events of the service. Instead, it had about six hymns and maybe three call-and-responses within it. On the back page was a section that asked to please leave the program at the end of the pew once service had ended. Although I'm not sure why this is the case being that they can't reuse the programs since the date is already printed on it.

The interior of the church was just as grand as its exterior. It was an extremely spacious area, what someone of my Christian-Baptist belief would call a "megachurch," which is basically what it sounds like. The stained glass windows on the outside walls spelled out words such as nativity, incarnation, resurrection, and crucifixion. What was unique about them was that each image depicted the term that was being spelled out for that specific window. There were names embedded into the plaques hanging from the walls overhead that indicated those persons to be reverends or bishops who obviously had some kind of great influence on the church. Towards the front of the church on the left side was a statue of some person, which is also unique because I don't think I've ever been in a church that had a real life statue in it. In addition to this, the pulpit was very grand in itself, yet basic as well. What I mean

is that it had the necessary amenities such as a podium with microphone equipment, decorated chair for the reverend and chairs set aside for the accompanying ministers, candles, and a kind of fancy stand that the candles and eventually a plaque of Jesus would be placed on. However, it was grand in the sense because the stage was overly spacious and the designs were very decorative and antique-like. I also noticed that on the bottom of the pews were knee rests, which I would soon find out was a major part of their service.

In regards to the parishioners, some of them upon entering the pew would do a quick kneel, bow, and hand gesture towards the front of the altar before taking their seats. I saw others doing it in their actual pew once they sat down and some not doing it at all. Catholics do this, or genuflect, as a way to show their respect to what's in front of them (God). I knew beforehand that Catholics were devout and strict to their beliefs and traditions but even more so after attending this service. Not only does the genuflect signify a deep respect of their culture, but so does their attentiveness and lack of disruption. For example, at my church, although we have ushers, that sometimes does not stop people from walking in and out throughout service. In this service, I literally did not notice anyone in front of me get up and move or leave, and I was sitting towards the back so that says a lot. They were also really quiet as a whole. The only time they spoke was when spoken to. This is also unlike my church, where sometimes we have people shouting up and down the aisles, leaping for joy and some speaking in tongue. Whereas in this cathedral people only muttered in unison after they were given the permission to do, what is referred to as a call-and-response. This is when the audience collectively

responds to a word or phrase that the speaker previously called upon. They did a lot of this throughout service.

The parishioners were also of different races. From what I could tell, there were some Black people but the majority of the congregation was Hispanic and White. I was surprised to see how many people actually attended service because it was so late in the evening, at least in my opinion. I was also surprised at how quick the one hour service was which contrasts with my own church which starts at 9:30 a.m. and usually doesn't get out until 12:30 p.m. The congregation consisted of mostly older adults, then middle-aged adults, some young adults, and very few children. Some people were dressed in suits and dresses but most people wore more casual clothing, such as a button ups, khakis/slacks, or a blouse. Some even had on jeans and leggings. This differs from my own church where even though we say "come as you are," it is kind of looked down upon if you don't have on your "Sunday's best."

In addition to the call-and-responses, the church had other interactive and mobile activities or rituals in the service. One was the processional of the reverend, ministers, and accompanying plain-suited men. Within this group, a cross mounted on top of a long staff was being carried down the aisle along with an engraved plaque of Jesus, which they placed on the decorative stand on the pulpit I mentioned earlier. Once at the front, the reverend and minister both bow and the processional departs. This entrance procession symbolizes the journey that all of us are pilgrim people on the road from here on earth to eternity in heaven. In this "journey," Christ is not only the goal, symbolized by the altar, but also

accompanies us on the way in the person of the reverend or priest.

Another kind of ritual that happened was the offering. It began like a basic offering, with designated parishioners collecting the money row by row, until one of the ministers in his white robe carrying that tall staff with the crucifix on top led the way back down to the altar to conclude the offering. The purpose of the crucifix-staff was to remind us that we were giving our money, or God's money, back to Him like He originally gave it to us. They prayed a prayer and sang a hymn following the offering. A last ritual they had in place was towards the end of service, the Holy Communion. With this, the parishioners each went up, row by row, to receive their communion. They each drank from the same cup, which signifies their courageous discipleship. Again, they knelt down on the knee rests to pray and ended communion with another hymn.

I did not personally participate in any of the actual activities that took place such as the communion, kneeling down and genuflecting, call-and- responses, or singing of the hymns. I did none of these because these were practices that I knew nothing about. I did, however, say "Amen" to some of the prayers that I could understand and bowed my head and closed my eyes out of respect. The church was very structured and everything seemed like it flowed in order. The message was short and sweet, although a tad bit difficult to hear over the echoing, but manageable. Although no one offered to sit next to me and guide me along the service, I did feel welcome from the moment I stepped in. I didn't feel like people were judging me for not participating in all their rituals nor did I feel obligated to do so. I do

appreciate that I got to see people vulnerable in their place of worship and really in tune with their belief. I am even more anxious to take my next trip to an unknown place of worship in the near future. •

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