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Cathedral of the Sacred Heart

by Barrett Martin

For this Field Trip, I attended a traditional Mass service at The Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, located at 800 S. Cathedral Place in Richmond, Virginia. I went to the 5:15PM Mass on Sunday, September 27, 2015. The Rector of this church is Reverend Monsignor Patrick Golden, however, my bulletin had a note that a Mr. Al Markow would be presiding over the evening's service.

Going to VCU, I see the Cathedral every day, and I had once been inside for a short tour. I find its appearance magnificent and demanding, without being too out of place. The outside architecture is traditional and lovely without being gaudy. But on the inside, everything is ornate and beautiful, in the Catholic tradition. The Sacred Heart serves as the Mother Church for the Diocese of Richmond, so it is likely the most important Catholic institution in the city and the surrounding area, and it wears its importance. Your eyes are immediately drawn upward to the dome architecture, decorated with elaborate carvings and painted images in ivory and gold, traditional Catholic colors, and a faded jade tone also found painted on the exterior of the cathedral. There's nothing bare about the walls, either, with spectacular stain glass windows depicting different scenes from The Bible, along with more carvings, images, and high-arched entryways into other sections of the church. There are two long rows of wooden pews, with an aisle between, and the flooring looks to be some sort of marble tile. Nothing much

else stands out besides the large basin of holy water near the entrance, called a "sacrarium".

I, with a friend, entered a bit before the service started. There were people situated at the doors to open them for us, who also greeted us and handed us a bulletin detailing the different parts of the service and their order. We took a seat near the back, so as not to bother many of the other churchgoers as we took notes and observed the experience. I watched as other people came in, stopping at the sacrarium and bowing at the cross towards the front of the church, but I hadn't done these things, not knowing I was supposed to.

It was still fairly sparse when I arrived, but by the time the service began, many seats were filled. It was an extremely diverse group. I wondered if it was always like this, or if the UCI bike race had attracted more people with a number of ethnic backgrounds, since Catholicism is one of the largest religions in the world. Regardless, there appeared to be people of all ages, genders, social classes, and races present; and nearly all seemed comforted in the surroundings. I was happy to have brought a friend; we really only spoke to each other before, during and after the service, and no one else attempted conversation with us. Frankly, I was fine with this; I didn't really need anyone there to know that I wasn't Catholic, didn't know anything about Catholicism, and was only there for an assignment for class. I was out of place, and something told me it

wouldn't go over well to acknowledge that further.

I'd never been to any Mass before, but I knew a bit of what to expect from friends and acquaintances who are Catholic. I figured the service would be more ritual than anything else, and I was proven right. From the very beginning, loud, dramatic music came from an organ somewhere and we stood to sing as a small procession in white robes slowly carried in large pillar candles and a golden crucifix that towered over the pews. We sat, and a number of rituals continued. The annoying thing for me was, you were just supposed to know what the rituals were, and execute them properly. Which, of course, everyone did, except for my friend and me. I began trying to mimic the movements and chanting of the rest of the congregation, but pretty soon I gave that up to observe instead—it was entirely too confusing for me.

Both the service and the congregation seemed to be devoid of emotion. I attributed this also to the ritualism. When you do the same things once a week—or once a day—for most of your life—or all of your life—they tend to lose any emotional weight they could have had.

During the approximately 45 minute service, there were readings of scripture, ritual chanting, moments of prayer, an offering, a eucharist, and several hymns sang. But the only time we actually heard original speech was for about five minutes after one reading, when a short sermon was given relating to what we'd just heard. Then it was right back to the routine.

The eucharist was actually the strangest thing for my friend and I. Until then we'd gotten

away with quietly sitting in our seats and pretending to know what we were doing; now we were going to have to actually get up and actively participate in something we weren't used to, something that held very deep meaning to everyone else there, and meant nearly nothing to us. It felt disrespectful in a way, on top of just unfamiliar. Thankfully, we noticed some other people choosing to remain seated during this ritual, and we followed that example. But the eucharist is also probably the most important ritual during Mass. It consists of consuming a wafer and a sip of wine, which symbolize the bread and wine Jesus and his disciples consumed during The Last Supper, which symbolized the actual flesh and blood of Christ himself, who was about to be sentenced to death. It's through this ritual that Catholics experience the most connectedness to their savior.

Mass ended with the congregation actually being formally dismissed—although you still need to stick around to sing a few verses of the final hymn. Just like all the other hymns we sang together, this signified some change in the service. After, some people gathered outside the Cathedral to chat with one another, but I left and went home. All in all, it was a fairly strange experience—but I expected as much. Yet it was still enjoyable enough. I would like to learn more about the rituals performed, like how and when to do them and why they're done; and I wouldn't mind attending Mass again. •

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