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Cathedral of the Sacred Heart

by Chantana Moapichai

The religious institution that I attended this past Sunday, November 22, 2015 at 11:00am, was the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart located at 800 S Cathedral Pl, Richmond, VA 23220. The Cathedral's denomination is Roman Catholic and the presiding official of the church is the celebrant, Monsignor Patrick D. Golden.

Facing toward the Church's doors, the beautiful building sat tall and elegantly. As I walked up the second flight of stairs, atop of the front entrance read "IF YE LOVE ME KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS." After reading aloud those words, a man in a gray suit greeted me with a warm smile and a "hello." I smiled back while walking through the large entrance. The inside of the church was equally as astonishing as the outside appearance of it. Service took place in the main room where colorful mosaic windows covered each wall. There were benches lined up in rows from wall to wall that faced toward the podium and the ceiling was detailed with astounding murals and paintings from the early 1900s.

The majority of people that attended service that day were of Caucasian ethnicity, middle class, and male. The estimated average age was 45 years old and there were about 200 people present. I did not feel as comfortable sitting there during the service as I had anticipated. Considering that I am leading my own spiritual journey, I thought I would open a door of enlightenment by attending my last

Church field trip of the semester, but I did not feel any more enlightened than my last two visits (buddhist temple and baptist church). I felt distant from the people sitting around me, as though I did not fit in.

I recognized my friend, Julian, sitting there with his sister and asked if I could join them for the service. They politely responded, saying that they were happy to answer any questions that I had to their best knowledge. A few minutes later, the church was filled with hundreds of people and graceful notes played from the grand piano on the second floor. I have never experienced Catholicism like this before, so I was more than ready to learn and see what the Cathedral had in store for me that Sunday morning.

During the service, there were lots of singing and giving that took place. The audience was expected to sing in unison when the young lady approached the podium in the front of the room. It is supposed to be a special moment, as Julian explained, where everyone's hearts connected as they sung prayers in remembrance of their Heavenly Father. When the reverends on stage were transitioning from one speaker to the other, the people of the church walked around with little baskets to collect money from everyone as donations to the Cathedral. Shamefully, I passed the basket to the person beside me each time it came around (twice!) knowing that I did not carry cash with me during that time.

The emotional tone of the service was happy and the opening was quite casual. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the moment of being together while sharing the same beliefs. Congregational participation was both emotional and reserved. Love filled the air as everyone began to sing each holy song and during prayer. Families held each others hands, appreciating the moments they have together. During Monsignor Patrick Golden's sermon, everyone listened attentively to his illustrations of each psalm. This part of the service was more reserved as everyone sat in silence, relating their own experiences with those of each bible verse.

The service was very ritualistic and structured. Along with singing, there were words that everyone reiterated from Monsignor Patrick Golden's homily, such as "Lord, hear our prayer" and "Bless us with your presence." Toward the latter part of service, everyone began to stand up to receive communion, a catholic ritual in which bread and wine are dispersed to each person that has been baptized. I was unable to do this tradition since I have not undergone a baptism. As each row stood up one by one to complete communion, it was finally our row's turn to stand. Julian began to explain that I could join them for communion, but I would have to cross my arms across my chest and refuse the bread and wine which signaled that I am just an observer. The service ended with more prayer and a joyful song played on the grand piano. Everyone rose from their seats with smiles and laughs as they made their way to the exit, putting an end to that week's service.

The art on the inside of the church consisted of old paintings that you would only see in

ancient religious buildings. The ceiling was filled with vivid colors which gave the church and its beautiful architecture an even bigger affect on newcomers like myself. There were detailed paintings of religious leaders and characters that the Catholic community are familiar with. This art serves as an expression of faith to Roman Catholics and to remind people of who they are as loving, religious people. When I asked Julian about what the paintings meant to him, he responded that it is an external force that lifts his mind and soul to God. The beauty within the art that surrounds the site of the Cathedral is very uplifting to some people, and rather important to others. For people like me, we need a visual representation of some concept in order to grasp the entire idea of it. Stories and theories, such as those accompanying the idea of religion, is harder to understand through verbatim, while viewing a picture gives it the realistic approach that the artist thrives for.

Roman catholics must complete three steps to be initiated into the church. The first step is baptism, which usually occurs during the infant years of a person's life but some people may choose to begin the process at an older age. An infant baptism is when holy water is sprinkled upon the baby's head when being held by its parent. The second type of baptism is also called immersion, when a person's entire body is submerged into holy water then pulled back out. The second step of initiation is that each person must complete communion in which school-aged children eat the bread and drink the wine which is consecrated and shared among the church community. At the Cathedral, communion happens every Sunday, when everyone who has been baptized must undergo the communion as a form of worship to God. The last step is called

confirmation, which serves as a final acceptance into the catholic religion as member of the church. People can complete this step at any age but it is usually completed following first communion. These types of rituals are one's initiation into the catholic church as devoted, loving companions.

Though I did not accomplish my search for spiritual enlightenment this semester, by attending the services of various religious institutions, it has opened my mind to the different ways I can express my faith. Whether it would be through Buddha, God, meditation, or prayer, I will gather a greater understanding far from my apathetic point of view: a sacred awakening. •

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