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Cathedral of the Sacred Heart

by Matthew Moynihan

This past Saturday, September 26, I went to the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church. The Cathedral is located at 800 S. Cathedral Place Richmond, Virginia 23220. Service started at 5:15pm and was presided over by Monsignor Patrick Golden.

The Cathedral is right by Monroe Park and is impossible to miss. The outside of the building would be best described as grandiose. The structure stands at least 100 feet tall and is composed of granite and limestone. Etched above the entrance are the words “If Ye Love Me Keep My Commandments.” Once I walked up the stone steps and entered the Church through one of the large wooden doors, I was greeted by a young lady and a man who said hello and handed out song sheets.

The inside of the Cathedral is impressive and there are few buildings that I can think of that are as beautiful. It has huge marble pillars, a copper dome, and what looks like stained glass that comes from France based on the inscription saying “Lognes, France” on each. The seats are all wooden and a little hard to sit on if you are tall due to how close they are to each other.

The community of people there was pretty diverse and seemed to be mainly middle class based on the attire which was semi-formal. Most ethnicities were represented but I would say it was dominated more by Caucasian and Asian ethnicities. The only ethnicity that I

did not really see represented was Middle Eastern. The people there were younger than I expected and I would estimate the average age was around 33 to 35 years old. I am guessing this is mainly due to it being a college town. The Cathedral was approximately 35% full. There were some people talking in the back with the ushers but, a majority of people were just sitting in silence. I would not have felt comfortable talking to a neighbor because it seemed inappropriate to do so.

The mass started with a song and a dramatic entrance by the Monsignor. There was a procession that included two young children, a man in white robes, and a few other people which I am not sure of their significance. The Monsignor followed all of them all the way to his seat in front of the people. This part of the service has a pretty formal tone and it was obvious that this was ritualistic with everyone doing the same things.

The opening of the mass was followed by readings from the bible and the Gospel reading which everyone stood up for. The white-robed man raised, what I assume to be the bible over his head the entire walk to the podium. I believe this was to show the importance of this part of the mass. After he read the Gospel everyone sat down and the Monsignor stood up and talked about what was read. This was refreshing because it gave an interpretation of what was just talked about, and was given in a more casual way than I anticipated. Everyone

was still silent but, there was less pressure to follow what everyone else was doing and it was easy to just sit and listen.

When the Monsignor was finished there was another procession similar to what had occurred at the start of the mass. Two people were lead up the same way and were holding wine and a golden cup. While this procession happened the ushers were handing out baskets for people to donate money and there was a song being sung. I have to imagine the procession was supposed to represent some type of connection between the regular people at the mass and the people doing the service, something to show community and participation.

Once this part of the service ended, things got very ritualistic and serious. Everyone kneeled and the Monsignor went in front of the altar and said a lot of prayers. This part of the mass had no singing or music and everyone either had their heads bowed or looking towards the altar. This is probably the most significant point in the mass because Catholics believe that Jesus is actually entering the bread and wine that are on the altar. This part of the mass was obviously a representation of the last supper, with the Monsignor even quoting lines from it. This part of the mass had a very serious tone.

Once this part was over everyone stood up and started shaking hands saying "peace be with you." I thought this was a strange point in the mass to do this and wondered why this was not done at the start of the mass. After some research I found out that it is just a ritual that shows mutual charity between one another before they receive communion.

After that ritual the service again went back to everyone kneeling and the Monsignor spent some time saying a few words. When he was finished everyone started processing up the aisles to receive the wafers, and some people drank from cups of wine. About 80% of the church went up at this point. This part of the mass was more energetic and there was even a song being sung.

The mass then ended as it began with another procession to the back of the Church. This had a very energetic feel and once it was over everyone started leaving the church and talking with one another. The Catholic mass is very ritualistic and seems to be a pretty serious event for Catholics. •

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