St. George Antiochain Orthodox Christian Church

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On the Sunday, the 20th of September I visited St. George Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church located in 4335 16th St NW, Washington, DC 20011. The Presiding official for this church is Father Joseph Rahal. The first service began at 8:15 am with the Matins and the Divine Liturgy followed at 9:30. The Greek Orthodox Church is nothing like I’m used to. It was definitely much more traditional than the Pentecostal Church I grew up going to.

The building looked like a big house, except there was a dome and then a crucifix on the highest point of the church. Inside was a beautiful décor of stained glass windows and pictures of many different Saints. There were no single seats, but there were pews that lined up all the way to the front of the church. The altar looked quite delicate and had candles placed all around. There were no Ushers to greet me when I walked in or show me where to sit. This made me quite nervous as I did not particularly know what to do or where to go. As I walked in, I quickly noticed that most of the church population was white. This got me worried as I wondered if I would stand out too much as a Black African and everyone will quickly realize how confused I was during the service. However this was not the case as everyone I had made eye contact with gave me a smile which made me a little bit more comfortable. Also, the church population was quite large so I tried to use that to my advantage by blending in and going with the crowd.

I had done a little bit of research before visiting the church just to get a little bit of background information on what the Greek Orthodox Church was about. I walked into the church and followed the crowd into a small room where people were lighting candles, kissing the different icons of saints and Christ, and making the sign of the cross. I quickly followed so as not to stick out too much. The matins was already in progress when I arrived and I noticed that not a lot of people were sitting, however most people were either prostrating or standing. There was more going around the room, kissing icons and making the sign of the cross in the main room. I found this quite weird as the service had already begun and it felt like we were distracting the people who were already there.

During the matins, passages from the Gospels were read, some prayers were said and some hymns were sung. It was at this time I realized how participatory Greek Orthodox worship service is. There were periods where most people would prostrate and stand up continuously or where everyone was supposed to stand all together. I of course joined in the prostrating and the standing. The matins flowed into the Divine Liturgy. This was done with chanting and singing plus there was a lot of bell ringing and incense burning. The Divine Liturgy also included readings from the Gospels and many prayers. Most importantly it was a celebration of communion. When the

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time came for the bread and wine the Priest blessed it and the people went up to receive it. Using a spoon, the Priest fed the people from what looked like a golden cup. I did not participate because I had read that non-orthodox could not participate in this part of the service as it is reserved for those committed to the Orthodox Church. (Archdiocese) After taking the bread and wine from the Priest, people lined up to collect some extra bread for their non-orthodox friends or visitors. From my research I found that people do this as a sign of fellowship in the Orthodox community. (Archdiocese)

There were many ritualistic aspects throughout the service. Prostration was a sign of total and complete respect and surrender to God. I found this really interesting because I saw it as a way to really honor God. Practically everything they did was out of reverence to God. The Orthodox make the sign of the cross frequently during the service. The thumb and first two fingers are pressed together and the last two fingers are pressed down to the palm. The three fingers together represent the Trinity and the two fingers brought down to the palm are for the two natures of Christ and his coming down to earth. (Archdiocese) I found that I couldn’t really do the hand gestures because I wasn’t used to them.

Another icon I felt the Orthodox paid a lot of attention to was the image of Mary. They believe that Mary is their “Champion Leader.” She is not exactly worshiped; however she is venerated in the Orthodox Church. They seek her prayers for protection and growth in faith and believe that she and other saints are not dead, but have only departed to the other side. (Archdiocese) I did not stay till the end of the service as it was getting a little bit too long and at a point I got completely confused as to what was happening. This experience has definitely allowed me to see a new Christian perspective and it has helped me understand my own church denomination better.

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