Saint Ambrose

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I attended the 10 am Sunday mass on September 20th, 2015 at St. Ambrose Catholic Church located at 3901 Woodburn Rd., Annandale, Virginia 22003. This institution is a Catholic church and the presiding official that day was the pastor, Father Andrew J. Fisher.

When I arrived at the church first, I noticed the outside didn’t seem to be very extravagant or showy in any way. It was a modest looking brown brick building with many trees, flowers, and bushes. There was a cross on top of the building that I have seen on many church tops. I also noticed that there was a Catholic school attached to the building. Walking inside the church became a lot more colorful with stained glass artwork around the building and statues placed at the entrance. I was greeted by 2 people at each entrance saying “good morning” or “good to see you” and it felt extremely welcoming.

I found a seat in a middle row somewhat toward the back of the church and watched as others filed in through the doors. I looked around at the people sitting down already and noticed that the predominant characteristics of most were middle class white families with two or three younger children and white elderly people. There was very little diversity at all and most adults seemed to be between the ages of 30 and 50, with exception to the elderly who seemed to average about 70, and the children average age seemed to be about 8 to 10 years old. Over all I would say there roughly 70 people in attendance that morning.

I noticed it was quite quiet in the church and most people kept to themselves when they sat down. It made me feel a little bit uncomfortable since I was alone and no one seemed likely to talk to me. I sat next to a family however they did not offer any greetings and seemed busy with their children and themselves. Many, though, were consumed in prayer kneeling so that may explain the silence as to give them the quiet to pray undisturbed.

The priest entered the church from a back room and the mass had begun. Everyone stood up almost on queue and music started to play. The director told us which song they would sing and we had books with words to follow along. We sang one song and then the priest said an opening prayer. This beginning seemed quite dramatic and uplifted the people attending who were somewhat reserved to begin with.

The service continued on with several readings from the bible, the last one being done by the priest. He read his passage and then proceeded on a more spontaneous feeling course. Prior to this, the mass seemed very ritualistic and on a given routine that most people seemed to expect. Now the priest began to speak to the people in a more casual tone. He related the readings that had read to how they can apply to our everyday life and spoke about them as though they had been
written yesterday and not 2 thousand years ago. This part of the mass was very interesting and engaged many people in attendance as they laughed at his jokes and nodded along with what he was saying.

He concluded his speech and the ritualistic tone of the mass was returned. The preparations for the communion were beginning. The priest, with the help of several altar boys, provided bread and wine and the priest performed blessings over the bread and wine to transform them into the body and blood of Christ. Once the preparation was complete people started to walk towards the center. I had researched before that I could go up with them and just cross my arms over my chest as a sign I was not confirmed into the Catholic Church. I did this and the priest still blessed me and I returned to my seat. This part was very inclusive and made me feel very connected to the others and the church. When people returned to their seats they bowed their heads in prayer for a short 2 minutes or so. Once every one had returned to their seats the choir sang a song while the communion was put away. When the priest and altar boys had finished, the priest told everyone to greet their neighbor. At this everyone around me started to smile and reach to shake my hand. It was sort of a shock as they had all seemed so uninterested to begin with but I was greeted by almost everyone who surrounded me. It felt very good again to be in that moment and another feeling of community rushed over me.

As the mass winded to an end one more song was sung and the priest said a closing and a final “go in peace” and everyone began to pack up and leave. This ending seemed somewhat abrupt compared to the communion procedure but the mood in the church was a cheerful one and all were smiling on the way out.

The biggest ritual that I could notice would be the communion and eating of the bread and wine supposedly being the body and blood of Christ. This was an obvious ritual and included the people in attendance in the mass creating a sense of community. Another ritual I noticed was prayer, especially after taking communion, because almost everyone did this. It was not a long drawn out time but still seemed very meaningful and with purpose. I believe these rituals were meant to connect the people of the church to each other and to God through talking in prayer.

This experience was very eye-opening for me. I was not raised on any religion and had only heard of Catholicism through the stereotypes it is often given. I expected a cold atmosphere that was judgmental and unwelcoming. However, after this, I would say that most of those stereotypes are false. I felt like part of a community even during my first mass. There were times when people seemed reserved, but for a majority everyone seemed upbeat and glad to around each other. From this I have learned that Catholics are not like the stereotypes typically given to them and are more welcoming and warm than most people believe.

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