On November 28, I attended St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Fredericksburg, Virginia. This church is located on Stafford Avenue, and is in walking distance of downtown and the University of Mary Washington campus. Fredericksburg is my hometown, but my parents do not attend Catholic services. I had driven by this church numerous times, and it always seemed to be busting; people were constantly driving in and out of this brick building. The only time I had been in here before this was for a funeral of a family friend’s child. I was much younger, but I recall it being very slow and quiet; but it was, after all, a funeral. This was a much more formal service than the past two I had gone to for this class. The building looked normal on the outside; somewhat large, and a packed parking lot, but not anything extra special. I went to the 10:30 Sunday Mass, which was led by Father Don. There was a policeman directing cars in and out when I arrived, which caught me off guard. After I finally found parking, I entered the church.

The inside was beautiful; dark, with many pews, beautiful stained glass, and an organ. It had some shared décor with the Jewish temple I visited earlier this semester. While it was similar, it gave off a much different vibe. This felt a lot more formal, and for me, more intimidating. Although people smiled nicely at me, I didn’t feel totally welcome. I had heard of customs like “peace be with you” and things like that, and done a little research beforehand, so I was not totally lost during the service. The methods they used were a little slow to me, but it was interesting at some points. They had two baptisms, which I really enjoyed watching. The priest seemed like a very nice man, and was a little slow to listen to, but he meant well.

The customs of the church were, as I mentioned, formal to me. The kneeling on the benches in front of us felt a little abnormal to me, but I followed what those around me were doing. I noticed many large, large families, as well as many old people. I saw very few babies or young couples. The only race that I saw in the room was white. Yes, I could’ve missed some people, but that is the interpretation I had. The family sitting next to me did not address me or greet me, but seemed very focused on their own experience. This did not offend me or upset me, as they seemed devout in their faith. I did not want to be a distraction, and I left them alone. The gender ratio seemed mixed to me; I did not notice a strong contrast in the number of men and women, but instead felt it was balanced.

The tone of the service itself was very dramatic, I felt. Each word used had so much passion, which I found intriguing. Whenever congregational participation was requested or needed, those around me were excited to react. It seemed that everyone in the room knew exactly what to say or do. The rituals were things I was mostly familiar with; baptism, which I addressed in my first paper. Communion
also took place. This was different than the Presbyterian Church I visited. Instead of the food and drink being brought to your aisle, as the Presbyterian Church, we went up in a line and received it from the priests. Another difference was that this Catholic church served wine while the Presbyterian served grape juice. I found this interesting, although I couldn't pinpoint exactly why.

During the slow sermon, I was intrigued with certain points, such as the focus on Mary in this particular service. The pastor talked about her in a spiritual way that I have never heard someone use while referring to Mary before. This kept me interested. After the hymns and the service, I made my way out. The priests and families now seemed friendlier. This could be just in my head, I'm not sure, but I did receive greetings from a few families, which made me feel much better about my experience. Overall, I liked my experience here. I do not think I would be compelled to attend more services like this one, because I didn't feel a strong connection to the message, the building, the priest, or the concept of the service. This being said, it was a beneficial experience for my spiritual journey and me. •

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