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St. Peter’s Church
by Hallea Ross

Growing up in this Christian church, I found that I was highly strict, and felt uncomfortable asking questions. When I did ask questions, I was constantly told that, that is just the way it is. I thought that there wasn’t a religion that was more close minded and restricting, until I learned about the Catholic Church. I have heard so many different stories about strict the church was and thought that this assignment would be a good time to finally experience this for myself.

For my assignment I chose to go to St. Peter’s Church of Richmond, Virginia, located at 800 E. Grace St. On Sunday September 19 at a very early 8:30 in the morning, I undertook my experience at a catholic church.

I hadn’t been to church in quite some time so I was a little nervous. Being that I haven’t been to church in a while I don’t have a wide choice of church clothes. I wore a pair black leggings and blouse, however I don't think was the right choice. I felt like I was getting a few stairs from the elder women in the church who saw me as I walked in. upon arriving the first thing that I noticed was the beautiful architecture of the church. The perfectly white columns shined with purity in sun light. The Catholic Church stood tall, with perfectly placed cross that sat upon a dome. Being that this is the oldest church in the area, the architecture looked expatriate. Outside of the church there was a plaque that was commemorated to the 125th anniversary. The people at the church reminded me of not being able to sit at the cool kids table at lunch.

While I waited for the service to begin I was sat alone in the last few pews of the church. I felt really out of place and had a hard time interacting with the other church goers. I did not feel comfortable approaching anyone. I felt as if no one was all that interested in welcoming me from the church. To my surprise though, there was a much wider variety of people attending that I had thought. Traditionally I have known catholic churches to be predominantly white, however this church had more diversity than I was expecting. The minorities where clearly outnumbered but I wasn’t the only person of color in the church, and that was comforting in a way. The majority of the congregation were middle class white women. I think the lack of a full congregation was because I attended so early and most of the congregation attended the later service. Once everyone was settled in, mass began.

Mass began with a song, that the choir sung in what sounded like perfect unison, as the congregation followed along. The song was slow, led by only an organ. I personally found the song to be depressing, and old, as if it was something from the gothic era. As the choir sung 5 men dressed in all white robs led the choir down the aisle and to the front of the church. The man in front was carrying a long, tall, cross, the two men behind him
were carrying tall white candles. Behind the choir were men dressed in long, green, and white robes. Once the choir and the two men in green and white, made it to the front of the church in the pulpit, the choir continued to sing. However, it was led by one of the pastors, and it didn’t seem to be a song anymore but sounded more like a prayer in which later the whole congregation cited with him.

The tone of the whole service was very stoic and serious. All of those who stood at the podium were dressed for success, wearing their Sunday best. Unlike the church that I was raised in the tone of the church was slow and serious, and the congregation was very, silent. When anyone spoke it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. The beginning of the service was interesting. Before, who I thought to be the pastor, began his sermon, he said a short prayer. Then he took this golden bell shaped object, which had smoke coming out of it; he took this object and swung it back and forth over the podium. I assumed that this was some kind of blessing ritual that is done before the pastor begins to speak from the text. I later came to discover that this is ritual is called Thurible. The thurible is filled with holy smoke, or incense. The incense are used to venerate, bless, and sanctify. The smokiness is supposed to convey a sense of mystery and awe; serving a sweet smelling of the presence of the lord. The use of this is to add a feeling of solemnity to the mass.

During the service I frequently looked up to observe the congregation. The emotional response that the congregation had was a very reserved one. This was different from my experience at Baptist churches, where it seems as if the pastor’s whole goal is to get everyone out of their seats, praising, and shouting to the rooftops. The service as a whole was very ritualistic. As if the schedule was the same every mass. It was modern but still followed all of the Old Catholic rituals that are sacred to the church. At the end of the service, the choir began to sing another slow song, then the pastor read another prayer. When the pastor was finished with the prayer, chimes went off. Then the choir began to sing once more. As the service was coming to a close the fellow church goers turned to one another and shook hands, then one by one everyone walked up to front of the alter where they then shook hands with the pastor.

My experience at the catholic mass was very interesting and was definitely a learning experience. It was interesting being able to see a religious ceremony that was different from what I am used to. •

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