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ANTH 3253

Participant Observation Project: Immaculate Conception Cathedral

For this participant observation project, I chose Immaculate Conception Cathedral located in Midtown Memphis, Tennessee. I picked this because it represents something special to me and to this city. It is the oldest and most similar architectural to a Roman Catholic church, as it offers an environment that is symbolic to its religious culture. I wanted to approach this from a more analytical point, for sure by paying even more attention to detail when I attend Mass. My goal was to observe more strongly the cultural elements, dynamics, and rituals of Catholic worship.

Immaculate Conception was built in 1938 as a Gothic Revival style. To this day it serves as the central point and mother church of the Catholic Diocese of Memphis. Its rich history and architecture is a reflection of global Catholic tradition, while also making sure to stay true to local faith communities. As one who has attended Catholic church my entire life, I really wanted to explore deeper into the behaviors, culture, and services within this specific cathedral.

Even as a Catholic, when I enter Immaculate Conception Cathedral, it feels like I'm entering a sacred place. The Gothic architecture, candle lit alcoves, and stained glass windows right off the bat establish a scenery. The arrangement of the pews and nave truly follow the traditional Catholic layout that I know, this also includes a long central aisle directly to the altar. Inside the Cathedral there are several elements of material culture that stood out. Hymnals and Missalettes were neatly placed in every pew, this helps provide structure for all the readings, songs, and prayers. A large crucifix hung above the altar, this is the anchor and backbone of the entire church as its focal point for worship. Various statues of Mary and Joseph and other saints also line up alongside spaces, each are all accompanied by candles. The priest wore green vestments that is a representation of liturgical Ordinary Time on the Catholic calendar. At the

center of the Eucharist were objects such as the chalice, ciborium, paten, and the tabernacle, these are all the very essentials in the Catholic liturgy.

Language and text played a vital role in shaping the service. Even though I am familiar with Catholic liturgy, I made sure to pay extra attention to the words as if I was experiencing them for the first time. The priest's prayers followed the Roman Missal, which is the guide to the structure of liturgy from start to finish. The day's readings came from the Lectionary, the universal book of scripture that is used throughout the Catholic world. The congregation recited the Nicene Creed all together. The printed Sunday bulletin served as an outline for the order of worship and furthermore upcoming parish activities. The language used constantly was symbolic, reverent, and total consistency with the identity of Catholic worship.

The congregation itself is a representation of a diverse range of backgrounds, ages, and levels of involvement. Elderly parishioners attended constantly, as they sit in their consistent spots, middle aged adults and young adults participate alongside them as well. A few visitors were present and seemed comfortable, as the regular parishioners welcomed them kindly. With this mix of people, each and every person played a role in the dynamic. The priest guided the service, altar servers assisted with the ceremonial parts, lectors praised the scripture, and Eucharistic minister helped distribute the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. The choir also led the musical elements and ushers often welcomed the attendees and collected the offerings. Observing all of these roles, helped me appreciate and wonder how much each person contributes to the Catholic worship.

The behavioral patterns throughout the service is what is called the posture cycle. Participants stood happily for the Gospel reading, prayers, and hymns. They also then knelt for the Eucharistic Prayer, which is the most sacred and spiritually intense part of the Mass. Singing also occurred various times throughout the liturgy. While some loudly sing and respond, some also are quiet but everyone moved through the ritual motions all together. The overall rhythm of standing, kneeling, sitting, and praying all created a

serious unified flow in the Church. People continued to be respectful towards each other and offered smiles and handshakes.

Durkheim's theories were pretty evident in the rituals I observed. He argued that religious practices combine individuals by a combination of sacred everyday life and emotional energy known as collective effervescence. This is unmistakable in the Eucharist. The very moment of consecration that is followed by procession to take Communion, created a sense of powerful atmosphere. Even with participating in this ritual weekly, viewing it through an anthropological sense made me realize its beauty and how synchronized its movements and silence all together. Communal prayer and music is a collective effervescence with the reciting of the Lord's Prayer with a response of "And with your spirit". These rituals expressed the communities deep values of humility and togetherness.

As a Catholic, many moments of the service were familiar, including the overall timeline and structure of Mass, the continuous gestures of standing, kneeling, and genuflecting. A deep moment is the significance of the Eucharist and the presence of Mary and many Saints' statues. As I was there observing through a more anthropological viewpoint, it made me more aware of aspects that I often overlooked, such as the depth of symbolism in the liturgy and how the artwork and architecture show theology visually. Practicing relativism helped me open my eyes to symbolic patterns that I usually take for granted. It also helped me deepen my understanding of community, belief, and behavior continue to strengthen another.

Overall, participating in the service at Immaculate Conception Cathedral as Catholic and an anthropologist deepened my understanding of how religious cultures operates. Observing symbolic and material elements of the Mass, languages used, role of participants, and the community interactions, I truly gained insight into the resonance of the Catholic worship. Durkheim's ideas about the sense of collective conscience and effervescence were strongly evident in the Eucharist and other rituals. Although I was already familiar with the Mass, analyzing it made me recognize small elements that I seemed to always overlook.

FIELD NOTES

Materials in culture...

- Holy water at the front doors
- Hymnals and Missalettes in each pew
- A large crucifix above the altar
- Statues of Mary, Joseph, and Saints
- Vestments worn by the priest

Religious behavior observed

- Ritual: structured order of Mass
- Prayer: personal and communal, spoken also silent
- Myth/narrative: readings from old and new testament
- Devotion: genuflecting, lighting candles
- Music: hymns of worship

Language and texts used

- Roman missal
- Lectionary
- Nicene Creed
- Hymnals of music
- Sunday bulletin

Roles observed

- Lectors: who read scripture
- Priest: Presided over the Eucharist and preached homily
- Altar servers: usually youth, assist with candles, incense, and other objects

- Ushers: guide seating and collect offerings
- Eucharistic ministers: distribute the Body and Blood of Christ

Behavioral patterns

- Standing: during hymns, Gospel, and certain prayers
- Sitting: for readings and homily
- Kneeling: during eucharistic prayer
- Singing: hymns and responses

Familiar and unfamiliar elements

- Familiar
 - o Structure of the mass
 - o Gestures; such as kneeling and standing
 - o Eucharist and its importance
 - o Language of the liturgy and hymns
 - o Sense of reverence in the sanctuary
 - o Presence of Mary and statues
- Unfamiliar
 - o How much symbolism I overlooked
 - o Roles and rituals reinforce community further than just spiritual meaning

PHOTOS/SCREENSHOTS



