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Sociology
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Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary Catholic Church

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary Catholic Church, also known as the Immaculate Conception Church, is a small Roman Catholic Church. I attended their Sunday morning mass on October 2, 2005. Their worship style and theology is vastly different from my home church; however, I was surprised at the similarities I observed in the members of the congregation in comparison with my home congregation.

The clothing worn by people attending the Immaculate Conception Church was casually formal. The majority of women wore blouses and either a skirt or slacks; however, there were a few women who wore jeans. Likewise, the majority of men wore slacks and collared shirts; but there were a few who wore jeans and a T-shirt. A large majority of the members of the congregation had short hair, including many of the women. The majority of the cars in the parking lot looked like newer models of nice cars. I did not notice any old or beat-up looking cars. Everything about their appearances gave me the impression that they were thoroughly involved in our modern culture. I think most people who walked off the street, as long as they weren't part of an extreme culture, would have felt comfortable among these people.

The church building was a modest building with no overly ornate architecture. It was fairly small as far as churches go, but the size of the building seemed appropriate for the size of the congregation. The sanctuary was shaped like a rectangle with a small balcony at the back for the musicians, and the walls were white. There were several stained glass windows the length of the sanctuary. The window frames were wood and were in the shape of rectangles that rounded to a point at the top. I was slightly surprised that there were no clear glass windows in the sanctuary. There were lamps that hung from the middle of the ceiling that were made out of dark metal.

The platform at the front of the church was very different from any church that I had ever been to before. The floor of the platform was wood. Instead of the pulpit being front and center, there was an altar covered in a green cloth. On the wall behind the altar there was a crucifix. To the left of the crucifix was a statue of Mary and to the right was a statue of Jesus. On both sides, in front of the statues, there were chairs. On the left there was a slightly larger and plusher chair for the priest. On the right side of the platform there were two smaller chairs for the people who assisted the priest with the service by reading scripture and offering communion. I found it slightly hypocritical that the priest would have a better chair than the other people because, according to the Bible, leaders in the church are supposed to be servants. I did not see how they exhibited an attitude of servanthood to the congregation. The pulpit, also covered in a green cloth, was situated on the right side of the platform in the front. This is where scripture and prayers were read when the priest was not reciting them.

There was only one row of pews down the middle of the sanctuary. The pews were made out of wood and had kneeling bars that were put down for people to kneel on during the service, That was another very unfamiliar aspect of the church, and if you're not careful you get whacked in

the shin when people put them down. The carpeting in the sanctuary was a deep red color. One thing about the sanctuary that really caught my attention was a picture of the pope in front of the platform off to the right. It seemed to me that the picture of the pope there was putting the pope in a position of importance almost as high as Jesus. It served as a distraction from God. All of these social observations led me to the conclusion that the majority of the families are from the middle class. The cars, the clothing, and the decorations all around the sanctuary indicated that the members of the congregation were well off; however, I didn't see any signs of extravagant wealth. I would say they were all either upper or lower middle class families.

The style of worship was mostly formal. Many of the prayers were read out of a prayer book and the Scripture is selected from a three-year schedule the Roman Catholic Church follows. There were moments of informality such as when members of the congregation laughed at a joke told by the priest or called out prayer requests. I was surprised at both the joking and the prayer request portion of the service. I think it is probably a result of a stereotype I had of Catholic churches being very somber and slightly stuck up.

A bulletin was handed out to the members of the congregation as they entered the church. The bulletin had a schedule of upcoming church events and it listed the scripture references along the top. The order of the service was outlined on a wooden panel hanging on the wall all on the right side of the sanctuary. There wasn't any place for spontaneity in the service; it was very planned out and orderly. If a person didn't follow all the standing, sitting, verbal responses and singing it would be very apparent to everyone in the congregation, and I think such deviance would be frowned upon.

The atmosphere in the sanctuary during the service was one of inspiration and awe. There were candles spread throughout the sanctuary. There were a few people who seemed to just be going through the motions, but the majority of them seemed very sincere. I found this as somewhat of a surprise, and I think that stemmed from a previous stereotype as well. During the service people did not talk amongst themselves, but once the service was over they were comfortable with lingering and socializing in the sanctuary.

The music was very different than what I have become accustomed to. All of the songs were selected from their hymnbook or were hymns printed on a sheet of paper that was on the pew. There were no contemporary worship songs. The hymns stressed Scripture, specifically the Psalms and beatitudes, as well as the fellowship of the church. During the hymns there were solos and duets between the congregational singing.

There were no drums or electric guitars. I heard a guitar, a keyboard, and an organ. All of the musicians were in the back of the church up in the balcony. I found this very interesting. It's vastly different from all the other churches I have attended. Usually the musicians are front and center. This arrangement was very refreshing because it took the attention off of the musicians and encouraged the congregation to focus on God.

The priest gave the sermon. He came down from the platform to stand in front of the first row of pews while addressing the congregation. No notes were used throughout the sermon, which I

found quite impressive. The themes stressed in the message were being conscious of God and the needs of others around us. A lot of emphasis was placed on doing good works, helping others, and not living a hypocritical life like the Pharisees. The scripture was read between songs before the sermon, and the priest mentioned the scripture in passing during his sermon, but he didn't read scripture during his sermon. A few references were made to modern day events such as mentioning how Donald Trump didn't need our help because of his fortune.

The priest told several jokes during his sermon. The first one referred to the way he had gotten drunk the night before, which bordered on inappropriate, in my opinion. The majority of feedback from the congregation was laughter at his jokes and an occasional nod of a head. A social value that was present was the importance of helping the poor. A social value that I find important that was lacking was the importance of remaining sober and not becoming drunk.

Friendships among the members of the congregation seemed open and friendly and they reminded me a lot of the interaction that takes place at my church. I think that perhaps this is characteristic of smaller, more rural churches. During the time of greeting, members of the congregation were very warm and welcoming, even to outsiders. None of the relationships that I observed looked like awkward surface relationships.

There were quite a few children present during the service. There was no Sunday school or nursery program, and you could hear the children making noise throughout the service. This was also a very familiar aspect for me compared to my home church. The service was not geared towards children at all. In some senses I think teaching a child to sit through a sermon quietly is good and will prepare them to do so when they are older. On the other hand, however, I think that perhaps the time could be spent more productively teaching children about God on a level that they can truly comprehend. Children played a very small part in the service when they helped walk the offering up to the priest as well as when they went up with their parents when their parents took communion.

Overall, I came to realize that there are some major differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, but a lot of the stereotypes I held in regards to Catholicism were incorrect and biased. Catholics are just as sincere about their faith as Protestants, although there are cases on both sides where people are not serious about their faith. More than ever I am realizing that there is not one right or wrong way to worship. It all comes down to what you have become socialized to appreciate [. . . *and what you personally prefer, within the bounds of NT teaching—PW*] as long as your heart is in the right place in relation to God.