

## **REL 402 - Visit to a Roman Catholic Church**

### **Visit to St Joseph Parish**

This week for a school project, I had the opportunity to accompany some friends to visit and observe a church service at St Joseph Parish at Laguna Pueblo. The church is situated in old town, Laguna, and its architecture is like one of those Catholic churches you see in old Hispanic movies. I was told the church is over a hundred years old. The church is white in color and had a cross on top. The landscape around the church was red dirt and the church property had a waist high wall marking its boundaries. One had to climb about four to six steps to enter the church.

### **Church Description**

Inside the church, about two steps away from the door was a bowl of water (which I was told is holy water) that we had to dip our hand in and make "the sign of the cross." The church had two rows of benches on each side and an aisle in the middle, running all the way to the front. I noticed the windows were high and stained with images of people. I recognized the images of Mary and baby Jesus (lucky and only guess), but not the rest of the images. I was told they were images of saints. On the wall, on each side of the church were fourteen pictures depicting the life of Christ step by step. One of my friends called it the "Way of the Cross", while another called it "Passion of Christ." I do not know who is right, or if both are right, but I was not going to let them argue in a church, so I reminded them of where we were. To the front, on the right side of the church were a pulpit for readings, and a place for the priest to sit. The altar with two candles on it was on a stage in the middle and behind the altar on the wall was a cross with a candle on each side. The singing group or choir was on the left. I asked my friends where the confessional was and they told me since the church was so small, it had been moved to an attached building next to the church. That building also houses offices, a kitchen and a reception area where one can have a reception after a wedding or funeral. There were statues of the Virgin Mary and some saints. The church was beginning to fill up, so we took our seats.

### **Church Service**

The singing group began singing and everyone joined them in singing. The priest, wearing a long white garment called an alb, with another colorful garment called a chasuble over it, walked down the aisle to the altar, knelt down, made the sign of the cross and walked to the pulpit. He said something and everyone made the sign of the cross at the same time saying, "In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

The priest then invited everyone to the service and asked that we join him in confessing our sins. The congregation did, reciting a prayer. After that there were readings from the lectionary and singing in turns for some time, and then the priest preached about the readings. We recited prayers too. Sometimes the priest would recite something or sing in Latin. Sometimes we stood up, other times we had to kneel. There were prayers for various things, including prayers to the saints to grant them their wishes, and a prayer for the dead. The priest, with the aid of two assistants, brought out two small chalices and one tall chalice and poured what I was told is wine into it. There was also a bread plate called a paten on the altar. From experience, I knew it was time for the Holy Communion.

The priest recited some prayers, blessed the Communion and took the first "flesh and blood." After that he served his two assistants. With the congregation singing, the priest and his two assistants served them the Communion.

After the Communion, we said the Lord's Prayer and then the congregation shook hands and acknowledged each other's presence. There were some announcements, a prayer, the sign of the cross and then the church service ended.

### **Conclusion**

It was an interesting experience and I found myself comparing the Roman Catholic service to my earlier visit to the synagogue, and the Baptist church I attend sometimes. I concluded that Roman Catholicism and Judaism have more in common than they do with the Baptists. For instance, my pastor always comes to church dressed in a suit, while the Catholic priest and the rabbi wore garments. My pastor preaches by ranting in a loud voice and moving from side to side, while the priest and rabbi did exactly the opposite. All three religious leaders are around the same age so one cannot say the Baptist pastor is younger and that is why he is so animated when preaching. The congregation at the Baptist church really dress up for church service, so that sometimes I feel it is a competition to see who is the best dressed. The congregation at the Catholic Church and the synagogue were casual in comparison. Even though I was not wearing a suit or tie, my tucked-in long sleeves shirt and dress pants made me feel overdressed. The congregation was very friendly. Somehow before I knew it, I found myself promising to visit again.