

Experience in an Unfamiliar Environment as a Minority

Previous as well as current events have led to the creation of an environment where religions, races and cultures no longer define the term minority. This has arisen as a result of globalization where different religions, races and cultures are forced to interact in school, work, church, and even in neighborhoods. However, a number of environments still exist where one will be considered a minority. To this end, I considered my gender, race and spirituality in search of an environment that I am unfamiliar with that led me to attend a catholic mass. This was based on the fact that women have a deeper affiliation to religion than men and as a Caucasian adult male, I would be a minority among the Hispanics who are more associated to Catholicism than other races.

Having anticipated the event for almost a week, I arrived at the church fifteen minutes early for the second mass. I joined the throng of people at the door who were waiting to go in. I was surprised to see that my previous thoughts on women and Hispanics were wrong. There were as many whites and blacks to Hispanics and a quick count revealed an equal number of men to that of women. Further, I noticed that teenagers were minimally represented among those present. As the first mass ended, I noticed that those who were waiting to get in patiently waited for those inside to walk out before entering the church.

As we walked in, I noticed everyone dipped their fingers into metallic bowl and made the sign of the Cross and respectively bowed as they walked down the aisle in front of the cross. Having thought that I would be able to select the place I would seat due to arriving early, I surprised myself when I rushed and sat at the nearest empty seat. It is at this point I noticed that some of the congregation were kneeling and praying while others sat in silence. In addition, I noticed the same behavior exhibited early of dipping hand in the bowl, making the Sign of the Cross, and bowing in front of the cross by all who were coming in. As I sat there watching, I had the choir start singing and all of a sudden everyone arose. It was at this point that the priest walked in led by altar boys with one carrying a long and huge cross. The priest and the altar boys also bowed before the cross before they ascended onto the altar.

The way the mass was conducted was a rather pleasing experience although confusing at times. To begin with, there were instances that the congregation responded in unison to the priest. This occurred a number of times before a lady took to the altar and read the first reading followed by a lady who read the second reading. In between the gospel readings, a man with a pleasing voice took the church through responsorial in song. I later learnt that this was based from the book of Psalms in the bible. After the bible readings and the responsorial the priest stood and everyone in the church stood. At this point, I was sure that the people seated around me could easily identify that I was not catholic since it took me a few seconds for me to follow suit. As I stood up, I noticed that those around me were making a sign that I did not now as the priest started

reading from the bible. As soon as the priest finished reading from the bible, everyone sat down, and just as I was the last to stand, I believe that was the last to sit. At this point I really felt uncomfortable and was sure that those around me would definitely react but to my surprise, no one even raised an eyebrow or looked at me.

The priest addressed the whole church through the preaching where utmost silence was observed. After the preaching, the church stood and was directed by the choir through a number of songs before the priest took over again. At this point the congregation knelt through what I now know as preparation for the taking of sacrament. In addition, while kneeling, the church uniformly responded before they stood and prayed the Our Father prayer with their hands open before something unusual happened. People started greeting each other and saying “The Peace of Christ” while smiling. It was at this point that offerings were collected before everyone knelt again as the priest took over and lead the church with the congregation occasionally responding to him. After this, the uniformity in standing, kneeling and sitting did not occur as a number of people were left kneeling, others sat while others walked to where the priest stood. I can honestly say that through this, I did not do anything right and seemed to follow what those in front were doing and occasionally murmuring unknowns when others were responding to the priest. After everyone was back at their seat, announcements were made before the priest ended the mass.

Preplanning and attending mass was an eye-opening as well as invaluable avenue from which I have learnt how minorities feel. As much as no one raised an eyebrow when I did or did not do what others were doing, I was uneasy and felt out of place. I learnt the importance of welcoming and guiding those who are new to a situation since this is the first step to them feeling at ease in their new environment. In addition, just as I was wrong in regards to Hispanics and women being the majority of catholic mass goers, my understanding of how minorities adapted to their environment was challenged. This was further emphasized by the lack of contact between myself and others who had attended the same mass as I had. Hence, I will be more accommodating and willing to give direction to those who are new to an environment that I am familiar with.

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