Hayley Richardson

3-28-16

Church Visitation Paper

Group #1-Roman Catholic

On Sunday, March 20, 2016, I visited Saint Agnes Church, which is a Catholic church in Point Loma. The congregation at Saint Agnes was fairly diverse and I noticed that there was a wide range of ages and ethnicities. One thing that stood out to me about the congregation was that there was no children’s service that was separate from the main service. Everyone went to the same sermon and worshipped together. This made my experience seem more familial to me. I think that the church may do this in an effort to be more inclusive and to model Jesus’s behavior when He said to let the little children come to Him. Jesus often mentions children in the gospels and He also talks of how important they are to the Kingdom of God. With this in mind, the Catholic Church is using their view of Christ as a person who deeply values all people, especially children, to guide the way in which they conduct their church service.

The worship at Saint Agnes was all hymns that could be found in a hymnal on the back of every pew. Singing hymns made the service feel more traditional; it also felt more raw in comparison with the church services that I normally attend. The worship songs at many modern churches are very flashy and are sometimes more about the music than they are about the words being sung. Singing hymns took away any distractions of lights and music and allowed me to focus solely on the words I was singing and to Whom I was singing them. Another interesting thing that I noticed about worship was that the choir of people singing was up above the congregation and hidden from sight. I think that this too is done in an effort to remove any distraction and to remind people that they are worshipping God and not a musician on a stage.

The priest at Saint Agnes reminded me vaguely of the preacher from the Lutheran church that I visited at the beginning of the semester; both wore white robes and both performed certain duties that seemed very calculated and ritualistic. The priest at the Catholic church, however, seemed to have more rituals and He commanded the congregation’s attention differently than the Lutheran pastor did.

Because I visited Saint Agnes on Palm Sunday, there were a few things happening at the church that normally wouldn’t happen during an ordinary mass. There were palm leaves at the back of the church which everyone in the congregation picked up as they entered into the sanctuary. At the beginning of the service, the priest had the whole congregation stand for the blessing of these palm leaves. This blessing was carried out as he walked up and down the pew aisles shaking holy water into the congregation. Also, instead of carrying on with the mass as if it were an ordinary Sunday, there was a little book which we read the entire sermon out of; this book contained daily entries for the season of lent and its schedule was strictly adhered to during the service. The mass that I went to consisted of many readings from scripture that were interjected with a few lines spoken by the priest. The largest reading came from Luke 22-23 and covered the crucifixion of Jesus. Something that the pastor pointed out was that the congregation was charged with reading all of the lines spoken by the “bad guys” in the gospel narrative. This was very powerful for me to realize because I would never associate myself with the people who caused Jesus to suffer so much; yet, it was my sin that held Him there on the cross. So even though it was not I who physically tortured Jesus, I still had a hand in it because it was for my transgressions that Jesus died. This was a powerful realization that I made during my time at mass.

I noticed that in Saint Agnes Church there was more of an emphasis on physical things than there would be in a Protestant church. For instance, the palm leaves that were blessed at the beginning of the service were of special significance to the people of the congregation; however, I didn’t quite understand the significance of them. Also, when communion was taken, the elements were assumed to actually contain the presence of God. This is different than the belief of many Protestant churches which hold that the elements are just a symbol of Jesus’s body and blood. Another thing that I noticed was that everyone placed their fingers in the holy water just inside the church doors and then made the symbol of the cross over themselves both as they entered and then again as they exited the church. The symbol of the cross was also used many times during the service. I think that the Catholic Church places more emphasis on the material things because they want to emphasize the fact that Jesus was actually a physical human and that He had a body. In fact, we read the Nicene Creed during the service and I know that Jesus’s humanity was one of the hotly debated points at the Council of Nicea.

I lastly want to talk about the art and architecture inside of Saint Agnes Church. There are stained glass windows on the inside of the church; these are really the only points of art throughout the building. The rest of the sanctuary is very plain with off-white colored walls and ceilings. Once again, I think that the reasoning for a more modest appearance in the church is so that the congregation is not distracted by any flashy art or architecture. I did notice that, similar to St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Saint Agnes Church had high ceilings. I think that this is done in an effort to make the congregation feel a sort of connection with the heavens. When you are in a low-ceilinged room, one feels more closed off from the world outside the walls. A high ceiling welcomes feelings of openness that enable one to embrace God more easily.

My visit to Saint Agnes Church was one that I will never forget. I learned so much about the Catholic tradition and I got to see a glimpse of Jesus that I normally do not see at my home church.