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### Farm Street Church

If you ever find yourself in London, there are of course many sights and attractions you could go see. For example, you could visit Buckingham Palace, the 18th century administrative headquarters of the Queen that is as beautiful as it is grand. Or you could experience the London Eye, the enormous Ferris wheel on the River Thames that offers the second highest public viewing point of London (behind the newly constructed skyscraper “The Shard”). But if you want my honest opinion, if you ever find yourself in London I recommend going to a quaint part of the bustling city known as Mayfair, and more specifically, South Audley Street. Here you will find neither mansions, nor Ferris wheels. What you will find, however, is one of the most beautiful and lesser-well-known areas of London. As you roam the streets, you will be delighted at the variety of stores and restaurants that are present, ranging from oyster bars and patisseries to cigar shops and wine stores. If you keep walking, you’ll soon find yourself in a lovely little park called Mount Street Gardens. Here, situated at its heart, lies an oasis of tranquility and a monument to spirituality: The Church of the Farm Street Immaculate Conception. Constructed in 1849, the church was intended to be a place of worship for the growing Jesuit community in London. Today, the Farm Street Church opens its arms to all who wish to experience the house of God, both Jesuits and non-Jesuits. Throughout my time in London, the Farm Street Church has become my most beloved spot in the entire city because of its friendly community and extraordinary beauty.

One of the reasons the Farm Street Church is my favorite area in London is because of the caring community it cultivated. After every Sunday mass, the church would host a tea and coffee reception in the adjacent building where all were welcome. Mass-goers would leave the stands in unison and soon find themselves chatting to each other while munching on biscuits and sipping coffee that the clergy had prepared. The priest made it a point to greet everyone who walked through the doors and ask them how their week had been, nodding thoughtfully and asking questions when appropriate. After a few sessions, I realized that there was one woman in particular who was always helping set out snacks and pouring people coffee every Sunday, and so I introduced myself. Her name was Claire, and she told me enthusiastically how she had been raised in Brighton but now lived nearby the park and loved being a part of the church community. One Sunday afternoon I told her that I would be out of the country for a few weeks because I had a school-organized music tour and robotics competition. It wasn't until almost a month later that I returned to my usual routine of Sunday mass and reception, and yet when I saw her that day she instantly recalled why I had been gone and asked me how the competition went. I was stunned; somehow she had remembered what I had told her a little more than 4 weeks ago and was genuinely interested in the minor details of my life. It made me realize how the Farm Street church was actively pursuing a meaningful community that cared about its members.

Another example of the church's cordial atmosphere became apparent when my mother accompanied my father and I to mass one morning. Although my mother is not strictly Catholic, she often enjoys going to mass and listening to the sermons, as well as admiring the aesthetic beauty of Catholic churches. But she was slightly nervous about the reception afterwards because she feared that once people found out that she wasn't catholic, they would treat her differently and perhaps even shun her. After mass, we walked to the reception and soon began talking with

various people. As I moved around, I realized my mother was no longer by my side. I looked around and saw that she was standing somewhere else, deeply engaged in conversation with another woman. When I asked her about the experience afterwards, she was delighted. She told me that she had never found a group of people so welcoming and tolerant despite their differences and had made multiple friends throughout the course of the 30-minute reception. The community of Farm Street Church opened its arms to all, not simply those who were catholic.

Apart from housing a kind and thoughtful community, the Farm Street church is also my favorite place in London simply because of its extraordinary architecture. I remember how awe-struck I was when my father and I first discovered the church. We had just finished having lunch in a nearby restaurant and decided to explore the neighborhood further than we usually did. At first, Farm Street seemed like a regular British street: narrow and uneven. But as we continued to walk, the Farm Street Church, that had been hidden stealthily behind another building, suddenly became visible. I stopped in my tracks to admire the prodigious, gothic-like doors that must have stood at least 12 feet high, filled with intricate carvings of Mary and Jesus on the sides, beckoning me forward. Walking inside, I could almost hear my own thoughts amidst the hushed echoes of my shoes making contact with the smooth brick stones that covered the ground. Roman-style pillars lined the interior of the church, creating two enormous archways on either side of the main walkway. My father nudged me gently, pointing to the main altar that stood surrounded by marble coated walls and a large portrait that depicted the plight of Jesus. Turning around, my view was drawn towards the gleaming red and blue pipes of an inconspicuous organ that resided on the balcony above the stands. Stained glass windows encircled the interior of the church, converting the sunlight into elusive strands of red, green and blue. The raw beauty of the church had somehow created an austere aura where it was almost as if I was truly in the presence

of some supernatural being. Even without the traditional format of a mass, simply being within the walls of the Farm Street Church and admiring its elegance makes it my favorite place in London.

While I certainly feel a part of the church's caring community and admire its aesthetic beauty, the Farm Street Church is also my favorite area of London because of its wonderful location: in the heart of Mount Street Gardens. Living in such a bustling city can often lead to stress, especially during academic peaks, and I often find comfort in the relaxed atmosphere of the church and its surrounding park. For example, one week during my senior year of high school had been particularly hectic, and as a result I found myself being unwittingly belligerent to both my parents and my friends. Attempting to find some source of serenity, I took the bus to Mount Street Gardens. As I strolled through the park, I was very easily able to find comfort in the presence of nature around me: Gusts of winds swept small batches of leaves into dreamy hazes; the sun shone brightly, forcing its rays through the looming branches above me; and I heard the familiar caw of crows as my nose wrinkled and detected the fumes of a freshly lit cigar. I found a bench sitting in a spot of sunlight just outside the church's side entrance and must have sat there for at least half an hour, allowing myself to cogitate on my actions while admiring the peace of the Farm Street Church's location.

I have lived in London for almost my entire life, and have come to thoroughly enjoy many different parts of the city. But there is no place quite as special or unique as the church that lies in the middle of Mount Street Gardens. Even now when I visit the Farm Street Church, I am still taken back by its beauty as much as I was when I first walked through its entrance. I have found a kind and loving community that genuinely cares about me and is tolerant to others with different beliefs. And simply spending time in the church and its surrounding park has allowed

me to alleviate my mental health in times of stress and tension. Even though it may be many years before I return to London, I am certain that when I do, the Farm Street Church will be there to welcome me back.