The Catholic Faith and its Followers

Religion and the belief in a higher power have existed since the very first civilizations in recorded history. The Vatican’s recent polls in 2013 showed an estimated total of about 1.142 billion registered Roman Catholics in the world. This makes Catholicism the third most practiced religion in the world today. Parishioners have increased by 23% in the U.S. alone and 15% in Africa (How Many Roman Catholics). A sense of identity, hope, and safety are the end product of most religions, and is what draws people together to a specific faith. From there this group begins to create a culture out of a religion that is just as social and unique as any other. Religion and religious beliefs also tends to provide followers of the faith with guidance, morality, and social order.

The most common event in the Catholic faith would be the Sunday mass. Many churches offer a variety of times to attend the mass on Sundays and also multiple Mass times throughout the week. The Sunday Mass is the most important mass of the week to attend in the Catholic religion. For parishes that are close and heavily involved the Sunday Mass serves as a place to gather, be social, and be immersed in the rich and fundamental traditions of the Catholic faith. In my observation of the holy Sunday Mass, I witnessed the people of this culture to be very close. They all are very social but still very respectful. Major holidays also include Easter Sunday, Good Friday, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, and Christmas. During all these events many Catholic families gather together for dinners and attend the celebratory Mass together. Aside from going to church the children attend Sunday school until their sophomore year in college to learn meditate and grow in their religion. Throughout this this time the children also complete three of the seven sacraments of the church. The celebration of the Eucharist, Confession, and Confirmation are major milestones taken by the children in the Catholic Faith. On a more casual note many also attend Christian musical concerts, church lichens and even religious retreats to further the connection between themselves and god. These events and many more gather local Catholics together to socialize and grow in their faith. The Vatican gathers hundreds of thousands of Catholics from around the world to grow in their faith and be closer to not only God but also the heads of the church. All these events show that this culture is not only very dedicated but also very faithful and social group of people looking to connect with each other and God.

A lot of religious jargons follow the Catholic religion. Phrases like the “Liturgical Year”, “Lent”, “Sacraments”, and “Eucharist” are just vocabulary words that are very important within the Catholic faith. This specific group when interacting with each other does not talk any differently then any other person around them, unless they are speaking religiously and utilizing religious jargon. This jargon is usually only truly used in the Mass, Sunday school, and when trying to study or connect with each other on a more spiritual and religious level.

Catholics have many texts that are used regularly, the Bible being most important of all texts within the Catholic Faith. The Bible is utilized as a tool for teaching, guidance, and the foundation of the entire religion. The Bible is filled with stories of Jesus’ life and his many miracles and teachings. One major distinction to the utilization of the Bible within the Catholic religion is the interpretation of the text. Unlike some other denominations of Christianity where the Bible is taken literally, Catholics employ the Bible as a guide and more so as a tool to navigate through life, interpret teachings and gain a connection with God. Aside from the Bible the Church publishes Missals containing the readings, chants, songs, and prayers for every Mass for the entire year for the whole world. This Missal is a huge part of the Mass along with a musical book of slams that contain hundreds of traditional and new songs for the Mass and many more celebrations. Recreationally, Bookstores are now filled with many Christian authors that provide the Christian faith with works that provide entertainment and guidance. The Catholic faith is filled with literature that ranges from novels and other works to music and songs that are filled with guidance and hope for the faithful.

To be a Catholic is no longer about pleasing the Vatican City. To be a Catholic is no longer about status and money. To be a Catholic takes a lot of work, time, love, and dedication. To be Catholic is to grow and establish faith in God and his divine grace. To be Catholic is no longer to judge but to hold out ones hand as a gesture of peace and help. The religion is based on the basic principal to love oneself, each other, and most importantly God. The people of this renewed faith take it very seriously.

Their participation in the liturgical life, the celebration and reveres of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross at Mass and most importantly the celebration of the seven sacraments witch include Baptism, Eucharist, Confession, and Confirmation is what truly separates the Catholic faith (Catholicism). Baptism is how Catholics introduce their children to the church it is a ceremony and celebration that spiritually cleanses the child and welcomes him or her to the church. This is a very spiritual and social ceremony that is anticipated by all the parishioners when a family brings in a new member to the church. Baptism can also be for people that are new to the church. Confession is also a very important practice; this shows the trust parishioners have with their spiritual leaders. This practice is where parishioners seek forgiveness from god. The priest is only there to hear their confession, give advice and help.

As I attended the Sunday Mass I tried to see the mass in a new way and look at the other people in a more critical light. I also tried to notice my own actions. I have always enjoyed the “Youth” mass. The music was always better and the homilies made more sense to me. I remember questioning everything and I tried to remember what I needed to do and why I was doing it. I tried to think of what the meanings behind my usual church routine were. I enjoyed looking at the mass in a different perspective. Looking back at the service, one can really learn about the Catholic faith and what the Catholic culture is made up of. This culture is very active, lively, social, and rich tradition filled. We see that the people apart of this community are very close. They all are very social; we also see that they follow a lot of traditions and are very respectful. We see that they are very involved and you can also see the change that has happened in the catholic faith. They dress modestly and are very respectful. This event is very common and very popular. Every Sunday many churches offer about 3 or 5 hours for mass to make it more available. Mass is not only popular because of tradition; but also because mass is a very social event. Before and after mass the talk isn’t always religious based. Many socialize and catch up with each other. The mass also offers the people time away to rely understand their own faith. As I spoke with all the parishioners I was welcomed in with no problem. They all reflected that the culture was very accepting of newcomers and are still respectful and faithful.

More recently a large shift in culture also challenged the Church’s views and practices. With the rise of popular religious music and a tired traditional Catholic Mass, many parishioners wanted change. The hypocritical stereotype that followed Catholics also began to deteriorate the parishioner’s view of their religion and themselves (Dichtl, John, R). Respects for the Catholic faith seemed to be missing, and many were bored and could no longer connect with the Mass. Those who left sought out a more welcoming, relatable, and “down to earth” form of worshiping (O'Connell-Cahill). With numbers declining the Church quickly realized that change needed to be made or it would soon be left behind. With more progressive priests entering the Church, continuous public pressure, and Popes with open minds, the church has regained popularity and is continuing to spread its message. Now, like most other denominations of Christianity, the Catholic Church has urbanized its Mass. Many churches have set “Teen” Masses every Sunday that include live music featuring guitars, drums, and lyrics to songs that are more relatable and understandable to the public. Priests have even made the effort to study understand the new generations of Catholics to better prepare their sermons. The Church has also adapted their way of teaching Sunday school (Foley, Nadine). The Catholic’s Papacy, their government-like office, is also very unique and its head, the pope, is essential to the catholic religion (Aleteia).

One would imagine that with the amount of structure that the Catholic faith contains, it would have been able to avoid the many problems it encountered. From corrupted bishops and popes to religious wars, the Catholic Church will always have a troubled past. One of the biggest losses in the Catholic Church would be the decline of followers in Eastern Europe. Europe, which once made up 38% of all Catholic followers, has now fallen to only 23% (How). Soon after Henry VIII and grievances made public by Martine Luther, Europe made a large shift to Protestantism. Europe’s tolerance with the Vatican’s grasp in multiple governments grew thin; and to make matters worse, it seemed as if the Vatican lost control of its leaders for a long time. The corruption that surrounded the Church and the continuous rise in Protestant influence cost the Church many followers (Dichtl, John, R).

The Catholic Church has changed enormously and so have its parishioners, its priests, bishops, and popes. Many Catholics have found their restored respect for the church, their religion, themselves, and others.. Many are active within their church and become engaged in their community. Even the meaning and practice of the Lent holiday has changed. This season lasts for 40 days in remembrance of Jesus’ 40 days in the desert. Not too long ago the church taught this season to only be to give up something in one’s life. Most people saw it as a chore and didn’t really practice or understand the meaning behind Lent. Now it is also seen as more of a willing sacrifice where followers can even give back to help out the community and to show their appreciation and reverence in a way that doesn’t benefit them at all. This simple change makes a huge difference in what the Catholic faith believes in and teaches. Pope Francis has also addressed his beliefs of the LGBT community. He has made it clear too the public that even he cannot judge the LGBT community and that it is not our place nor right to exclude them from the Catholic Faith. With a leader that is more accepting then anyone in this religion’s past and any other religion, there is more acceptance within this community then ever before.

Like most religions one of the most obvious goals parishioners have is first and foremost to develop a rich and personal relationship with the God of their faith. Many have a personal goal to truly be one with their faith, to try and live in their beliefs to the best of their ability. “Be not afraid,”-Pope John. This is a very simple statement that still carries a lot of weight even in today’s society, and has had great impact on the Catholic community. Being a Catholic Citizen in the U.S is a blessing of its own; many see this blessing as a way to continue to spread their faith to as many people as possible. Many Catholics believe that they have a responsibility not only to the church but to God. Some being: to make known to the world of God’s gift of life, to spread their faith, and to donate not only money but more importantly their time to those in need. Most Catholics want to achieve unity and harmony within themselves and their own faith, as well as to devote their time to worship and show appreciation to God.

Appendix

Ethnography Observation: Sunday “Contemporary-Youth Mass”

Location: St. Philip Neri Catholic Church

 292 Munn Rd E, Fort Mill, SC 29715

 (803) 548-7282

 <http://www.saintphilipneri.org>

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| Saturday Vigil Mass | 5:30 p.m. |
| Sunday Masses | 8:00 a.m., 9:30 a.m. & 11:30 a.m. |
|  | (Nursery available during the 9:30 a.m. & 11:30 a.m. Masses) |
|  | 5:30 p.m. (Contemporary Music) |
| Weekday Mass | 9:30 a.m.; Monday through Friday |
|  | Daily Mass Chapel in the Sanctuary |

Notes:

* Many started arriving around 4:50pm about 40 minutes early.
* As people enter; we all touch the holy water in the fountain and leave the lobby and enter the pews. As we enter my parents bow their heads facing the altar and Jesus on the cross.
* Everyone is very friendly, I see people socializing and catching up.
* The bad has already been practicing and have already arrived and are now setting up.
* Father John has begun setting up the later for the mass.
* Clothing wise everyone is different. Many are in business casual clothing (no ties) or casual but respectful attire. Everyone looks modest and respectful.
* I see a lot of families, and many couples.
* A lot of the kids are playing together while the parents are trying to keep an eye on them and trying to socialize and talk before mass begins.
* I am going around talking to my cousins and my aunt who I haven’t seen in a while.
* As I look around my mom is talking with her church group and my brother in talking and laughing away with his friends.
* Its 5:25pm and the church is filled with people. The lobby and the pews are filled with people and everyone is conversing. Some parents have begun to move to the soundproof room set aside for parents with noisy kids.
* The room is filled with life, the alter is very simple but very beautifully lit.
* At 5:30 the room is quiet the light are dimed around the room and everyone’s attention has moved away from each other and now we are all focused on the alter and the processing priest and the alter boys/girls.
* As they reach the altar the priest along with the alter boys/girls all bow and head to their positions.
* The priest announces the beginning of the mass and greets the parish as a whole and blesses the mass, the room, and the people.
* The band is playing contemporary Christian music along with the mass.
* It is Feb. 22nd and there are three readings. The first reading is a reading from the book or a letter or an act, following the reading there is a responsorial psalm with leads into the second reading and a Gospel acclamation or Alleluia.

The first and second readings are read by parishioners, and the music is played lively as people join in.

* The practicing priest reads the third reading (the Gospel), while the people are standing.
* At the end of the reading the people are signaled by the priest to sit down and then he continues with his homily for the day.
* While all this is happening there are still many things going on. Some people are in deep concentration on the readings and the priest. Some have been distracted. For the most part the people seem engaged.
* Once the priest concludes his homily it is time for the profession of Faith. Everyone is standing and all verbally join together.
* Now Parishioners present the gifts to the altar.
* Now all are kneeling and in meditation. The priest performs the Eucharist prayer.
* The sign of piece is now professed all shake hands and give each other acceptance and the sign of piece.
* Once this is done the breaking of the bread is preformed and all are getting ready for communion.
* The adults and those who have completed eat and drink while the little kids and other go up to get a personal blessing until they too go through the process. During this time everyone is in mediation and in prayer.
* After this the priest makes the final blessing and finally we are dismissed.
* Before the dismissal a parishioner steps up to the altar and informs all the parishioners of the things going on in the community.
* At the end the band plays a final time to lead the exiting procession of the priest and the alter servers.

Artifacts:

 Candles: Used to represent the Holy Spirit.

 Chalice: The cup that holds the blood of God

 Wine: Represents the Blood of God

 Bread: Represents the body of Christ

 Altar: A place to praise the lord and serve him

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