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## Comparison of Church Services

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# Comparison of Church Services

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"After visiting three church services, Episcopal, Eastern Catholic, and Roman Catholic, and comparing these to my experiences in Protestantism, predominately Presbyterianism, I found many similarities among the obvious differences. First, I will discuss each church service individually. Then, I will compare those services with each other and my prior experiences."

# Comparison of Church Services

by

Jodi Rowland

After visiting three church services, Episcopal, Eastern Catholic, and Roman Catholic, and comparing these to my experiences in Protestantism, predominately Presbyterianism, I found many similarities among the obvious differences. First, I will discuss each church service individually. Then, I will compare those services with each other and my prior experiences.

First, I visited Christ Church, an Episcopalian service, on East Avenue. Since I have not attended an Episcopal service prior to September 21<sup>st</sup>, I did not know what to expect. When entering the church, I noticed the use of images. From the beauty of the architecture to the statues and decorative altar and vestments, I was in awe of the church. Before the service began, I noticed that the choir was situated behind the congregation. Throughout the service, the priest, deacon, and lector faced the congregation, including us in the service. From these initial observations, it is evident that the Episcopal Church relies on signs and images to express a kataphatic event (God refracted through something tangible, like a sign or symbol). Thus, the congregation visually participates in the service and God through these images.

During intercession, I became aware of Christ Church's sense of community, which reaches beyond the congregation itself. Starting with the congregation, the prayers were extended to the local community, national, and international level—political and spiritual domains. In fact, much time was devoted to this sense of communion, not just in our midst, but in union with other Episcopalians and to the world.

Another element of the service at Christ Church that I noticed was communion. The Eucharist shows that the Episcopal Church participates in an apophatic event (recognizing that form is not completely God—God is formless—and is spiritually

beyond us). When taking the Eucharist, the congregation (all who have been baptized), are invited to the altar, where they stand or kneel behind the communion railing. This promotes a sense of community, which ties back to intercession. Thus, Episcopalians, at least at Christ Church, have a strong sense of community.

By observing this service, I found that Christ Church, as a representative for Episcopalians, is connected spiritually with each other and God, using sign, symbol, and sacrament. In addition, there was an emphasis placed on the Word of God—through prayer, song, and scripture. (The scripture readings were, Wisdom 1:16-2:1, 12-22 and Mark 9:30-37.) These readings, along with the prayer, song, and sermon show the importance Episcopalians place on the Word in coordination with sacrament. Therefore, the congregation encounters God through two means—visual and auditory—which allows each member to actively participate in the service.

Moving forward, the next service I visited, on September 28<sup>th</sup>, was St. Josaphat's Ukrainian Catholic Church, which is Eastern Catholic. Having never attended an Eastern Catholic or Orthodox service, I did not know what to expect. Upon entering the church, I immediately noticed the iconography. On the two side walls and the wall behind the altar were large icons, depicting various scenes—from Jesus to the Saints. In addition, there were gold doors in front of the altar, only opened to the congregation during the service. Even then, the altar was not completely visible. All of these images demonstrate the idea of God refracted through sign or symbol. The message from the icons, the nature of the altar and the doors, is a kataphatic event, allowing the congregation to witness God in some form of tangible means.

During the service, on many occasions, the deacon shook incense toward the altar and the congregation, bells jingling as he did this. This was one of the only moments where the service was directed toward the congregation. For the most part, the priest, deacon, and lector faced the altar. This shows reverence toward God; however, the congregation watches what is happening, and cannot fully participate in all of the service. I was able to observe part of the consecration, but not all.

The prayers of intercession showed communion with the church community, not only locally, but globally as well. St. Josaphat's is in communion with the Pope. Thus, reference was made to him during intercession and throughout the service.

Although I am unsure of what scriptures were read, I do know that the congregation used the Divine Liturgy of John Chrysostom. This furthers the church's connection with the Communion of the Faithful (Catholic understanding of past, present, and future members of the Church) in that Chrysostom is venerated by both the Latin and Eastern rites. Therefore, there is a strong sense of communion with the Church.

For the Eucharist, the priest consecrated the bread and wine, and then mixed them together. Those participating in the Eucharist, only Catholics were allowed, received communion from the same chalice and spoon. Receiving communion in this fashion, demonstrates yet another sense of community; the congregation drinks and eats from the same cup and spoon—all are equal. This sacrament illustrates an apophatic event, experiencing God spiritually and recognizing that God is beyond our senses.

Observing this church service, I noticed the sense of community found within the Catholic Church. Along with this, St. Josaphat's community experiences God through

sacrament (sign plus symbol) and scripture, on a form and a formless platform, which facilitates a tangible vision of God that is symbolic of God's transcendence.

The last service I attended was St. John of Rochester, in Perinton, which is Roman Catholic. Since I am a member of RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) at St. John of Rochester, I have been dismissed before the Eucharist. However, having past experience in attending Roman Catholic services, I am aware of the process of events.

First, there is an emphasis on sign and symbol—the crucifix, the Stations of the Cross on the back wall, a baptismal font—which presents a kataphatic event. Thus, one experiences mass and God through visual orientation. The priest, deacon, lector, and choir face the congregation, inviting them to join in the service. Through the intercession, there is a demonstration of unity with the congregation and the Church.

Since, there are three scripture readings, depending on the day, there is an importance placed on the Word. In addition, since St. John's uses the Roman Catholic Lectionary, this demonstrates a further notion of community within the Church. Thus, image and Word are important in the participation of the mass and the experience of God.

Besides the images, scripture readings, homily, and song, there is a major emphasis placed on the Eucharist. This is the main way that Roman Catholics experience mass—understanding that the transcendence of God mystically transforms into bread and wine. The experience elevates the congregation from static to active participation.

After observing a Roman Catholic mass at St. John of Rochester, I noticed that the images, scripture, and Word are important to mass. However, the Eucharist is vital. This shows that Catholics are in communion with each other—extending beyond St.

John's to the Communion of the Faithful—and with God. Through different forms, or the formless, Roman Catholics participate in mass and experience God.

Looking at these three services, it is easy to find similarities. However, first I would like to view a few startling differences. One, the Episcopalians have women deacons and priests; the others do not. Two, the Episcopalian and Eastern Catholic priests are allowed to be married. For the Eastern Catholic priests, they may not marry in the United States. However, they may marry in another country, and then, move to the U.S. Three, Eastern and Roman Catholics require that one be Catholic in order to partake in the Eucharist, whereas the Episcopalians (at Christ Church) welcome all who have been baptized.

Comparing the three services, I realized that the basic foundations of belief were the same. In addition, the sense of community, although experienced on different levels, was present in all. Experiencing God in different means—visually and through the Word—was apparent in all three. Not previously mentioned, these churches are institutionalized—there is a hierarchy: laity, deacon, priest, bishop, archbishop or pope.

Moving on, when I look back to my experience with Protestantism (Presbyterianism), I am aware of the emphasis placed, almost solely, on the Word. Although the Presbyterian church I used to attend in Geneseo had some images, such as the crucifix, there was never a real emphasis placed on them in coordination with the service. In addition, we had communion once a month, and it was considered symbolic. There was no consecration, in a Catholic or Episcopal sense, of bread and wine.

On the other side, in comparison with the other services, there was a strong commitment to community shown at the Presbyterian services. In fact, I think that there



was an even stronger sense of the local community, but not nationally or internationally. Before attending any service other than mainline Protestant, I thought that the sermon and scripture readings were the focus of church. However, after attending Roman Catholic services, followed by the Episcopal and Eastern Catholic services, I became aware of the sacramental world view. Church became more than a chance to hear the Word of God; it became the chance to see God in some sort of form—image or symbol—and recognize God's transcendence.

After experiencing these various services, I found that there are more similarities than differences within these denominations. Putting aside some controversial issues, like Roman Catholic priests being married or ordaining women within the Catholic rites, the basic foundation of Christian faith is fundamentally the same. I feel that there could be positive outcomes in advances toward an ecumenical movement.