

A Catholic Visits A Jewish Synagogue

This is a report written by our parishioner Patrick O'Leary, a grade 12 student at Charleston Catholic High School for his theology class with Diana Mehle.



On November 1, 2014 I went to a Saturday morning service at B'Nai Jacob Synagogue in downtown Charleston. I went with fellow classmate Michael Kawash, and we were the only two Charleston Catholic students there. We met our CCHS teachers Mrs. Urecki and Ms. Urecki in the gathering space outside of the worship space. We put on yarmulkes [traditional Jewish head covering] and proceeded in. The service had already started, to our surprise. We arrived at 9:30am, when the Ureckis had told us to arrive. However, the Ureckis told us that they usually arrive late at 9:30am, when the service starts to pick up.

Knowing that the rabbi was their husband and father, we figured we were going to be all right.

We quietly walked into a room with many chairs. It strangely resembled a Catholic church, where most of the chairs were facing the front. There was a stage with a small table like an altar, and behind it against the wall was a large area located in the center where the Torah [large parchment scrolls on which the first 5 books of the Bible are handwritten] was located, covered up by blinds. There were several windows, but they were covered up by curtains. However, the service occurred on a smaller pulpit-like structure in the back of the room. This is where Rabbi Urecki and various others read during the service. We sat in chairs facing the side of the smaller pulpit.

I was very surprised about the congregation. I was expecting a large amount of people, such as on a Sunday morning Catholic Mass. Other than Michael, the Ureckis and myself, there were only about 15 people there. (I later learned there was another service that Saturday evening, so maybe that was the main worship service.) Mainly middle aged to older men, and one middle aged woman attended this service. Other than ourselves, the youngest person there, I would say, was about 30.

The service was very hard to follow due to the fact that everything was said in Hebrew. Without the Ureckis' help, I would definitely have understood nothing. I knew the service was something that I had ever experienced before when I opened a hymn book from the wrong side! Their Hebrew books are the opposite of our worship books, where the back is the front and vice-versa. Mrs. Urecki could only laugh when I did that. As I said, Rabbi Urecki read from the pulpit in the back. I was not sure if this was a common thing, or because of the small congregation gathered.

During the service, there were many prayers recited and scriptures read. One of the neatest parts, I thought, was when prayers were finished and the Torah was brought out. It was kept inside a gold structure called an ark, and Rabbi Urecki carried it around to all of the congregation, who were standing. Whenever the Torah was up in the air, we had to be standing. It was similar to when the Priest or Deacon at a Catholic Church holds up the Gospel, and everyone stands. Several people from the congregation were called up to read excerpts from the Torah in Hebrew. This, we discovered later, is a very big honor in the Jewish tradition.

I think what I found most interesting (and it is kind of hard to explain) was that despite the service being so different from anything I was used to, and being so hard to follow in Hebrew, it was very relaxed. Perhaps that is because there was few people there; I'm not sure. This could be explained by one man who had a WVU logo on his yarmulke. However, even

though the service was relaxed the people were very serious and devout. I was very impressed by this. There is a lot of standing, getting up and sitting down. They bent over and bowed a lot during specific words and phrases, but we didn't have to. They are a very dedicated group of people, who love their faith.

One of the biggest questions I had was how many are there in the congregation. I am sure there are a lot more people than we saw who attend the synagogue. I also would like to know which services are the most crowded.

At the end of the service, Rabbi Urecki concluded by talking in English, which was very nice. He thanked Michael and me for coming. I think this gesture summed up the hospitality of the group gathered. They were very polite and welcoming to us. This was an indication to me of why people attend. There was clearly a rich tradition, and it was like a family was gathered together. That would certainly be a reason for the people to continue to want to gather together.

This service and experience said a lot to me. First of all, I was glad to have the opportunity to go. While I really enjoyed it, it made me miss the familiarity of Blessed Sacrament. I also missed hearing English being spoken. As for my faith, I thought it was interesting to hear Old Testament readings. It was easier to understand the many connections between Judaism and Christianity. The service was almost exactly an hour and a half, and we missed at least a little bit of it. **This certainly will make me not complain about an hour Mass.** The experience will also encourage me to try new things. As I go off soon to college, it is important for me to expand my horizons and try new things. I never know what I could come across.