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### I Went to Church and I Liked It

My experience with the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, located just a few streets down from the campus of ECSU, began early on a cold, fall morning, as I knocked on the wooden doors of the church about ten minutes before the start of the 9:30AM liturgical service on October 18, 2015. This experience marked my first time in an Orthodox Church, along with the first Christian Sunday morning service I had attended in about half a decade. I was immediately greeted with a handshake from a man decked out in an ornate priest outfit, reverend Marc Vranes, who looked surprised, but happy, to see me for the first time. As I entered into a rather small lobby, Mr. Vranes asked for my name and where I came from. After answering that I was visiting from ECSU and this was my first time in an Orthodox Church, he told me that the service would start shortly, and I was free to look around inside the nave. Upon first glance, the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church appears as a relatively small and humble church. At the top of the building lies a golden dome, marking the entrance, and the church bells, the only external distinguishing feature of an orthodox church, aside from some signage and an orthodox cross. As I moved through the church, I found myself talking to the only other person inside the nave, an older woman who overheard my discussion with Mr. Vranes. As I looked around, the church reminded me of my studies of the Byzantines and late Romans in terms of design. While the building had modern features, it looked like a modest church you may have stumbled upon in a small Mediterranean town in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century. After my friendly discussion, I began looking around at the various icons hung up around the church, surrounding the pews, until the service began. I noticed that one icon in particular was on a stand, covered in silver leaf, and embroidered with gemstones, depicting the Theotokos. This icon appeared much larger, about

the size of a poster, than the small ones hanging around the church, and it primarily composed of silver, blue, and green color, rather than the typical gold and imperial purple icons I came across in the nave.

I sat down in a pew near the back of the nave, curious as to where anyone else, particularly my classmates, were. After a few minutes, roughly a dozen people had shown up, and either took their seats or had begun chanting liturgy in English as the service began to start. As I remembered from class, I saw church members go up to the front of the nave and kiss an icon before taking their seats. While the church had a foreign feel, the service appeared unbelievably similar to the ones I experienced in Presbyterian and Dutch Reform churches, except chanting took the place of hymns. As the service began to pick up, Mr. Vranes made his way into the nave from the sanctuary through a pair of ornate wooden holy doors, flanked on each side by paneling covered with icons and began reciting church litany. At this time, around 9:45AM, roughly twenty individuals took their seats, or joined with other chanters near the front of the church, leaving most of the pews half empty. Chants during the service usually occurred three times, either in succession, or spread out throughout the service. Astonishingly, I witnessed people pour into the church even half an hour into the service, something unheard of doing in my past experiences in Protestant churches, unless you wanted other church members to brand you a heretic.

I noticed that the church had a younger cohort of individuals than I normally had seen in other services. While a few individuals were around my age, I accounted for that as they came from UConn, which does not have an Eastern Orthodox Church. Unlike in the churches I have gone to, it appeared that there were more women than men, and no men over the age of seventy or so. The church also had a number of couples or families, and only a few church members went

by themselves to service, like those from UConn. To my surprise, there were roughly a half dozen children under the age of five in attendance, a large amount for the 30-35 people that showed up for the service. It also surprised me how many of the kids were free to roam around and do as they pleased, something I have never witnessed in a church before. Some of the kids behaved themselves, and others ran around until their parents eventually corralled them to a pew. No one seemed to mind the children, not the members in the pews, nor the reverend or head chanter.

By the halfway point in the service, Mr. Vranes began to recite some biblical scripture, from Luke 8:5-15, and proceed to use it for his sermon. This sermon reminded me of my old Presbyterian minister who delivered several throughout a given service, except only one was given in this particular church. This particular sermon regarded the adherence of God's word, and Mr. Vranes focused on the need of the community to follow a "good path." Mr. Vranes once again reminded me about my time in a Presbyterian church by stressing the need for members of the community to take care of the less fortunate, and to remember that there is good within everyone.

After his biblical teaching, Mr. Vranes went around the pews, spreading incense with a canter, chanting litanies three times in succession. After returning to the front of the church, Mr. Vranes began to conclude the service with another round of chants. At some point during the chants, a man approached me, welcoming me to the church, and proceeded to take down my name, and passed into the church sanctuary. I feared that he may have passed down my information to Mr. Vranes, and to my chagrin, he totally did. As Mr. Vranes began to end the service and prepare for the Eucharist, he began discussing recent church news, and made several announcements. All of a sudden, he looked at a sticky note on his outline, and proceeded to look

directly at me, and publically welcomed me to the church, causing everyone around me to look over in my direction. Afterwards, he began to deliver a final litany, but after the first line, I heard Mr. Vranes add my name into the chant, which I found rather cool.

Finally once Eucharist had begun, everyone had gone up, formed a line, and proceeded to take some bread and wine from the front of the church. Many church members made their way to the pews, stopping by to welcome me to the church. At this point, the head chanter, Steve, offered me a piece of bread which I took; this was the first time I have come remotely close to taking communion (or Eucharist) in about a decade. Once everyone had taken their seats, Mr. Vranes ended the service by talking about the large icon that drew my attention just prior to service, and how it was being brought to orthodox churches in the Northeast, and Steve, the head chanter had organized it to make a stop at this particular church. According to Mr. Vranes, the icon, based off of the precious metals used alone, had a material value of twenty or more thousand dollars. As a gift to Steve, Mr. Vranes had a small copy of the icon made and laminated for him, and then proceeded to give it to him. Steve, who appeared rather stoic throughout the service became a bit emotional, and thanked everyone in the church.

After the conclusion of the service, I was invited downstairs for coffee time, so I followed the crowd for some free food and conversation. After grabbing some food, I became surrounded by about four or five friendly church members who began chatting with me. Not too long into the conversation, we began to discuss our religious backgrounds. To my surprise, I discovered that many of the members of this particular church were former Catholics or Protestants who had a spouse that brought them into the orthodox tradition. However, through my conversations, I found out that some of these spouses still claimed that they were of their original faith, but have not gone to a church of their identifying denomination in decades, instead

favoring to attend service at the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Willimantic. A middle-aged woman approached me at one point and I learned that she had a background in Dutch Reform churches, which I have some familiarity with, but she also preferred to go to this church with her family. Another surprise was that there were very few Willimantic locals within the church, and many, including Mr. Vranes, had driven across the state to go to this particular church. Mr. Vranes had made his way down to the church, and he had shed his ornate robes for a painter's outfit, old clothes smeared in paint, as he had intended on working on the church basement for that day. By 11:30, I had begun my way back to ECSU, only to pass by the neighboring Baptist church, where I heard multiple people screaming and shouting prayers, thus quickening my pace.

After deciding to tempt fate once again, I returned to the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church for service on October 25, at 9:30AM. Unlike my first experience at the church, I arrived in Eastern Orthodox fashion, and walked in through the main entrance at 9:31AM. As I walked to take my seat, I entered into Mr. Vranes welcoming in a half dozen new ECSU students to the service, and then stated "I see Mac showed up again, I guess he failed his paper the first time." After years of suffering through dad humor, my morning face did its best to sum up the strength to garner a smile, but the results were apparently less than ideal. The rest of the service carried on without any real deviation from the previous service. Aside from a different biblical teaching, and a small ending ceremony for one of the youth members, the service appeared quite the same from the prior week. After service had concluded, I once again went downstairs for food and a brief church meeting about the Windham Area Interfaith Ministry. As I shoveled in church bacon into my mouth, Mr. Vranes approached me, and sincerely apologized for his aforementioned dad humor, and we had a pleasant chat about the service. After another pleasant trip to church, I left to destroy any built up holiness by watching the deconstruction of the New York Jets' defense by

my spiritual guide, Tom Brady, and his beard. Although, I probably will go back for another service.

The Holy Trinity Orthodox Church offered a unique experience that managed to bring me back a second time. While the church had a definite Eastern Orthodox feel, it did not present itself as an exclusive group, and had several familiar features to my past experiences in Protestant churches. While I had concerns walking into the church that it may have overemphasized the clergy or a certain political agenda, as I have experienced from Catholic Churches in my town, Holy Trinity did not. Although I entered the church without any real interest in doing so, everyone in the church presented themselves as friendly, and welcoming to myself, and other ECSU students. The Sunday services of the church did have a learning curve, as I had no experience with chanting, but it did not take long to understand and enjoy the services. The church had a distinctly open feel, and unlike my experiences in churches with a hundred or more members, I did not feel like one person in a crowd, I felt like a part of a small community. The service had a decent balance, as someone coming from a Presbyterian background, of chanting and biblical teachings, that did not end up feeling as if it unnecessarily dragged on. I particularly enjoyed coffee time after the services, and getting a chance to chat with both Mr. Vranes and members of the church, all who were friendly and welcoming of my presence, even though I had no prior connection or experience in an Eastern Orthodox Church. If I have any reason to go to a church again, I may have to pick the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, as it provided a friendly, community oriented feel that ties in historical traditions and church design to a modernized American service; a perfect combination for myself as a young history major.