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Reflection on Italy

Studying abroad is more than a chance to live and study in another country. It is a chance to open your eyes and see the world from a different perspective; a pair of glasses you have never tried on which bring new things as well as old things we thought we new into focus. As a Roman Catholic, the opportunity to study in Rome gave me the ability to study the roots of my faith and see it from the eyes of actual *Roman* Roman Catholics. How was it different? How was it the same? What could I learn from them that would not only deepen but further enrich my own faith?

Catholic means “universal” or “undivided” but it is hard to actually realize the truth in the name when one attends mass every Sunday at the same local church with the same eighty to a hundred people. In Italy, however, I took every Sunday as an opportunity to visit a local Italian church. The search was not difficult at all seeing as there were at least five churches within a ten-minute walking distance from the Tiziano Hotel where I lived and hundreds of them throughout the entire city, each with their own heritage and history. While several, such as Del Gesu, usually catered towards the tourists with very few regular members, there were many with large congregations of families and friends. These were the churches I often returned to, for the members welcomed me as one of their own, and there was something special about listening to the youth choir of Santa Maria Transportina while sitting next to the grandmothers of the singers.

The core of the mass: the scripture readings, gospel, offertory, structure and organization of prayers and responses were the same, as one would expect. Using an Italian mass book from the Saint Mary’s Rome Library I was able to follow along and respond in prayer with the rest of the congregation. Even if I would become slightly lost in the sequence, I would immediately find my place when the priest raised the host and sang out in Italian “*prendatelo e mangiatelo.*” Some parts of mass didn’t need a translation.

The rest of the mass, however, was surprisingly different. Not in structure, but in practice of the people. While American masses are structured for everyone to kneel,

stand, and sit together at the same time, Italians never worried about such dictations. Although they stood or knelt when the Eucharist was present, the choice of what to do or when to do it was each person's own decision. Even communion was not performed in an orderly American fashion with each row going up one at a time. Each person stood and walked to the front when they felt like they were ready to receive communion, allowing others to pass as needed. At first I was taken aback by such lack of structure. How was I supposed to know when to do anything? What if I did something wrong or at the wrong time? However, I never saw any train-wreck during communion, nor did I ever receive a scowl or raised eyebrow from an elderly Italian next to me if I knelt or stood before they did. Each person was to their own dictation and respected those around them. Although at first it was strange and foreign to me, I soon found a peace in this difference. For by taking away the rubrics of actions of the congregation, I was able to connect solely to the altar and Person present there without worrying. I no longer stood because everyone else was standing or sitting because everyone else said to. I stood because I felt called to do so and I knelt because I felt inclined to kneel before my God.

As the year continued, I was able to attend masses and visit churches around Italy including Assisi, Florence, Lipari, Naples, and Padua. Each was a little different and each gave a new insight into the history and tradition of different branches of one faith. Attending masses also helped me improve my Italian by listening, responding, and praying in Italian. Although it may sound strange to one who has never done so, the first time I prayed silently in Italian was a huge stepping stone for me. While we may talk about God as one overlooking all traditions and cultures, we often have a bubble around him, preferring to think of him as English speaking or understanding Americans. My prayer in Italian was equal in heart and spirit to any prayer I had ever spoke in English, and was raised up equal with those praying next to me. There was no difference. Just as when I stood with several thousand people in Saint Peter's Square singing Christmas carols while waiting in line for Midnight Mass. We were all one.

It would take seven times seven page papers to share every aspect of my experience abroad and it would not do the entirety justice. The only way for someone to fully understand is for them to experience it themselves and make it their own. Which is why I encourage everyone who can to study abroad and take advantage of the unique and

life changing experience that Saint Mary's offers to its students. I would also like to thank CWIL for giving me this wonderful opportunity, for without their grant I would not have been financially able to attempt such a journey. Your contributions to the rising women of tomorrow allow us to enter the world with a better understanding of ourselves and the world around us.