

My Experience Simulating Culture Shock

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At the beginning of the year I began working as a part-time high school French teacher at Saint John's Academy in San Francisco. Saint John's is a k-12 parochial school operated by the Holy Virgin Russian Orthodox Cathedral on Geary Boulevard in San Francisco. Before accepting the position, I visited the school's website in order to educate myself about the Russian Orthodox Church and the degree to which the Orthodox religion would be present in the school and classroom. I was raised in England in an Irish-Catholic family and although I rarely go to church anymore, I was concerned that I would not be comfortable in a potentially strict religious environment. Although my initial reactions and research into Russian Orthodoxy had created doubts, I ended up accepting the position because during my two visits to the school during the interview process, I found the Principal and other teachers to be very open, professional and friendly; the students to be very happy and outgoing; and the overall environment to be very warm and caring.

For my culture shock assignment, I decided to attend two Orthodox religious events related to the period of Lent. The first was the Rite of Forgiveness, a short ceremony of approximately thirty minutes that took place on Monday March 2nd, 2020 during school hours in the main hall of the school. The second was a Russian Orthodox religious service at the Holy Virgin Russian Orthodox Cathedral that lasted approximately three hours and took place on Sunday March 8th, 2020.

The Rite of Forgiveness

On the morning of Monday March 2, 2020, I was speaking with the Principal of my school and telling her that I would be attending a service at the Cathedral for an assignment on culture shock that I was working on. At that point she offered me an opportunity to experience another culture shock situation later that morning: The Rite of Forgiveness. She explained that

as this was the first week of Lent, the entire school would be leaving their classrooms during third period to celebrate the Rite of Forgiveness in the school hall. I was not obligated to go but would be very welcome if I wanted to attend and could either stand in the back and observe or I could also participate. Knowing only that it was to last about thirty to forty-five minutes, I agreed to participate.

After my French 2 class had finished, I exited my classroom and followed the students to the hall. I had absolutely no idea what to expect. I opened the doors, went into the hall and first saw two priests from the Cathedral who had come to lead the ceremony. They were setting up a table in the front. All of the students, from kindergartners to twelfth graders, as well as the teachers and the school staff, were standing throughout the hall haphazardly, facing the priests. I found a place to stand next to my older students and one of the teachers I knew. There was no music; just some very light chatter. Suddenly it went very quiet and one of the priests began to chant in what I later learned was Slavonic. After a while everyone started making gestures with their hands several times in a row accompanied by a very deep bow. The gestures seemed like the sign of the cross that we do in the Catholic Church but at the same time very different. I immediately felt confused and caught off guard. I didn't understand what was being said and didn't understand the significance of the gestures and the bow. I was standing among everyone and felt really self-conscious. I felt that I was expected to do something but didn't fully understand what exactly. Then there was more chanting from the priests who were joined by the school body. Suddenly everyone began bowing, approximately twenty very deep bows in succession. These bows were different and I noticed the people around me would extend one hand to touch the ground as they bowed. I tried to discretely look around to see what those next to me were doing but didn't want to stare either. I was definitely feeling uncomfortable at this

point but I also realized that no one was looking at me. I realized that my discomfort was all in my own head. That helped make me feel a little less anxious. The series of deep bows ended and then everyone began to sing. I was stunned at how beautiful it sounded and how every single person was singing loud and with confidence. It was a melody that I had not heard before and sounded very Eastern. Usually in a Catholic church when the congregation has to sing by itself it usually doesn't sound very good. This was a stark contrast to that.

Once the singing ended, one of the priests walked around to our side of the table and spoke to the students in English about Lent and what lent means to them. I was so glad to hear some English and felt at least I could relate to what was happening. Through a light-hearted and funny story that brought chuckles from several people, the priest spoke about how Lent is more than giving something up, but is a time to forgive people and to unload negative feelings. I also appreciated the light-heartedness of the moment which reminded me of the style of sermons I am more used to. I felt in familiar territory.

As the story ended and the priest went back to his original position and the chanting in Slavonic began once more. This time I could tell that we were supposed to be repeating phrases after the priest. We began to bow again after each phrase but this time the bow was very different. At the end of each chant we would go on our knees and touch our foreheads to the ground, something that I have only seen Muslims do on television. As I did this alongside everyone else, I tried to study what they were doing to make sure I was doing it correctly. When the chanting finished everyone began to line up in front of the priests. The younger students went first and then everyone else lined up behind them. I was amazed by how they all knew what to do. They only do this once a year but their actions seemed instinctive.

As I stood in line, one of the teachers in front of me turned and quickly explained that we were about to ask each other for forgiveness. I appreciated her help but I needed details. I didn't ask for any. I began to study what was happening at the front. The student at the front of the line, a kindergartner, made a deep bow to the priest, who bowed back to him. They then said something to each other and then exchanged "air kisses" to the cheeks 3 times, like French "bisous." When finished, the young student moved next to the priest and faced the line. The second student now went through the same ritual with the priest and then moved down the line and did it with the first student and then she in turn stood next to them and turned. When I was close to the front, I heard what the teacher in front of me was saying to the priest. She bowed, said "Forgive me for my sins," and the priest answered "God forgives you." The priest then said to the teacher "Forgive me for my sins," and she answered "God forgives you." They air kissed and she then moved to repeat the ritual with the next person. I stepped up and was now face-to-face with the priest. I bowed, but was too close and we bumped into each other. I wasn't sure who was supposed to speak first so I just repeated what I had heard. It was very awkward and I felt like I wasn't doing it right at all. I fumbled through the air kisses and moved on to the next person who was a six-year old boy. I immediately felt less anxious. I gradually worked my way down the line, repeating the same ritual with every person. When I got to the end, I positioned myself next to the others so that those behind me could then perform the ritual with me.

When the last person had performed the ritual and everyone in the school had asked everyone else for forgiveness, the whole ceremony simply ended and everyone went back to their classes. I felt relieved and like I had just ran a 5K race. Although I felt extremely awkward and self-conscious, I also felt like I had put myself out there and that it had brought me a little closer to my students and the school body.

Religious Service at the Holy Virgin Russian Orthodox Cathedral

The Service was scheduled to begin at 9:30 am on Sunday March 8th, 2020. I arrived at 9:15. As I walked up the steps to the church I noticed that the three entrance doors were all closed and an elderly woman was sitting on a chair at the top of the steps. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to check-in with her or show her my ID. I simply said good morning and went up to the door. She looked at me curiously. I went to open the door on the left side and it was locked. I then went to the middle door and it was locked. The woman said something in Russian and gestured for me to use the door on the right, which I did and it opened. I hadn't even started my assignment and I already felt out of place.

I went through the door and into the church and was immediately taken back by an onslaught of colors. The walls and ceilings were covered with very bright paintings of angels, saints and religious figures. It was stunning and unlike any Catholic church I had been in. There was also a woman dressed in black at the front of the church, with her back turned to me, chanting in Slavonic from a very large book. Her chants were not loud, yet filled the entire church and made me feel that I was in a very foreign and holy place. Whereas a Catholic church is laid out with pews (benches) in an organized way, in this church there was nowhere to sit and scattered throughout the middle of the church there were paintings and artifacts placed on stands. These, I would later learn, are icons. Unlike the Catholic Church, there was no alter. I was very curious to see how this service would take place. I made my way to a remote corner of the balcony where I would be able to observe. I was able to find a folding chair, took out my note book and waited for the service to begin.

Over the next ten minutes the church began to fill. The first thing I noticed was that people placed themselves randomly throughout the church, standing wherever they found space. There was no sitting down in neat rows like in the Catholic Church I'm familiar with. Also, some people were walking around the church venerating the icons. Some people bowed to them, some touched their forehead to the icon and others kissed them. Many did all three.

When the service started, twelve priests in brightly colored clothing emerged from behind a partition at the front of the church. The first priest was distributing incense which quickly began to fill the entire church. The congregation began chanting a very melodic prayer in Slavonic. The colors, smell of incense, the chanting, the movement of people venerating icons was a lot for the senses to take in and created an environment unlike any I had been in. Other people were beginning to come up to the balcony and I started feeling self-conscious that I was sitting, taking notes when everyone was standing. I put my notebook down and stood.

The singing stopped and one of the priests began chanting something different. People in the church and around me on the balcony began bowing. I did not bow and felt now that I really stood out. While the priest chanted, there were still people walking around venerating the icons. I didn't understand why. At one point, all the priests came into the middle of the church and stood among the congregation, chanting. While this happened, some church goers were continuing to move around venerating the different icons. I was really puzzled by this. After an hour of singing and chanting I was expecting one of the priests to stop and address the congregation with a sermon of some type like I am used to, but that never happened. Throughout the entire three hours I wasn't able to identify a time when there was that interaction. It seemed as though the priests were there to perform a ceremony and everyone was there to watch and pray but not interact. This became clearer when the priests left the main part of the

church to perform a ceremony behind a partitioned area that was closed to the congregation. Singing and chanting continued for the entire time the priests were isolated. After two hours of standing, many of the children simply began to sit on the floor

All of a sudden, one of the priests emerged from behind the partition carrying a very large chalice. He held it up and began chanting. I could feel how the mood suddenly became much more serious. He went back behind the partition. More people started moving around to venerate the icons and yet others carried in a large table which they set in the middle of the congregation and on it placed baskets of bread and pitchers of water with paper cups. The priests emerged again and people started lining up at the front of the church for communion. This lasted a long time and at the end of the communion people walked to the back of the church.

Throughout the entire service I had the impression to be in a completely new and foreign environment. Slavonic and Russian were the dominant languages and English was only used for one prayer which lasted about five minutes. Not only could I not understand what was being said but I was confused by everyone's behavior. Not only how they were organized randomly throughout the church, but their gestures and bows, how they moved around at various times to venerate icons. My natural instinct was to try to identify reference points, words and behaviors that I could relate to just a little, but it didn't happen. Everything was different, even the way people dressed. I tried to fit in as best I could. I felt it was important during a religious ceremony and so I put away my note book so as not to stand out. I also remained standing like everyone else but was still not entirely comfortable because I didn't understand what was happening, what was being said, nor what to expect. That said, I was able to appreciate the beauty of the church and the ceremony and as I left the church laughed at myself that I was able to go through so much culture shock so close to home.