

Study Abroad Story – Sarah Crowe

Germany

Clip A: Confirmation services at St. Mary's Church, Reutlingen

So, when I was studying abroad in Reutlingen, Germany, I had a lot of different experiences in various churches, not really just in Reutlingen, that kinda helped me to rethink what I thought about Christianity and what it meant in my life and what it means for me as a religious person.

The first example is that I went to the St. Mary's Church, which was the largest church in the town, and it was a big gothic cathedral - very German, very medieval - pretty much a staple of the whole town, and I went, probably not as much as I should have, but I did go sometimes. And there was one particular service that really struck me and was kind of like the first religious experience I had in Germany that really made me think and rethink what I believed.

So, there was a confirmation service going on and I didn't know that that was going to be happening that day or anything like that, but it was interesting because they had this class, that was almost the exact same size as the class that I was confirmed in at the Lutheran Church that I grew up in in my hometown. They all had these chairs, and they were all like painted and decorated different ways and, I guess, from what I got from the sermon, from what I could understand in German (theoretically I should have understood it at least somewhat well) they had this message of like everyone's going to have a different place in the world, everyone is unique, everyone is different, and everyone is going to have their own experience of Christianity. And that was really similar to what I was actually taught when I was growing up, and that you're going to - we're all going to be Christians, but we're all going to have our own place and our own vocation.

That was just kind of like crazy that I was sitting here in, this cathedral on the other side of the world from my home, and that there were other kids who also had the same exact experience of going through confirmation and becoming adult Christians.

Clip B – Holy Week at St. Steven's Cathedral, Vienna

And when I was studying abroad, I also traveled to a lot of other cities, and a lot of other countries, and over spring break, I had the opportunity to visit Vienna and Rome. During that week it was Holy Week, and I had decided, the person I was traveling with, we were like, "well, I guess we probably should go to church since it's Holy Week" and we were both Christian.

We decided to go to the St. Steven's Cathedral, which is a huge gothic cathedral, sort of like the St. Mary's Church in Reutlingen, but a little more colossal, very large, very medieval - and it's right in the city center of Vienna. And so we looked up the times for the services the day before, and when we

walked in, it was really strange, because it was like there was this service that was clearly already going on, and we were late, and it was this strange separation of the people in the back, there was like a fence, or like a rope, I guess, not really a fence, like separating the people who just came in who wanted to look and be tourists, and then there was the area where you could actually go into the service.

We kind of looked like Americans, like not too terribly, but we sort of did, and so we walked up and there was a person who was, like, guarding the entrance to the rest of the sanctuary. We had to go through this person and I told him in German, “we’re here actually for the service”, and he looked confused. I think he was surprised that I could speak German to him and that I understood, and so he was like okay, and he let us come in. And we sat there and there was this mix of Latin and German and, there was even one song I think that was in English, so it was really kind of interesting in that way, like all these different languages coming together, even that just had that theme of unity, on this sad day, on that Good Friday. There were a lot of people who were praying and kneeling, and people just coming and going and everyone sort of taking that experience and making it their own.

I sort of felt the same way, like I wasn’t Catholic and we went to this church, because really it just looked like it would be a cool place to go and to have that experience. We stayed for a while and we sang some and that always brings people together, and it just was another experience where all these people were coming together for a common cause, and all of them were coming to observe the Good Friday, and just to really reflect on the death of Christ and I think that was really a valuable experience, as well, finding that commonality, again.

Clip C: Easter Mass at the Vatican

The third, kind of, experience that I had that shaped my view of Christianity when I was studying abroad was, I had the opportunity to go to the Vatican for the Easter mass, which was also a really interesting experience, because, again, I’m not Catholic.

We had to go to this little orientation thing that was for, just for Americans who were coming to this service and they were talking about plenary indulgences and stuff like that, which didn’t really mean anything to me because I’m not Catholic.

We had decided we wanted to go because, I don’t know, it was because we were there and because the person that was with me had found out that you could get tickets just to go, so we figured, “Why not?” because it’s Rome and because it’s the Vatican and it could be an interesting experience even if we felt out of place, but I really didn’t feel out of place during that service. People came from all over the world, just to be at this, and it was sort of like - considered a pilgrimage if you are Catholic, to go to Rome, to go to the Vatican, and go to get blessed by the Pope.

And so we went to this service and most of it was in Latin, so I don’t really know Latin, but from what I gathered from the message of it was - some of it was translated into a little book, into English and then into German, a lot of other languages - and so with reading that, the whole message was about unity and

peace and everyone cooperating and being one. That really encapsulated everything that I was thinking about with Christianity when I was studying abroad.

It is good to celebrate differences and to try and understand them, but if we do have things in common, and if we do all believe in one God, then I don't know why we spend so much time focusing on those differences. That's something that I kind of realized when I came back and that kind of changed the way I view Christianity and religion.

In the world, there's a lot of differences between cultures, but there's also similarities. Finding similarity was really comforting. It was comforting because, I think, I felt like - like I said before - connected to these people who I had never met, and I knew they were having the same experience that I had, or a very similar experience to what I had, which made me think: Christianity is obviously, and this seems like such an obvious statement, but sometimes it just needs to be said: it's bigger than your Lutheran Church you grew up in in your hometown, it's bigger than the United States, it extends further.