



“What is it that connects hundreds of young people when they come to Taizé?”

Project Documentation of “A week in Taizé” written for CertiLingua®

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1. Introduction

My project, “A week in Taizé”, took place from Sunday, 12th of June 2022, to Sunday, 19th of June 2022, in Taizé, a small rural village of nearly 200 habitants in the east of France. It is known for its “Taizé Community”, an ecumenical monastic community composed of more than a hundred brothers mostly of Catholic or Protestant belief from more than 30 countries. The community was founded in 1940 by Brother Roger Schütz, a Reformed Swiss Protestant theologian. At the age of twenty-five, after battling tuberculosis for many years, he decided to leave his home country Switzerland to settle in France, where his mother came from. During his illness, he developed a strong desire to create a Christian community.

Since Taizé was placed near the demarcation line which divided France, it became a useful place to hospitalize refugees fleeing from the Second World War. Brother Roger, with the help of his sister, also provided Jewish refugees a secure place to stay there, despite their limited material resources, limited drinking water, and being able to only offer simple foods consisting mostly of soups bought at the nearby mill. In 1942, a French officer who was appointed to look after Roger and his sister by their parents, warned them that their doings were not secret anymore and advised everyone to leave as soon as possible, which they eventually.

After France was liberated in 1945, Brother Roger returned to Taizé and began rebuilding the Taizé Community where he remained permanently the rest of his life until his death in 2005. In the 1960's, young people from France and neighboring countries started to visit the religious community to exchange about spiritual topics in international groups. Since then thousands of young adults from around the world make their way to Taizé every year to spend a week experiencing the completely different, minimalistic, and communal daily life, while finding communion with God through daily Youth Meetings of bible study, prayer, and reflection. Each year during Easter and the summer more than 6000 young adults of age 17 to 30 years old arrive in Taizé. They mostly stay for a week from Sunday to Sunday, though it is also possible to come only for a few days, or even remain several months supporting the community and youth groups as a volunteer. There are also certain events where families with children or adults can visit Taizé, but generally the focus is on receiving young people coming together from different places and wanting to experience the community firsthand. Thanks to two teachers at my school, a week trip to Taizé has been organized for students every year for several years now.

2. Motivation and Preparation

Personal interest and developing the project idea

One day in the spring of 2022, two teachers at my school presented the “Taizé Trip”, which would take place two weeks before summer break. Students from the 10th and 11th grades were welcome to take part. Personally, I became interested in the opportunity to meet other young people from many different countries, to live a very simple life for a few days, and to learn about an unfamiliar international religious approach that was apparently attracting many young people. However, I didn’t know much more than this in terms of what to expect. There was only one informational meeting in the school two weeks in advance before heading to France. The teachers, who organized and later carried out the whole trip, were only asked some last, mostly organizational, questions and they handed out information only regarding the times of departure and coming back. I must admit, I had never known so little about a school trip before applying and taking part in this Taizé trip.

In the months before going to Taizé, I struggled to find a project that I could develop for CertiLingua, especially since I was not able to participate in some of the other international and intercultural exchanges earlier in the school year, which are usually considered for CertiLingua projects. However, among the various exchanges or trips with an intercultural focus offered by my school, I was particularly drawn to considering Taizé as an option. I found it interesting that this exchange is intended to offer another kind of learning that would not be based on some high level of performance or on getting a good grade on a report at the end of the trip. My teachers emphasized that the Taizé trip enables students to fully focus on the pure experience of meeting other people and having discussions about life, religion, and politics as a different way of learning outside the classroom. Furthermore, in Taizé, young people of different cultures and backgrounds meet each other face-to-face, live together as guests at the – also very international - community of Taizé, and come together as an entire group at least three times a day. Therefore, I felt that this experience to be very much aligned to the framework of a CertiLingua project.

Connection to school life and subjects

The project is not directly linked to the school curriculum or a specific school subject, yet there are various connections to several subjects and the values of my school. My school has a special focus on languages, especially French and English, and offers many exchanges and class trips in order to expand learning within the classroom to include actual personal contact with foreign languages in foreign countries. Taizé is one of these trips supported by my school simply

because it is known and recognized as a place which draws hundreds of young people from diverse cultures and countries who come to meet and learn from each other. Additionally, whether in the subjects of French, English, Philosophy or Politics, questions of interculturality are often addressed in my school, e. g. often addressing issues related to racism, prejudices towards other cultures and religions, or the importance of international cooperation. In my opinion, Taizé combines so many of these intercultural aspects and lets young people gain a further perspective to these which cannot be reached in school itself.

My lack of knowledge about this trip and this place, in addition to my own curiosity, already brought up all sorts of questions to my mind for weeks in advance. For my research question or rather questions, I just had to sort them out and put them into words. I narrowed these thoughts down to two main research questions: What happens when young people from all over the world come and live together in one small village in France? Is a connection established between these people despite cultural and linguistic differences, and if so, what aspects form and strengthen the connection?

At the beginning I was just speculating different answers to these research questions, since I could not do any specific research or preparation before our departure. At the same time, I had the impression our teachers intentionally only wanted to give us a bare minimum of information regarding Taizé so that we would fully let ourselves engage in this experience, free of expectations that might end up disappointing us. Whether intended or not, this sparked my curiosity and anticipation even more and I could not wait to finally go and find my answers.

Personal outlook and expectations

Before going to Taizé, I admit I had some expectations and preconceptions. I expected to be in touch with people around the world in one space, especially to learn more about the brothers and the Taizé Community. One preconception was that the brothers' community would consist only of white conservative Catholic or Protestant men, who direct their life toward God in a small village of France. I couldn't imagine them having seen the world in terms of traveling or having lived a "normal life". Still, I knew there would be a lot more to find out about the brothers: who were they really? Are they all French? How and when did every individual choose to live probably for the rest of their life there? Besides learning about the brothers, I also expected to find the "real" answer to the reason why so many young people are coming to Taizé. With so much criticism towards the Catholic Church in the last few years due to the exposure of sexual violence in the Catholic Church in Germany and other European countries,

the exposure of the oppression of indigenous people over several decades in Canada, and the ever-decreasing number of Christian believers in general, I was quite sure there must be other reasons why thousands of young people come to Taizé, too. To conclude, I was very curious about the Taizé Community and looked forward to finally experience this myself for eight days.

3. Implementation

Description of the project's realization

On Sunday, we – a group of approximately 30 students and two teachers – took a bus from our school in Bonn to Taizé, driving 500 km within 8 hours and arriving in the late afternoon. We were then supervised by a volunteer who presented us the structure of the days to follow. Monday to Friday would always be the same: 8.15 am Morning Prayer in the Church of Reconciliation, then breakfast, 10.00 am introduction to the day with a brother of the community, 12.20 pm Midday Prayer, then lunch, 2.00 pm an optional song practice in the church while during the afternoon international small groups work together, 5.15 pm Tea and Snack Time, 5.45 pm Theme Workshops (from Tuesday onwards), 7 pm supper, 8.30 pm Evening Prayer followed by Vigil with songs in the church, and then night silence. On Friday and Saturday evenings the Evening Prayers were extended to also include additional prayers, a prayer “Around the Cross” on Friday night and an Evening Prayer with candles to celebrate the “Paschal Mystery” on Saturday night. This set “schedule” was followed every day except on Friday afternoon, where a part of our school group (including myself) visited Cluny, a bigger village 9 km from Taizé.

Connection of the intercultural perspective to the course of the project

My research questions were quite important as I moved through my project, as they reminded me to remain actively openminded towards other cultures and keenly observe in the moment what it is that seems to connect people of different backgrounds when they come together. The questions also did not change while the project was underway, but new, rather more detailed questions arose which helped me consider more comprehensive aspects of my original questions. For example: What do people have in common, in which aspects do they differ? Is it important, even necessary to experience an intercultural perspective to expand my knowledge of intercultural perspectives? If there is a common connection between youth, regardless of their background, how did it come into being? Before, during and after the project, I always had a strong sense, that these questions could not be answered from a single culturally limited

perspective. However, this would be something that I would only be able to really know once after going through an intercultural experience like I was having during this week.

4. Reflection

Intercultural experiences

My first impressions were rather negative and demotivating. Everything was completely different to home, which was not quite unexpected, but still, I found myself surprised and a little overwhelmed. I had to get used to the high-placed mirrors in the shared bathrooms, the extreme heat (throughout the day it always got up to 30 degrees or more), no internet connection, barely any access to power, a mosquito spray which became my new deodorant, spiders and other tiny creatures crawling in our tent (in your bed, on your plate, basically everywhere!), eating with no fork or knife, and drinking out of bowls. I began asking myself whether I was too spoiled, but after seeing other students from our class complaining about the new circumstances, I noticed I was not the only one. Despite these initial feelings, after the second day, I sensed a complete change of my mindset. After I got used to all of the “problems” and accepted that this is the way it will be, they seemed to have disappeared over night. Furthermore, I began to like the “minimalism” and started being more relaxed and independent. I felt at peace somehow and realized that I did not feel the urge to be on my phone every few hours for the first time in months. After arriving in Taizé, the volunteer who introduced us to the community even suggested to us to lock our phones away for the week in safe deposit boxes that were provided for valuables. I was surprised how many of us used this opportunity without thinking too much about it. As I needed to get adapted to all the other changes, I did not lock my phone in a locker. However, I only used it to look at the time during the day and only turned on my mobile data in the mornings and evenings to check messages of my closest friends and family. After a few days, I already sensed some relief, a vanish of pressure I had not taken notice of before in my daily life. I did not feel the pressure anymore to check the news all the time and all the posts of my friends on social media, etc.. Moreover, I was able to concentrate better and be more sincerely interested in my surroundings, as I consciously tried to enjoy every minute of the daily services of the day in the church, the meals with people I had not met yet, and all the other activities set throughout the day.

The strict and consistent day structure seemed dull and tedious at first. When I arrived, I did not expect to have services three times a day, At the beginning they seemed boring and did not have any effect on me. However, I ended up being amazed at how exhausted I positively was

at the end of the day and how productive I felt due to the specific structure of the day. I also found myself enjoying the prayers more than I could have ever expected.

Although I was only there for one week, I am certain that I can answer my research questions by talking about some of the most impressionable intercultural experiences I had. The first and probably most important experience out of three I would like to describe has to do with the Morning, Midday and Evening Prayers in the “Church of Reconciliation”. Three times a day, about 2000 to 3000 people came together in this church. At the front, the brothers seated themselves on the ground (although older ones were given chairs), while around them and especially behind them, tutors and teachers, hundreds of young people (rather few thousands) and a few additional visitors including Sisters from other communities nearby were all sitting on the ground. There was always a prayer at the beginning of the service which was spoken by a brother in his native language (e.g., French, Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, German, English etc.) or Latin. The service then mainly consisted of singing songs, known as “Taizé Songs”, which everyone could sing along with a songbook. These were written in different languages, too. I later found out that the selection of the few songs from over 300 possible songs for the prayers was dependent on which nations were represented among the youth during each respective week. Therefore, we sang for the most part in Latin, German, French, Swedish or Spanish. In the middle of each service there was a period of silence for seven minutes, where thousands of people stopped singing. Most people laid down and closed their eyes. Some people prayed to God, some people connected to the nature (as birds were always singing outside of the church), and some people took the chance to think of nothing, freeing themselves from all their daily worries, including those of the past and the future. And, despite all these different thoughts or empty minds, despite all religious and cultural differences, I sensed some kind of connection between myself and the others, between the others and others, between us as one, which I could not further explain at that point. I also felt this connection during the meals, the activities in smaller groups, as well as the joint singing outside of the church, when many young adults came together and sang typical karaoke songs everyone knew by heart. However, I certainly felt the connection strongest in the church, because of its huge dimension and unique atmosphere, and began to try to make sense of this connection, its origin and importance, particularly in order to get closer to answering my research question, too.

The second intercultural experience is about a rather private organized gathering of our group from school, our teachers, and one brother. On Thursday afternoon we sat in one circle together and were given the fortunate opportunity to ask this brother whatever questions we had about

him personally and the brothers' community. Since his mother tongue was French, we used English as our language of communication, which worked perfectly. I learned for the first time, that the current group of brothers were originally from more than 30 countries. They were obliged to speak French fluently before joining the Taizé community as a brother, but other than that were welcomed from all countries around the world. They do not work for a salary, but instead work making different handicrafts, which they sell or donate. All profits from their work are put into maintaining the Taizé grounds and keeping the church in good shape. The Brother (I will keep his name anonymous to respect his privacy) told us his life story, as well as about when and how he decided to dedicate his life to the Taizé community. To make it short, he grew up in a small village in France in a Protestant family, although he remained distant to his father and to religion during his childhood. He met the love of his life ("the one" he said), studied, and worked, but he felt like he did not fulfill his purpose in life the way he should. He went back to Taizé for some time as a volunteer (he had been there before as a teenager with a group of friends) and after a year, he asked if he could become a brother. Instead of granting his acceptance, he was told he should travel the world and experience as much as he could. If he then, he was told, still felt the strong will to live his life as a brother in Taizé, he could come back, and they would speak again. I was so amazed by the way he talked. He spoke very wisely, inspirationally, and was funny, too. I could not put into words why he had such an emotional impact on me. I questioned what it meant to live and if there is something, I want to fulfill in this life I was given. Other than that, I was also astonished by the community of brothers. It seemed that their connection was not built only upon sharing a common religion, but came also from the community itself. They were connected in a sense that everyone took the same decision to dedicate their life to this Taizé community (probably) for the rest of their lives. I found it remarkably interesting that people from diverse cultures could come together and create a community they live for and share this with thousands of people from all around the world.

My last experience I want to address is also a rather private one I had with a friend from school in Taizé. It was here that my friend and I got to know each other more personally and I learned that we were both from diverse backgrounds. She grew up in Spain and moved with her family to Germany a few years ago, while I grew up in Germany, but have an American mother, who married my German father and has stayed there ever since. I know that our school is more international than others, because of its focus on languages, but I still have the impression that we do not get to know so much about each other's diverse backgrounds in school. I had the impression, I really got to know her for the first time in Taizé and we did not meet as students

in school, but as humans. Therefore, in Taizé, I learned so much more about other cultures (e.g., about the Spanish culture) even among students from my own school, that I would have never been able to have done so intensively within school.

I seemed to forget how impersonal and distant school is and how we are trained to always perform our best according to a mechanic, strict grading system, which excludes the support or even acceptance of mistakes, which in my opinion makes us human. In Taizé I saw some students from my school authentically and emotionally affected – both happy and sad – for the very first time, even though I had been going to school with them for seven years. It made me think about the role we fulfill daily as a student and how little it portrays us as a person. The entire eight days, the atmosphere, and my mindset which developed throughout it, served to answer both of my research questions. However, the three experiences I just explained played a significant role in helping me understand more about what happens when youth come and experience such a week together in Taizé.

As my first research question, I asked myself what exactly happens when hundreds of young people meet in Taizé. I can now conclude that when youth are coming together and experience the same things at the same time, a sense of connection can be felt, despite all differences. Such an experience can also allow youth to open up and learn more about each other on a more personal basis.

To answer my second research question, I can come to the conclusion, that in Taizé, there was indeed a connection established between the people that was strengthened by many aspects, despite cultural and linguistic differences. First of all, people were connected in a sense that they all chose come together in this church three times a day. Our teachers often stressed that no one is obligated to go to the services or to participate in the activities. So, everyone decided voluntarily, independently to join or not, to sing or not, or to speak or not. We all had this in common: the decision to come to Taizé to reflect on life, let ourselves learn about other cultures, and then three times a day consciously chose to commit ourselves to this decision. This, from my point of view, created a feeling of ease and calm in the room. Furthermore, there is also religion and belief, which certainly connected some people, but did not include everyone. I, myself, was touched by the singing of hundreds of people at the same time and sometimes, when I was laying down on the church ground during the service, I felt connected to the other people through our voices singing the same song. The singing also created unique acapella vocals I had never heard before. Secondly, people were connected by the common will of creating and living for a community, which is what I learned when we spoke privately to a brother. I was very interested to learn about the importance of the community in Taizé and

underestimated at the beginning, what it means that this community was all they lived for. Thus, this community was the key to their connection. For young people like myself, the feeling of connection was also strengthened by the Brothers being explicitly open to share their experience and spend time with us and all visitors of Taizé.

In reflection, I am also convinced that it is not only important, but necessary to experience intercultural experiences in order to gain and broaden one's knowledge. In my opinion, to form an unbiased opinion one must be able to look at matters from different angles and perspectives. And, in many cases, an intercultural experience can give many insights and perspectives like no other. Exposure to a more comprehensive intercultural perspective encourages open-mindedness towards others, which is key to preventing racism and prejudices.

Retrospective reflection of experiences and personal development due to the project

Retrospectively, I can say that the project changed my ability to act in an international context to quite some extent. It inspired me to be more open-minded and to remember that there will always be similarities between people of diverse nationalities. Often it is hard to prevent prejudices, which naturally come up in your head. So, it is even more important to acknowledge the lack of knowledge you have, to be open to letting go of those prejudices and to be interested to learn about different perspectives and backgrounds. In addition to the experiences mentioned above, I also had some other inspiring exchanges with other youth while I was in Taizé. When talking about political matters like climate change, or the European Covid-19 pandemic politics, or globalization, I learned that opinions or attitudes strongly depend not only on one's educational, but also cultural background. During the pandemic, I spent a lot of time wondering why many Germans were so reluctant to get the new vaccines. There were so many in Europe at that time who begged in vain for the opportunity to be vaccinated, while in Germany, many ignored the privileged offer for a long time. In Spain, for example, I learned that there was a much greater demand for Covid-19 vaccines. One of the reasons for this was that families tend to live closer to each other with different generations often even in the same house, which meant that older people come into immediate daily contact with younger generations. In Germany, this coexistence is much less common, so people are less afraid of infecting their older relatives.

In addition, I was able to observe some additional differences concerning language abilities, for example, when it comes to the different levels of spoken English. But one has to say, that overall, the youth, the teachers, the volunteers, and the brothers spoke it very well so having

English as lingua franca was no problem. On the other hand, we were connected through many other stronger similarities other than speaking English like common values, music, open mindsets and the willingness to help and work together to reach a goal. When one evening a girl had an epileptic seizure during the minutes of silence in the service, the value of solidarity stood out to me the most. Although many people stood up for help, the brothers started to sing to divert attention and give privacy to the girl and those who were helping her. Hundreds of people followed their example by singing to show sympathy and solidarity.

Besides solidarity, Taizé also reflected a place of diplomacy and peace. In my opinion, these are three things the world can use more of, especially in the face of the current Russian war. I appreciate Taizé for passing on these values to young people who will form the next generation and therefore, the future.

Although, these hundreds of people did not quite represent Europe as a continent, Taizé often reminded me of the European community. Diversity, individuality, and a common value of solidarity are aspects which I directly think of when talking about Europe. I think it is important to use our advantage of being this unique, diverse continent, which is still able to connect with each other when meeting face to face. That's why I also think it is very important to continue to promote and expand such exchange programs everywhere in Europe, particularly in schools. I am very glad to have had the opportunity to have this experience in Taizé.

Coincidentally, Ursula von der Leyen, the current acting President of the European Commission, also made a visit to Taizé at the end of the summer. In September, she held her yearly State of Union Address in Strasbourg in which she talks about her experience in Taizé. I was incredibly surprised how much she spoke out of my heart and resembled my thoughts and experiences I had gathered for this project. On this note, I want to quote her:

“Three weeks ago, I had the incredible opportunity of joining 1,500 young people from all over Europe and the world, who gathered in Taizé. They have different views, they come from different countries, they have different backgrounds, they speak different languages. And yet, there is something that connects them. They share a set of values and ideals. They believe in these values. They are all passionate about something larger than themselves. This generation is a generation of dreamers but also of makers.”

When I first heard her say this during her speech, I directly thought that I am so grateful and glad that I went to Taizé, that I was one of these people, which were somewhat representing

my generation, and that in one week I was part of the connection we created despite all our differences.

As I look in the future, I plan to travel the world for a year after my graduation. I will remember that wherever I go, I will definitely meet people with linguistic, cultural, or religious differences which define them and probably make me feel very foreign. However, if I look more closer and do not see their differences as barriers anymore, I am certain that I will be able to connect with people in unexpected ways like I once did in Taizé.

5. Appendix

Sources and attachments

History of the Taizé community www.taizé.fr

Quote from Ursula von der Leyen

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/SPEECH_22_5493

Declaration of Independent Work and Permission for Publication

All project documentations need to be produced by the applicants themselves who have to declare this with the following statement.

“I hereby declare that I have written the project documentation on my own and only used the listed references and aids.”

Permission for anonymous publication

It is planned to make the project documentations available for scientific research and for the CertiLingua network by publishing examples of best practice on the CertiLingua website. This will be done anonymously. The author’s consent is nevertheless necessary.

☒ I hereby authorize the anonymous publication of my project documentation.

☐ I hereby deny the anonymous publication of my project documentation.



Liliana Mödinger, Bonn, March 22nd, 2023