

1958–1959

There are no journals extant for the years from May 1955 to April 1958. Was Brother Roger unwilling to keep for posterity what he may have written at that time?

Three notebooks exist covering the years from April 29, 1958 to August 12, 1963, with significant gaps. Some pages are dated; other entries are left undated. The writing is spontaneous, unpremeditated; sometimes one page corrects another.

In these years Taizé began to be better known, not just in the French and Swiss Protestant world, but in many places and churches. The drama of divided Christians, the Algerian War, questions about the community's lifestyle and, inevitably, personal meditations occupy the mind and the pen of the prior of Taizé. Surprisingly, the election of Pope John XXIII and the first audience Brother Roger had with him immediately afterwards, which was to prove so important for the history of Taizé, find no echo in these pages.

April 29, 1958

On my table a letter from Rome, asking the question: when are you coming? I believe in the value of dialogue with men involved in the workings of the Roman curia. But I am restrained by the fact that each time we travel to Italy some of our Protestant friends are upset.¹ I will put it off once again. But I do so with difficulty, because such renunciation only maintains us in our mutual intransigence.

One thought keeps coming back: after four centuries of division among Christians, without a sudden influx of grace, it will take generations to prepare the roads leading to visible unity.

In the eighteen years since I set out on this road, I have seen people enthusiastic about the cause. In the postwar period, there were reawakenings of the Christian consciousness. Those who had suffered together in the camps were sometimes unable to tolerate denominational differences any longer. Today those same men are lukewarm. There is disappointment caused by what has not been possible.

Today, more than ever I believe in the necessity of small groups of Christians on fire with an ecumenical flame; in such groups, the main thing is to ensure a continuity.

During the years when our foundation was beginning, I smiled when people said to me, “You have to build for centuries to come.” I was too opposed to institutions to take seriously the continuity of our community after the first generation.

Today I say to myself: only several generations of men and women, attached with all the fibers of their being to the search for unity, will be able to pass through the ups and downs of the ecumenical vocation. For these men and women, our young communities must be focal points that pass on the flame.

1. Brother Roger's first visit to Rome, together with Brother Max, was in 1949; the brothers had an audience with Pope Pius XII.

April 30, 1958

In my Christian life, I am aware that I fumble around. There is a key element that I would like to interiorize more each day: mercy, the spirit of forgiveness.

For the rest, I notice progress and setbacks, emphasis first on one aspect then on another. Recently a concern for authenticity has filled my heart. I cannot speak about Christian unity or pray for it if I do not tend towards an effective unity among brothers in our life together.

May 1, 1958

Having Alain² alongside me, caring and tranquil, is of incomparable value to me. I withstand many trials when I know he is there.

May 2, 1958

Finished reading *Madeleine et André Gide*, by Jean Schlumberger.³

I appreciated the author, his surprising attentiveness to these individuals whom he understood better than they understood themselves. The rehabilitation of an ineffable love.

But, despite the author's striving to have us think well of them, Gide inspires rancor and bitterness in me. Basing one's happiness on another person's suffering and, still more, on the suffering of

2. Alain Giscard (1929–), a Frenchman who entered the community in 1949 after witnessing the life-commitment of the first seven brothers at Easter of that year, one of whom was his older brother Robert.

3. André Gide (1869–1951) was one of the most important French writers of the early twentieth century, the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947. What interested Brother Roger in him, aside from his prodigious literary talent, was his concern for authenticity, and undoubtedly also the fact that both had suffered from a strict and moralistic Protestant upbringing. That search for authenticity, however, led Gide to advocate and practice pederasty, whereas it led Brother Roger in a totally different direction. Schlumberger's book explains that Gide's marriage to his cousin Madeleine Rondeau was not consummated, although they were never formally divorced.

someone who is weak and who would no longer have anyone to rely on, evokes in me revolt and disgust.

Some speak of a successful divorce. Do they measure the quantity of suffering lying beneath that happiness? Human happiness built on a wounded sensibility has nothing to do with joy.

May 3, 1958

Took a walk on Mont Saint-Romain with Robert.⁴ Ten years ago, we came up here together; his decision was imminent. We read the prologue to the Rule of Saint Benedict. We read it again today.

Beforehand, even though nothing had prepared us for this, we both agreed to keep an inner silence for the next ten years. Our unity must grow in peace. Enough of those hortatory speeches where each of us uses pedagogical methods to try and change the other.

Received a letter from Pierre Bourguet⁵ this morning. I no longer expected from him a little trap set for me. I hope I can give him a good reply, concerned only for the unity of the Church. In this case I do not think I am being cowardly by making a one-sided concession.

May 4, 1958

Soon it will be Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit, Christ living in his church, is invoked upon the church. Grant me, Lord, your life in me so that I may not be a being of outer appearances.

4. Robert Giscard (1922–1993), the fifth brother to enter the community and the first Frenchman. Mont Saint-Romain is the tallest peak in the vicinity of Taizé (579 meters above sea level).

5. President of the National Council of the Reformed Church of France.

May 6, 1958

Guy Boerwinckel, a friend of ours, arrived last night from Holland. Conversations with him this morning on the terrace. We have the same concerns.

I explained to him the two underlying tendencies among us: some want to take “the narrow road,” with no discernment beforehand; others place the emphasis on the importance of being present in the world before any other choices are made.

In the first group, there is an authentic desire to respond to the Gospel’s call to choose the “narrow paths that lead to life.”⁶ But is there not also, in this aspiration, something other than a concern for authenticity according to the Gospel? Does not a character trait also play a role here, one that is a burden on other temperaments that are more nuanced, more able to practice a certain detachment concerning choices? I sometimes wonder whether they are not fooling themselves when they think they have taken the narrow path. If it corresponds to a natural tendency in them, what is supernatural about their behavior?

The first group cherishes the prayer robe, the garment that marks us visibly in our vocation. The second group fears the separation from other people that such a clear sign would bring about. The first would like the length or the number of prayer services to increase; the second, without looking for a minimum, fear an overload.

I can well believe that the conflict here is between two different temperaments. But I can’t help noticing that, in times of crisis, the first ones can easily impress the whole group. If, at these times, they exert pressure, they eliminate a necessary tension from the community.

At that moment, the equilibrium is destroyed. There will be fewer apparent shocks—although that remains to be seen—but a flame will have been extinguished.

6. Matt 7:14.

This is how, it seems to me, in the great cenobitic⁷ tradition, anxious members were able to create a bad conscience in more placid people and gradually impose on them frameworks, a host of rules. As a result of the tenacious will of legalistic minds, customs⁸ were overloaded in the course of the ages.

May 7, 1958

Ever since I entered the Christian life, I have refused to attribute a literal meaning to the call to “enter through the narrow gate.”⁹ A road that seems to be wide may in fact be the narrow path of which the Gospel speaks. And Christ does not necessarily call us to follow a tendency that goes against our disposition.

I always remain attentive to that broad vision when a choice has to be made. I then have to protect myself, in the life of the church, from those who have a more limited outlook. Some people try to give me a bad conscience regarding my attitude of freedom towards people and things. Sometimes they have succeeded, and they still succeed, even in the name of the Gospel of Christ. But once the yoke has been cast off, I discover joyfulness at the end of the road.

Neither my vocation, at first sight so restrictive, nor the Christian life limit my joy. On the contrary. Any time the joyful freedom drawn from the very wellsprings of life in Christ is called into question, my road can only be spoiled.

May 9, 1958

Lenten pastoral letter of Cardinal Wyszyński¹⁰: “A persecuted church is not less holy because of this. A church devoid of all

7. Cenobitic: concerning life in community, from the Greek *koinos bios*. Brother Roger preferred it to the term “monastic.”

8. Custumal: a written collection of the customs of a monastery or a manor in the Middle Ages.

9. Matt 7:13.

10. Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński (1901–1981) was the archbishop of

earthly property is still in possession of much more precious things, in other words the sacraments and prayer. Even an abandoned church—like Christ on Calvary—is still the love, the salvation and the peace of humanity.”

May 10, 1958

I cannot remember ever having experienced a more radiant beginning of May. The perfumed air wafts through the house. A desert wind reaches all the way to us. Springtime may never have arrived so late. And so the happiness which causes my whole being to vibrate at every renewal is given full rein.

This very moment Daniel¹¹ brings me a ceramic lamp that is already mounted. [. . .]

Joyfulness sings within me. My ever deeper attachment to nature, and in particular to each tree, to each plant that adorns the garden, fills me with joy.

Trials are present each day, sometimes excruciating ones, nothing can remove them from the road, and the patience to accept them is sometimes lacking. So I know that the Lord grants to each person compensations according to his needs.

For me, strength and joy are renewed by contemplating the fruit, the flowers, the branch of a tree, a bush.

Every year I wait for the peonies to blossom. Since I was a small child, in the springtime my impatience would grow: will the peonies blossom in time for my birthday, May 12? As a child I sometimes even forced them to bloom by removing the protective petals from the flower.

Warsaw-Gniezno and the primate of Poland from 1948 until his death. A strong resister to the Communist regime, he incarnated the soul of the Polish people during those difficult years. Brother Roger attended a Mass he celebrated in Rome in 1957, saw him there during the Second Vatican Council, and met him later on a visit to Poland in 1973.

11. Daniel de Montmollin (1921–), was one of the first four brothers whom Brother Roger met in Switzerland during the war. Originally a theology student and an ordained pastor, later on he began the pottery workshop in the community and achieved international renown as a potter.

Today, I am waiting calmly and with deep joy.

Life teaches me lessons. I think that since my teenage years I have learned acceptance.

This education was possible on account of a suffering that has been constantly sharpened.

I regret nothing.

I give thanks.

May 13, 1958

Yesterday was my birthday. I wrote nothing in this notebook. I look forward to May 12 as a day full of joy. That did not happen. Painful explanations, the weight of susceptibilities. The further I go forward in life, the more I consent to passing through the small daily trials with inner peace.

May 14, 1958

The French political news is bad.¹² Keep inner peace so as not to be too affected. I keep on trusting and cannot endorse pessimistic views.

May 20, 1958

Six days without being able to note any impressions. The political tension was grave. Then there were three days in Switzerland, at the World Council of Churches, to lay out the project of a small group of brothers in Geneva. Saddened by the conversation with Pastor Visser 't Hooft.¹³ He only began to understand when he realized our desire to be open to the position of the churches of the

12. On May 13, during the Algerian War for Independence, a coup d'état involving the French army took place in Algeria, creating the possibility of an insurrection in France.

13. W. A. Visser 't Hooft (1900–1985), Dutch theologian, first secretary general of the World Council of Churches in Geneva.