

The Early Years

Brother Roger, in his mid-twenties, spent the years from 1940 to 1942 in Taizé. With his sister Genevieve, he offered shelter to refugees, mainly Jews, fleeing the Nazi persecution. In 1942, while he was away in Switzerland, the police broke into his house and, warned in time, he did not return. In Geneva he met the young men who would become his first three brothers.

April 23, 1941

Met this morning on the way to Massilly¹ a worker returning from catching fish. A windfall: he hopes to have some fish to sell in the coming days. We talk about the present situation. He is unable to feed his family. I gather from his words that he has been a militant in the Communist party. I try to understand. He promises to sell me some fish. I point out my house in the distance. All at once his expression changes. He takes me for the new lord of the manor. He is afraid he has spoken too openly and the look of distress on his face haunts me.

April 24, 1941

Awake at dawn, I wanted to take a walk in order to calm the heart-ache caused by yesterday's meeting. A poor man opened his heart and immediately he was frozen by fear of the bourgeois. He is right to fear, for at this moment people like me are in charge of things.

For my own peace and quiet, the current situation is likely to last. But as a Christian, can I think of my own happiness when it is to the detriment of the weak? I know that the coming of a socialist society would cause me to be deprived of certain things.

From now on I will live in solidarity with the lowly of the earth. May this not inspire in me any hatred of the powerful.

I have made my choice. It is a costly one.

May 1941

Yesterday I went on horseback to Macon, a round-trip of seventy kilometers. The horse is so unmanageable that I wrote my will the previous evening. Coming face-to-face with the reality of death did not impress me. I could have refused to run any kind of risk whatsoever, but the thought never even crossed my mind.

1. A small village close to Taizé, in the direction of Cluny and Macon.

May 1941

Welcomed this morning two Jews, who arrived like a pair of hunted animals. I did not ask them for their papers and I did not try to learn their real names. Both of them have a sad history. They even gave the impression they were overstating their case, as if their actual suffering was not enough to awaken sympathy. I didn't feel that their exaggeration was a lie. Having drunk the cup to the dregs, they are not yet able to discern the limits of their distress. This phenomenon is widespread in people who have suddenly been struck by misfortune.

June 1941

We are short of food; we eat nettle soup. If the bakery in Cormatin² was not so understanding, we would go hungry.

Every morning I work on a text on spiritual retreat.³ Setting apart a few days to be alone, face to face with the Lord, animates our inner silence.

Still thinking about the need for a community of men. I know well that, in spite of all my reluctance to devote my life to this, I will have to undertake it. I have spent so much time trying to thwart God's plan. I would prefer the beaten paths, fearful as I am of the bitter struggles involved.

July 1941

Fathers Couturier and Villain came to see me yesterday.⁴ In their presence I felt the positive effects of the discipline I imposed on myself during my teenage years as an unbeliever. At that time I was unable to believe, but I respected the mystery of the faith,

2. A village four kilometers from Taizé in the direction of Chalon-sur-Saone.

3. Published in October 1941 with the title *Notes explicatifs*.

4. Paul Couturier (1881–1953), a Catholic priest from Lyon, was a pioneer in the ecumenical movement. He started the week of prayer for Christian unity (January 18–25) in France. Brother Roger visited him in Lyon in late 1940.

incarnated in Christians of whatever confession. I believed in the good faith of those who maintained that they experienced communion with a God who was foreign to me. That readiness to be attentive is now of service to me. I believe that today I was able to grasp from within the Roman Catholic position of those priests.

Both of them understood my concern: the indifference of Christians at our divisions. Since the Great Schism of the East and the Reformation, Christians have become used to living apart, thinking they could profess a religion of love notwithstanding. The hypocrisy is so great that we have become blind: we speak of love as the very basis of our ethics and yet we cannot stand one another. We are suspicious of one another despite the fact that we bear the same name—the name of Christ, of Christians.

In my thirst for authenticity, the scandal of division kept me captive and far from the faith; how could someone bear the name Christian, of a God of love, and accept having to choose a church, in other words to take sides against other Christians?

Our complacency in thinking that the present situation of divided Christians is normal will lead us to ruin.

Summer 1941

Read the life of Charles de Foucauld, by René Bazin.⁵ How thrilling it is to read about Christ's victory over a man of great sensitivity, born to be an aesthete. At the root of everything: going to confession, followed by the obligation to take communion with no delay.

I remain confounded by his failures. Though I am clear-sighted enough to see how different my situation is from his, his failure is a salutary warning for me. It burns me within. I love life; all the education I received as a child has inclined me to joy. And

5. Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916), a French army officer and explorer, became a Catholic priest and hermit in the Sahara Desert after a radical conversion experience. He dreamed of starting a community, but died alone, assassinated by a group of bandits. Today several religious communities and associations follow his inspiration, notably the Little Sisters and Little Brothers of Jesus.

yet a vocation of combat lies before me, with the possibility of failure at the end.

Lord, remind me of your death on the cross, your failure, so that I do not stray far from you.

Re-read the Acts of the Apostles. More than ever I am sure of one thing: communities were the living stones of the Church, whether in Jerusalem, where the Gospel was lived out to its most extreme consequence, Christian communism; or the communities founded by Paul, bringing together families in autonomous cells, the archetype of parish communities.

October 22, 1944

Again I take up this journal, abandoned since I was forced to leave Taizé. November 11, 1942–October 22, 1944. I arrived this evening with Max and Pierre.⁶ It is hard for us to celebrate, since we cannot easily forget the departed whom we will never see again.

No journals survive for the years from 1944 to 1948. After the war, the small group of brothers settled in Taizé and began to live in community. The postwar years were not easy, since the war had left so much devastation in its wake. The brothers took in twenty young boys, orphaned by the war, raising them with the help of Brother Roger's sister Genevieve. At Easter 1949, the first seven brothers made a life-commitment to community of goods, celibacy, and accepting the orientations of the community. Brother Roger was chosen prior, a charge he occupied for the rest of his life.

6. Max Thurian (1921–1996), a theology student, and Pierre Souvairan (1921–1998), an agriculture student at the Polytechnic Institute of Zurich, met Brother Roger in Geneva during the war. Attracted by his project of community life, they lived together with him in an apartment near the Geneva cathedral, and returned with him to Taizé to become the first brothers of the nascent community.

September 10, 1948

Our friend L. has just spent two days with us. I am struck by his unaffected disposition, his subtlety, his nuanced judgment. I appreciate his search for a Christian aesthetic in the service of love.

I am more convinced than ever that Christian artists have an incomparable fullness of expression at their disposal. Their love for all creatures and their striving to acquire a catholic spirit give them resources for a creation along classical lines. Not that they refuse to innovate, to be revolutionary, to become relevant, but classical in the sense that the expression of their thought does not go beyond the thought itself. Their self-effacement in order to make possible a universal comprehension of events and persons makes what they create accessible.

During our conversations, I brought up the subject of frequent communion. I was appalled that a friend, someone who knows us so well, is unaware of the meaning and the significance of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in our community.⁷

Even if, for several weeks, it happens that I receive communion with a manifest insensibility, this does not worry me at all, since I know that Christ is really present. The Lord does not need my feelings to nourish me with the bread of life.

This infinite peace, despite the heart's indifference, is a sign for me of Christ's sovereign presence in the Eucharist.

I call to mind my whole inner journey regarding communion. Disbelieving, I saw no need at all for the Lord's Supper, since my (Calvinist) church assured me only of a spiritual presence in the Eucharist. Of what use is the Sacrament, I wondered, because when two or three gather in the name of Christ, that spiritual presence is already granted.

I am overjoyed to know today that I am the bearer of Christ in his fullness, assured of his real presence, even when no perceptible resonance attests it to human beings.

7. This is a clear indication that a reflection on the deeper meaning of the Eucharist began long before the entry of Catholic brothers into the community in the late 1960s. The same is true for confession: see below, journal entry for September 1, p. 12–13.

September 11, 1948

Sixty-eight years ago today, in the Jura Mountains, at Chateau des Monts,⁸ my revered mother was born. I am aware of the privilege of being born of that woman always true to form, so serene in her faith and yet so lively, with such artistic talents.

October 4, 1948

For almost a month now I have abandoned this journal. Travels abroad. Many material questions and perhaps above all “the tragic sentiment of life,”⁹ that inner drama that takes hold of one’s whole being and keeps it captive to such an extent that written expression becomes impossible.

Last night, my brothers and I sung the night office. We did not want to begin any other way this day when part of the Church commemorates one of its most authentic witnesses: Saint Francis.¹⁰

October 1948

I have always found the pivot of every inner discipline in constantly putting in their place the questions that assail me: lining up the problems, deferring this or that reflection to the appropriate time, exercising control over the mind so as not to be overwhelmed by the deluge of all kinds of worries and, to this end, jotting down particular suggestions in order to deal with them later on, when the mind is rested.

8. A lovely house in the town of Locle, in the Swiss Jura Mountains, where the family was on holiday at that time.

9. The title of an essay written in 1912 by the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno. Brother Roger was familiar with it from seeing it on his grandmother’s bedside table at the end of her life.

10. The example of Francis of Assisi was very important for the nascent community. Many years later, a small community of Franciscan friars lived in Taizé alongside the brothers.

I know well that heartaches inevitably remain. They risk overturning the entire construction when we are no longer in control of ourselves. That evil cannot be mastered by will-power; the will loses its footing there and, if it unfortunately manages to go beyond itself, it hardens what it touches in the emotional life. The spirit of mercy, of forgiveness, alone can assure an inner self-control.

October 1948

One of our brothers, whom we thought had recovered, has just suffered a relapse. The suffering that torments him keeps on welling up in me.

For the last few days I have been trying to figure out the cause of our common suffering. I try to remember what I learned about it.

Suffering is the state that we feel most strongly. Pain, by causing me to turn towards myself, absorbs the whole of my being. In it I disappear.

I then perceive in myself an almost unrecognized being that gains in inner depth what it may lose in spontaneity.

The cause is not as important as the use I make of my affliction. Revolt, resignation, self-pity . . . I want none of that bitter fruit. Merely tasting it demeans me. If I am not careful, that fruit secretes a bitter gall in my soul. I want suffering to activate a resolve in me; I want it to focus my dispersed energies, to cause me to look within, to lead me to acceptance.

Distress, whatever form you may take, I say yes to you in advance. Through the suffering imposed upon me, I want to try and go beyond myself. I know that my consenting will not spontaneously be cheerful, but why not head towards the joy of gratefulness?