

## Article 12

# On the Road to Taize

---

After my sunny Sunday in Vezelay, I arrived at Tournus and a 300 year old hotel. It is close to Taize, Cluny and other sights suggested to me by Fr. Jim Lothamer. Monday morning there was a heavy fog so I walked around Tournus, a small town and I came across Ste. Madeleine, a small 11<sup>th</sup> century church, which once probably functioned as the village parish. It is, as I was to find out one of 12 parishes for which the pastor of Ste Philibert is responsible. There is only Mass on Sunday morning and everything else takes place in the larger abbey church which is only a short walk away.



The Abbey of Ste. Philibert is only a five minute walk. Founded in 850, the present abbey church was built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Near the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the king assumed the right to name the abbots; and like Vezelay, the abbey went into decline as bishops were appointed absentee abbots. In 1569, the abbey was attacked by the Huguenots, their library burned and the monks driven away. A monastic community returned for a time, but distant bishops were still named abbots until the French Revolution. In the concordat made in 1806, the abbey church became the parish church of Tournus. In 2000, for the Jubilee year it was restored and renovated.



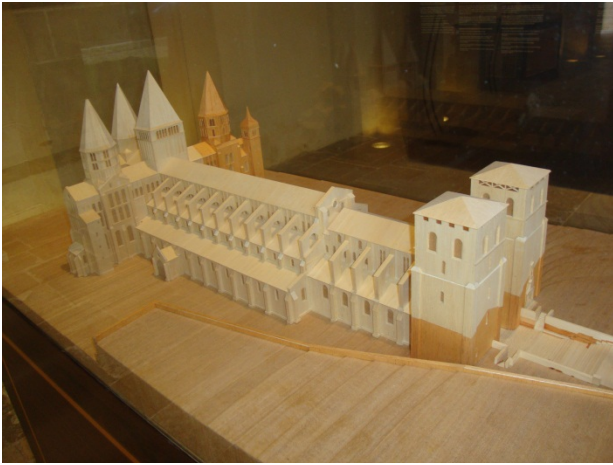
When the fog cleared, I headed out to Cluny. Founded in 910 and dedicated to Sts Peter and Paul, it was set up to be directly accountable to the pope, which kept local nobles at bay. The abbey grew considerably by inviting other monasteries and priories into an association with Cluny. Over the next 200 years it became the mother house for over 1,000 other communities in the west, leading what would become the known as the Cluniac Reform of the middle ages. Two of their members would eventually be elected popes. More importantly, their first 6 abbots were canonized as saints because of their holy lives. The next two were declared venerable (a step toward canonization.) For almost 200 years, these 8 abbots of Cluny shaped the life of the Church.

The decline of the Cluniac Reform began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The abbey which had been such a leader in the religious life in Europe found that the election of its abbots was profoundly influenced by the king. Abbots became more “lords of the manor” than spiritual fathers, and the Cluniac Reform deteriorated. In 1516, a treaty with the king of France gave him power to appoint the abbots and bishops in France, even for abbeys that were a part of the Cluniac reform. Bishops, cardinals and other ranking prelates were appointed abbot and religious life began to decline, despite attempts to return to the stricter practice. Eventually those who wanted a stricter practice became the Cistercians and the Benedictines continued to decline. Cardinal Richelieu, who is not well remembered by history, became the abbot and began to reform daily life back to a stricter monastic life and also began to restore the buildings.

The original abbey church was consecrated in 927 by the pope; a second enlargement of the church was undertaken in 981 and the third enlargement took from 1088 to 1130. This third enlargement made it the largest church in the Europe, only to be eclipsed by the second St. Peter’s in Rome. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Cluny was the residence of Pope Gelasius II after he was driven out of Rome.

The demise of Cluny occurred during the French Revolution. Long a sign of the Church’s power and prestige, the abbey was attacked by the revolutionaries and the remaining 35 monks were driven out or killed. (At its peak, Cluny had over 1,000 monks!) The land and the buildings taken over and the revolutionaries began to tear down the abbey church. Today only part of the north transept still remains as well as part of the abbey and cloister (the garden) and few of the other buildings.

The pictures below give an idea of what the abbey church looked like.



After leaving Cluny, I went to find Taize. I arrived there early in the afternoon and the commune had a large number of youth. A few guys were playing soccer and frisbee and others were sitting or walking around. As I walked around there seemed to be youth everywhere. In fact there were rows of 60 large, almost military size tents plus other simple places for those who come to stay at Taize. I found the large prayer hall which is built in four parts; the front with a large center space plus rows of stairs and a few benches. The back half can be closed off by large overhead doors that can roll down. It effectively doubles the size of the hall.

From there I made my way over to Paray. The priory there was founded there in 973 and soon became a part of the Cluniac movement and the Cluny monks were, from 999-1789, lords of the town.



The abbey church was first dedicated to Mary. Again, like all monasteries, it went through both its rise and its decline. In the French Revolution it was closed and taken over by the revolutionaries. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was reopened and dedicated to the Sacred Heart. Later in the century it was made a basilica. In 2005 it was completely renovated.

The days driving to Vezelay, Taize and Paray took me along back roads run through small towns and villages that have changed little over the last few centuries. As it has been for over 1,000 years, the main industry of the area is still farming; and many of the houses and barns have been the same since Louis XIV was a young man...and before. Only the paved roads, the electrical lines and the satellite dishes mark the change since the days of the Sun King.

The French countryside is truly stunning. As it has been for centuries, fields are separated by stone walls and hedgerows. Some are pastures in which sheep or cows graze, others are cultivated with a wide variety of crops. Hillsides are favored locations for vineyards. Both in France and Germany steep hillsides are often where large vineyards are located.

Today, at Ste. Philibert Abbey-Church I happened upon a funeral. So I stood in the back and observed. There were a number of small votive candles and a very large spray of flowers but no white pall on the casket. A woman was conducting the service and, apparently, preaching when I came in. There were several prayers and some recorded music (from Taize). Near the end, two got up and gave a eulogy. Then the whole assembly came forward and sprinkled the casket with holy water, ending with the family. During all of this recorded music was played...obviously not religious. Then the casket was carried out to the waiting hearse.

Afterward the older man and woman who conducted the service were straightening up the altar and I approached them and asked questions. The pastor of Ste Philibert has 12 churches, including Ste Madeleine in town, and he had another funeral in a nearby village later in the afternoon. The lady who led the service was a laywoman who had been chosen by the pastor and commissioned by the bishop to lead funeral services. The gentleman who assisted her, was not commissioned, only a server. The deceased was an older man and the father of 13; and as I had thought, the family chose the music for the end. It was a very interesting and instructive experience.

On Tuesday, October 18, as the sun was beginning to lighten the sky, I set off to Taize. As I arrived in Taize the bells were still ringing for Morning Prayer and young people were still scurrying to get to the prayer hall. It began shortly after I found a spot. The church is more of a prayer hall; it is a simple building built in two parts. The original building is at the east end; it is lower and built of concrete. That is perhaps 50 feet or so in length. There is a platform with an altar-table on it. The rest of the prayer hall is an addition which is a simple steel frame, roof and sides. It has roll up walls that make it possible to close off or expand the prayer hall as the need dictates. There are three sections on the west end of the building and even more additions on the north and south sides of the main addition. It is designed to seat a few hundred or a few thousand.

In the original part of the building there is an area marked off by small planters that carve out a space in the middle of the east end in front of the altar, back into the first addition. This is the “prebyterium”, where the brothers are seated. Some sit on the floor, some on small kneeling benches and some in chairs. There appeared to be about 80 of them.

Taize was founded after the WWII to be a non-denominational Christian community that seeks unity among Christians and all people in order to bring peace to the world. So the brothers of Taize live a simple, celibate life of poverty and prayer; while French is the primary language, the brothers come from many different nations and continents. Their prayer is sung in French, Latin, Greek, German, Flemish\Dutch, Polish and Spanish. Unlike the monastic tradition of Catholic monks who sing the whole Psalter each week, the brothers of Taize sing only a phrase or a sentence of a psalm or Scripture passage or prayer over and over in a meditative way. (At MM we use some of these at Liturgy...during Holy Week we use “Jesus, remember me”.) These are all simple and easy to pick up even in a foreign language and often they are sung in harmony or as rounds.

Morning Prayer was a series of Taize style Psalms. The first reading was done in 3 languages. After another couple of psalms there was another Gospel reading in German, French and English. Then a 10 minute silence followed. There was another psalm, followed by a series of intercessions in 3-5 languages and finally the Our Father sung in English...the ecumenical version. Several brothers then went to the front and returned with ciboria and others with baskets of bread. As it turned out, the brothers distributed Eucharist consecrated at the 7 am Catholic Liturgy that took place in the crypt chapel. At other stations, there were other people distributing blessed bread. Eucharist from the Protestant Liturgy was distributed at a station near the left of the altar. (All this was explained to the newly arriving groups on Monday. It was explained to me by one of the brothers.)



My guess is that there were about 800 young people – mainly high school age – along with their adult chaperons here. They are from the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, France and Germany. When I came out from the church, they were lined up for a simple breakfast of bread and tea or coffee.

While folks were eating, I wandered down and found the parish church of Taize. It is a small thing which is used by the community. The stone floor was covered with a mat; there were Taize

hymnals at the door and simple benches for seating. The only stain glass window depicted St. Francis, so it may be that the church is named in his honor, or it may be that he is a favorite of the Taize community. I found out that it is almost 1,000 years old and there had been no priest since the French Revolution. There are no regularly scheduled Liturgies there, though it is in the care of a pastor in another town several miles away. It is used for local funerals and Taize uses it for quiet prayer, small groups use it and the Orthodox use it for Eucharist when they come in the summer.



The church is a very small, ancient, simple, plain Romanesque building that may seat 50 or so. The village cemetery surrounds it; it contains the graves of the local folks and 15 – 20 members of the community, including Brother Roger, who founded Taize.

I went to the Welcome Center and ended up setting up a meeting with Br. Emil from Canada. He is in the process of planning a Taize Gathering at DePaul University in Chicago next year for 18-35 year olds.

Besides the brothers of Taize, there are a group of young adults called the Permanente. At the Welcome Center I met Louise who was here for 3 weeks and Denis, the young man from Virginia who is here longer. The males live with the brothers and the women live in a separate community with the sisters. The Permanente have Bible studies, have a variety of jobs around the community and also work with the youth who come for a week at a time.

There are three communities of sisters here. The oldest is the Community of St. Andrew from Belgium. There are 25 of them here and they work with the youth, leading the small groups and providing spiritual direction. They are a 1,000 year old community which adopted Ignatian Spirituality 300 years ago. They have been here at Taize almost 30 years. Sisters of Charity operate the clinic and three Ursuline from Poland came a few years ago to work with the youth from Eastern Europe.

There are hundreds of youth here for a week at a time all through the fall and spring. Over the last two weeks in October there will be 6,000 French 16 & 17 year olds here. They will spend a week at a time. Each day they will join the brothers in prayer three times daily. In the morning they will meet in small groups for Bible Study and sharing; in the afternoon, they will have lunch, work groups and small

groups; and evening prayer and discussion groups in the evening. During the summer tens of thousands of 18-35 year olds flock to Taize from all over Europe, some returning year after year and following the same schedule. That is the primary ministry of the community, though they also make and sell pottery.

Shortly after noon I participated in Mid-day Prayer. It is shorter, but very similar in style to Morning Prayer: a couple of Taize psalms, a reading in 5 languages including Spanish and Dutch, a long pause and the concluding psalms. Interestingly even after the brothers left many of the young people stayed and sang for 10-15 minutes or so before they left for their mid-day meal.

In the afternoon I went to visit three churches near Taize. The first church is in at Chapaize: Ste. Martin and was founded in 950 as part of a monastic community that became part of the Cluny movement. This church was not built until 1050. It is a small, typical country Romanesque church. It is brick and while all the masonry looks good, most of the overlay of plaster is gone. It is one of a number of churches under the care of a single pastor. The church and its surrounding cemetery look well cared for. But it has not been an independent parish since the French Revolution.



In the next town over is the new and more frequently used Ste Augustin Church of Cormatin. The cemetery is not located around the church and the interior has been plastered and painted, at least in the sanctuary area.

The last church I went into is less than a half a mile from the church in Taize. It is Notre Dame de Ameugny and it too was built in 1050, the brick work is exposed because only a few areas still have the plaster work. Its cemetery surrounds it. Like Taize and Chapaize it is only used for local funerals.

Evening Prayer was at 8:30. It was done in French, Latin, Greek, German, Flemish\Dutch, Polish and Spanish. The way we do Taize Evening Prayer at MM is very similar; the only thing is that at the very end, the brothers bring forward an icon cross for people to come and venerate. Again, several more songs are sung and people stay even after the brothers leave. Afterward I made my way back to Tournus... along the very windy roads...in the dark...thank God for the Garmin!!!