Janel Moore

Cross Cultural Experience

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Learning and Growing in France

When I was looking through one of my old journals one day, I came across a list of places I would like to visit: Switzerland, Ireland, Canada, Alaska, and Normandy. This spring, with the Jacques Lefevre Institute, I was able to spend five months in Normandy, France. I attended L’Université de Caen, helped around the Institute—which was my home—visited historical sites, experienced French worship, and lived in the culture.

As a French Education major, taking the French Linguistic classes in Caen was a priceless opportunity in improving and practicing my French reading, writing, listening, and speaking. I also took a culture class where I learned about French cuisine, the geography of France, how the school system works, and studied some of France’s best musical talent. However, learning about the culture in class is not as beneficial as being in the culture. At the Institute, Danielle, the cook and only French native running the program, made sure our meals were typical French meals. We always had bread, butter, and jam for breakfast, and there was always cheese after dinner before dessert. The main courses were delicious, but simple. Couscous soon became one of my favorite foods, and now I make my sandwiches using butter instead of Mayonnaise. In May, I got the chance to buy the daily baguette at the nearby boulangerie-patisserie, and, of course, I enjoyed many croissants at street-side patisseries.

The Institute was started by Danielle along with an American (Steve) who loves the French people and culture. Listening to his history sessions was always very interesting. It was through him that I learned about the battles between England and France as well as about all the kings and dukes that are important to Normandy. The most prominent being William the Conqueror, who founded the city of Caen. In fact, one of the castles he built is right across from the University and I got to walk through it regularly and even spent a few hours sitting with a cannon overlooking the city. As part of the culture class we got to spend a few days touring the city and learning its secrets. There are several small streets that have great historical meaning, including one that would have been filled with blood during the Revolution. There were times as I traveled through Caen and other historical sites that I could feel the years. In comparison, America is such a young country.

Other outings included a visit to the American Cemetery, an emotional experience that felt like stepping into history. Seeing the white crosses right after walking on the D-Day beaches is something I will never be able to explain fully. Walking through Monet’s garden before seeing all of his paintings was an incredible experience as well. I also went to Mont St. Michel, St. Malo, and the Bayeux Tapestrie with my University classmates, all of whom were from other countries. There were only three other English speakers in my class, everyone else was from Asia, the Middle East, or other European countries. I can now say that I have a Japanese friend-sister who I met in France and with whom I can only communicate in French. It was a wondrous opportunity to be able to learn so much about other countries and cultures.

During Spring break, I was also able to travel to Greece with my cousin who was vacationing there. It was the best vacation ever, and I enjoyed seeing all the marble ruins, eating Greek cuisine, and swimming in the Mediterranean.

Another great opportunity to understand the French culture was the weekly Bible study I was able to attend with French university students. Each week one of the students would pick a chapter or a few verses and lead the study. It seemed that most often he or she would start by identifying the people, move to explaining the events, and then pondering how the passage should be read and used today. At first it was very hard to keep up with all that was going on, but by the end of the semester, I was able to voice my opinion a few times. We also went to watch the new movie *Noah (Noé)* with them. The discussion following the film was a bit tricky to follow, but I was pleasantly surprised to find that I could understand the movie even though there were no sub-titles! My roommate Jessie and I also decided to see *Rio 2* in the French theater. At the Institute we also watched several French movies, and I thoroughly enjoy putting Disney movies on French mode and practicing my listening that way.

The Institute also provided tickets to theater music or drama shows. Most of these I absolutely enjoyed. The first one was bizarre, to say the least. A group of five or six people took random objects, like buckets, springs, a trombone, and so on and used them to make odd and unique sounds; often looking quite silly in the progress. Another one was done with horses, like what the vaulting team at Asbury does, only they were depicting something about Greek mythology rather than the Christmas story. My favorite was a clavier (a precursor to the piano) concert performed in a Catholic church. My least favorite, and probably worst memory of the entire trip, was another performance about some mythology. It was performed in Russian with French sub-titles, so it was really hard to keep up, but more than that it was demonic. I left feeling gross and didn’t fully recover spiritually until the next week. Thank the Lord for calm, peaceful, windy beaches and forest clearings!

France is much like other countries in Europe, especially Spain, in that once it was a great Catholic/Christian nation but it is now post-Christian. There are still Catholic churches in every village, and all the Catholic holidays are honored, but there are very few practicing Catholics who truly believe in and love God fully. However, there are evangelistic churches that are being planted. While there I went to two: one in Caen and one in Houlgate, which is up the coast from Franceville-Merville, my town of residence. The church in Caen, which is Baptist, is large enough to have two buildings; one on the north side of Caen, and one on the south side. The Houlgate church is very small. It mainly consists of two families and a few other older couples. It was there that Jessie and I were able to help watch and teach the children during the sermon, something I greatly enjoyed.

While I was there, the Institute hosted several groups. There were three or four groups from the United States, but there were three French groups that came for a retreat. The Caen church sent their women for a week-end, a Paris young adult group came, and during spring break, another Paris group arrived. Talking with all three of these groups opened my eyes to many of the struggles that French Christians have as well as enabled me to learn about French politics. It was also very comforting to know that even though we were from different sides of Earth, under Christ we were brothers and sisters.

My eyes were definitely opened to the need for Christ in France. Steve also explained how impactful French missionaries could be throughout the Middle East, Africa, and other Francophone nations due to the political partnerships. However, he and I are convinced that Satan is well aware of how strong of a nation France could be united in Christ, so it is a spiritually dead and hurting nation. I returned home to the United States needing a refill of God’s Spirit even though I was surrounded by fellow believers and communed with God every day.

Because of this need for evangelism in France, I would not be surprise that after I graduate I go back to serve at the Institute. They desperately need the help there, and as long as I can get a hold on the language I would willingly be part of the team. Of course, I don’t know where God will send me, but I know that I will be on the lookout for ways to return to France.