

Witness by Joëlle Ruffieux and Joyce Wechsler:

Before starting my studies of theology here in Fribourg, I've only had a few exchanges with catholics. When I met Joëlle, I was curious to find out what her relationship with Jesus is. As a matter of fact it is rather a myth among us free church Christians: Are there any catholics who have their own and personal relationship with God?! It did not take a long time for me to be convinced that the spirit of God is quite alive within these old stonewalls of a catholic church. My name is Joyce Wechsler and I grew up in the church "Freie Evangelische Gemeinde Düdingen-Freiburg" where I work as youth counselor to this day.

My name is Joëlle Ruffieux and I belong to the Catholic Church. In the parish of St. Nicholas in Alterswil I am active as an altar server, lector and sacristan.

Before I met Joyce, I had no contact at all with a free church and was excited to learn more about it and to see how they live their faith in their tradition. I literally pestered her with questions and listened to her stories with enthusiasm. I found it particularly exciting when she told me about her baptism, which, unlike me, she had received as an adult. Things that had been evident and important to me in my tradition were not so important to her, and vice versa. For example, she told me that the sermon is one of the most important elements in a church service. The biggest "shock", however, was how different the free church understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper is compared to our understanding of the Eucharist: Joyce told me that the Lord's Supper is celebrated only once a month and that they go and take the bread and grape juice by themselves.

I am sure she had some "shocks" as well, at the latest when I invited her to participate in a novena devotion to the Mother of God ... I really appreciated that she actually decided to participate in it. I had known this way of praying together since my childhood, and in my opinion it is very beautiful to ask the Blessed Mother for her intercession in various intentions. As Joyce joined me in the sacristy after the prayer, I was curious to hear about her impressions and her reaction:

Lacking better words, the first thing that came to my mind to describe the prayer was: "very catholic". Looking back, however, this experience was quite interesting for me because this tradition was so unfamiliar to me. I had never really encountered Mary beyond a Christmas musical... The fact that there is an entire ceremony devoted to the Mother of God has opened up a new dimension of Christian spirituality to me. What fascinates me is that in Mary one meets a concrete female figure. I think it is beautiful that she is honored in this way.

There were other things from my tradition that I was happy to share with Joyce. I was especially pleased that she joined me as I explained to the altar servers how to use the incense during liturgy. The use of incense is something I really enjoy as an altar server. Among other things, it expresses that our prayers may ascend to God, like the incense. The practice session with the altar servers was a good opportunity for Joyce to just try it out herself. What was your impression of it?

This experience helped me to understand the meaning of liturgy in general. I admire how the catholic tradition recognizes the entirety of a human being. A simple act like burning frankincense creates an atmosphere in which you can easily enter the realm of spirituality with all your senses.

On this same day, Joëlle also gave me a tour of the church building. She took me up into the bell tower and showed me the sacristy. My personal highlight was a closet that was filled with the gowns of the altar servers.

Not long ago Joëlle was also a guest at our church. What were your highlights of the visit?

There were many... First of all, I was struck by the joyful mood in the service. The music of the praise band created a very festive atmosphere. I was surprised to learn that it was not common for the community to make the sign of the cross. Furthermore, the building and room where the service took place was also strange for me. As a Catholic, I indeed missed the paintings and statues, and yet it became clear to me that one does not actually need a special building to pray and worship. As a sacristan, you spend a lot of time preparing and decorating the church – but in the end, this is not what really counts. Any space or room can be a church if you fill it with prayer.

In our tradition the most common form of prayer is a free prayer. It's a form that you too are familiar with, Joëlle, however, it has opened a new perspective for you, right?

Of course, free prayer is something that we also practice and that is also important for us, and yet I was surprised how great its importance is within your tradition. What surprised me the most, was that even a blessing was pronounced so freely and was not connected with a specific prayer of blessing. I personally also appreciate the prayer based on a prayer book, the rosary, and also praying together with prayers we know by heart (for example to say grace before a meal).

Another very important part of our tradition is reading the bible together and so I use various tools to discover the bible in new and different ways. Like for example the bible app "YouVersion" for smartphones, particularly for youth groups, but also for the personal daily reading. You found that interesting:

Yes, that is true. Scripture is of great importance to me as well, but it is not necessarily something that is often shared with others, at least not in the same way as it is for you. This is definitely something that I learnt from your tradition and that I am going to use for my own spirituality, especially the use of reading plans, as you described them to me.

Besides these experiences we've had many discussions about various topics on our beliefs and we talk about the challenges that come with the work in our local churches. We can learn a lot from each other. By uncovering and acknowledging disagreements in peace, but also accepting them, we honor our traditions. That way we help create a broad and creative Christianity, because despite the different approaches we still feel united in Jesus Christ our redeemer.

I was able to learn a lot as well, thanks to our discussions and mutual visits to those places where we concretely live our faith. Not only did I learn about the differences between our traditions, I also saw my own tradition from a different perspective, in a different light. When you show something you've always known in a certain way to someone who doesn't know it that way, you are inevitably challenged to question what you are used to, and then you get to appreciate it even more again. There is a lot that we can learn from other traditions and also integrate into our own spirituality. We had the opportunity to experience together and from each other that what unites us is much more important than what separates and distinguishes us.