

FRANCE

Exactly a week before I left to spend a semester in Paris, I went under the needle at a small, clean tattoo parlor near my house. It's small, on my wrist, and says "AMDG," which are the initials for the Latin phrase *ad maiorem dei gloriam* (translated as "for the greater glory of God"). I love it – it's my adult baptism, my renewed confirmation, though a bit more painful than some water or fragrance oil on the forehead. However, it has been something of a double-edged sword during my time abroad.

On one hand, seeing the reminder of my faith almost constantly helps me slash through bad habits and clears a path towards a more Christ-like life. It's personal, it's for me, and it liberates me in some ways.

On the other hand, when other people catch a glimpse of the thin black letters under my sleeve and ask what it means, it boxes me in. It's not that I didn't expect to have to explain it. I know I've asked plenty of people about their tattoos, and I don't mind explaining it. But along with the simple cross I wear around my neck, it is a symbol to the new people I have met here in Paris of a whole slew of stereotypes. For the first time in my life, I am a minority, subjected to the preconceived notions that people have about a certain group. Very often, I've had to explain myself against the stereotype of what an American "Christian" is perceived to be before I can begin to talk about what is important to me about my faith.

As it turns out, both edges of the sword have been important parts of my study abroad experience. Seeing the tattoo every day reminds me to continue to work on developing my faith, to go out and explore churches, and to seek out peaceful places and reflect. It reminds me to read and write and meditate on the ways God is moving in my life. My faith has been tested by the conversations prompted by my marking. After investing the time to deconstruct the stereotypes – which in its own way has helped me develop a deeper sense of understanding of what I believe – I have been able to share the developing faith I have been finding and therein construct a community. In my opinion, community is the cornerstone of faith. It's where we share our struggles, our joys, and our passion. More importantly, community is where we deeply understand our God, who created Adam and Eve in a relationship, who filled Noah's ark with two of each beast, and who entered into human friendship and family with the Incarnation.

I think the most difficult part of living abroad after two years at Davidson is the amount of time I've spent alone – especially at the beginning, especially in a huge city like Paris, and especially in a culture where interaction is confined to specified corners of life. It can feel isolating without a community. Luckily, study abroad programs make efforts to create these communities for us. I know my program created for me a great space with interesting people to associate with; however, as a person invested in my faith, not having a group to articulate my developing faith to has been unsettling. I am restless without that sort of community. I recently spoke to a friend from Davidson about the subtle hum of connectivity that becomes audible when you realize someone you are speaking to has tapped into that same spiritual vein in which you rest. That hum of community reminds me of my faith almost as profoundly as these four letters on my wrist, if not more so.

I didn't realize what the road to finding true community abroad would be like. At Davidson, it's almost effortless. But in another country, with another language, in a secular culture that relegates religion to the most personal sphere possible, it has been hard. But this double-edged blade of a tattoo – which at first seemed like a hassle, a frustration, a relegating factor – has become the door to this community. And it has led me to those who know that hum of divine community and who also long to share it this semester. I have had some great conversations this semester during which that glean of communion glows – in the

back corners of cafés, on Facebook chat, on the stone stairs by Notre Dame, and on the way to and from Mass at the Sacré Coeur.

I think study abroad, as a religious person or a spiritual person, allows one to learn that God enjoys holding up to the light something we think we know and rotating it in God's divine beams until we see clearly the satisfied smirk of Our Creator. I never imagined my tattoo would be more than a personal reminder of my desire to pursue the Kingdom on Earth as it is in Heaven until I began to be questioned about my identity as a Christian and reluctantly accepted my role as the "religious one of the group." Nevertheless, God scooped up the four little black letters and held them in the Light until I could see them as a tool for finding what I had been missing in France. A great Catholic mystic – whom I love – once wrote, "The feeling remains that God is on the journey, as well." I love this saying. It's full of wisdom for such a short sentence. I've felt God on this journey quite a lot, if for nothing else than to pick up what I've discarded from my backpack and gently hand it back to me for closer inspection. I am so excited to carry all these things back to Davidson.