This July, I had the opportunity to visit Angers, France, to participate in two weeks of a course at the Catholic University of the West (UCO), in order to deepen my connection to the French language and the culture of France. Thanks to the MSVU Modern Languages Department’s Fenêtre sur la Francophonie Award, I was able to take courses on not only oral and written language, but also the rich history of the country and its influences on how the French live. The courses alone were incredibly enriching. We took courses on expression as well as comprehension, focusing on genuine spoken French, with some of the quirks (and the speed!) that the French people use today. We touched on real-world topics, and gained a hearty vocabulary to be able to communicate ideas better in French. The classes that we took on the culture and heritage were very well-taught, giving us a glimpse into the history and customs of Brittany (even learning a bit of the local language there) as well as life in castles around France, from the 15th century to the present day. This look into France’s past gave me even more insight to the development of French between both Canada and France itself, as a lot of the vocabulary I learned growing up in Nova Scotia are considered more “vintage” to the French people!

It wasn’t just in the classroom that we got to see a glimpse of the beautiful and rich architecture of a French castle, however. The University held an excursion to visit Mont Saint-Michel, a gorgeous castle not too far from Angers, as well as to a town with a deep history of privateers, Saint-Malo.

There we got to explore firsthand the intricacies of the castle and the city alike, while experiencing the culture and history of that part of France.

This year, the students at UCO were representing 23 different countries, and I was very happy to be one of the few representing Canada. While we got to learn more about French life and culture, we were all able to learn about different cultures through the friends and colleagues we shared the experience with along the way. In my class alone, we had students from Canada, the US, Madagascar, and many countries in Europe such as Spain, Germany, and the UK! Getting insight into their cultures was a great way to learn as well as further develop my conversational French.

Of course, my host, Thierry, was amazing. A retired music professor, he was not only a delight to engage in conversation with and learn from, but an excellent cook as well. Our meals were fantastic, cooked with fresh vegetables from his garden, as well as a fresh baguette that he picked up each morning from the boulangerie down the road from where he lived. I was very glad that he shared his experiences with me, and we even went to see a classical concert at a Franco-Chinese school of music with which he has many connections. Getting to witness the blend of culture not only in sight, but in sound, was a breathtaking experience.

I would like to thank everyone who was able to make this possible: Mount Saint Vincent University, the wonderful people of the Department of Modern Languages and the International Education Center, the staff at UCO, and last but certainly not least, Mr. Thierry Dechaume. I thank you all for this unforgettable experience.