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Monastic Life and the Urgency of Reconciliation

MEETING WITH BROTHER ROGER AND LINKS WITH TAIZÉ

1940... Sr Marguerite wrote in her Memoirs:

One day someone knocks at the door. I find myself face to face with a young man twenty years younger than myself. His name is Roger. He has received a call to form a community of young men. He has just heard that here we are beginning a community life, and he has come to ask if he can spend a few days with us in prayer.

At that time, Marguerite had been living at Grandchamp for four years to be there to pray and to welcome people for spiritual retreats. It was a rediscovery, in the Churches of the Reformation, of the importance of silence in listening to the Word of God. The retreats would come to constitute the fertile soil in which the community would be born. When Roger knocked at the door, three women were making their first steps in community life “without any experience, with no rule, with no office book”.

So the links between Grandchamp and Brother Roger go back to the origin of our communities, in the mutual recognition of a vocation that was still being sought. The meeting with Sr. Marguerite was an encouragement for Brother Roger, who stayed in touch with her. Geneviève Micheli, who was soon to become mother of the emerging community, discerned the finger of God in Brother Roger’s project, a prophetic intuition. She would understand Brother Roger’s concern that Taizé, Pomeyrol and Grandchamp should be able to “bear witness together to a single vocation” in Churches where that was not an obvious thing. She had confidence in him. And when he brought her one of the first copies of the Rule, she did not hesitate. The sisters adopted it in 1953.

It was a **turning-point!** The first sisters had already tried to write their own rule, but it was, it seems, a “rule for angels”. The rule that Brother Roger proposed set them in the open: just *the essential that makes common life possible, for the sake of Christ and the Gospel*. By its simplicity, its depth, by the breath of the Gospel that it exhaled, it brought a lightness and a freedom which did not exclude challenging demands. It responded to what the sisters were already seeking to live out (a life of prayer in community, the spirit of the Beatitudes – joy, simplicity, mercy –, commitment for Christian unity). And it came as it were to liberate life from structures that were sometimes too rigid. It offered a framework that made possible a process of growing in depth and, at the same time, in breadth. A process of growing in depth, because it rooted prayer for unity in the concrete life of a community, in the call to live out *a parable of community*. A process of growing in breadth because it made explicit a new way, the way of a life of fraternity: alongside a wide welcome for retreats at home, it was also an invitation to go towards others, and to join the least fortunate in the places where they lived. A way that had already been prepared by the meeting, at Taizé, with Little Sister Magdeleine, founder of the Little Sisters of Jesus! And it was at the call of the brothers that the sisters set out for Algeria in 1954. They would later open other fraternities elsewhere.

So it was a grace to go forward together. Brother Roger's support gave strength to the Community and his writings were a source of inspiration. But Grandchamp also needed to grow little by little in its own identity, as a community of women, rooted in the spirit of retreat and in a different ecclesial context. Today, I would like to express our great gratitude for the wellspring that Taizé was and is, and for the bonds of communion deepened year after year.

How is our life today marked by this? I could sum it up in a prayer that has accompanied us for several years and which carries us forward in the challenges of today:

MAY THE BREATH OF YOUR GOODNESS LEAD US TOWARDS A LAND OF UNITY

It is a prayer inspired by Psalm 143 which we have adapted. It expresses at one and the same time a source, the horizon towards which we are walking, and a path:

The Source, God, who is infinite goodness. A God who *can do nothing other than love, who wants happiness for us*, as Brother Roger often repeated, and as the Beatitudes sing. A God who is aware of the reality of evil, but whose eyes see further, who sees this "goodness deeper than the deepest evil" (Ricœur). A God who looks upon every human being, upon the Church and the world today with hope, with trust. A God who, by the life, death and resurrection of Christ, has reconciled all things and wants to make of us bearers of this reconciliation.

But on our path following Christ, what would we become without prayer together and without the Eucharist? *Praise in All Our Days*, the liturgy of which we have received the main part from Taizé, has never ceased to form the life of the community from within and to nourish it. It makes us turn together towards the source, the Risen Christ, to become one heart and one soul. It is the place where the gift of our communion in Him is renewed, called to extend to the dimensions of all humanity.

The horizon towards which we walk, a land united, reconciled. To learn to lift up one's eyes towards this horizon and to let it light up the present, our life and our commitments, and orientate our choices day by day. To change our way of looking when the trials, conflicts and upheavals that the world is undergoing risk leading us into despair or resignation. Not to close our eyes to what is wrong, but to see what is *also* there: acts of solidarity, of sharing, of reconciliation, of forgiveness. So many little signs of the resurrection that do not impose themselves, but which are there to be seen by anyone who is awake to them.

To change our way of looking... It seems that in a region of Mexico, when people greet each other they don't ask "How are you?" but "How do you see?" To choose to look with the eyes of faith in order to be witnesses to the hope in the future that God is preparing and which is already there. "Behold, I am doing a new thing. Already it is springing forth. Do you not perceive it?" said the prophet Isaiah. The world needs "watchers": women and men who know how to discern the new thing which is already springing forth, the signs of a future on the move!

The Way, for us, is to live out a parable of communion. To express, by our life, the gift of a communion that is always offered through reconciliation, to be a seed of unity in the soil of the Church. It is to live out the call to the reconciliation of Christians not for its own sake, but in order to be together a word of the Gospel, ferments of reconciliation and of peace in the dough of the human family.

But unity comes from within; it begins in us, where the root of divisions is found, and amongst us. An invitation to let God's breath of goodness unify our heart – a slow and patient transfiguration of our lives! He wants us to be born to ourselves, so that we become beings of communion. "The spirit of communion is a broadening of the heart", Brother Roger used to say.

If we say "communion" we also mean learning to welcome differences as something valued, living out unity in diversity. We all know that, today more than ever, "living together" is one of the great challenges facing our multicultural and multi-religious societies: differences there are often seen as a threat because they reveal fears and prejudices. It is also a challenge for us, an exercise day by day. Our diversity has grown over the years, with sisters coming from different countries of Europe (West and East) and from other continents according to our small capacities (Asia, Africa). This implies diversity of temperaments, of generations, of denominational traditions, of cultures, and so also diversity of ways of thinking, of acting, of being in relationship. In the common life, differences can be a source of misunderstandings, of tensions, of conflicts, of wounds, and it is there that we learn to live out **reconciliation**, forgiveness, continual new beginnings. It is a way of humanisation, often a long and painful way, all the more so because we also bear within us more than just ourselves, the wounded memory of our collective histories. We had a very concrete experience of this a few years ago, with wounds resulting from war and colonisation. We came to understand better the importance of listening together to the suffering linked to such wounds in order to lay them down together at the foot of the cross. Today these wounds bear a different name – and we can think of the path of South Africa, of the conflicts that are evolving in front of our eyes in Ukraine, in the Middle East, in Congo, in Nigeria...

The call to reconciliation widens our view to the dimensions of the whole human family. Many years ago it led us to turn towards the people of the first covenant, to Judaism, here and in Israel. Our fraternity in the Holy Land sought to be a simple presence of prayer and friendship, of reconciliation in this place of brokenness, in openness to the two peoples who live there. Another fraternity in Algeria where sisters began to live among the most unfortunate has opened our eyes little by little to the world of Islam. At Grandchamp, we are in touch with a group of Sufis with whom we have already experienced certain times of prayer together.

And further still, Christ's call opens us to a communion with so many men and women who seek God by different ways from us, who struggle for justice and peace, for the integrity of the creation. We would like our house to be open to all, as a place of listening and of refreshment: groups, guests from very different backgrounds, who need to be strengthened in their path of faith, young people who share our life for a while... Today there are also sisters of other religious communities living with us, often for several months: we find ourselves wondering at this exchange of gifts.

IN THE DEPTHS OF OUR POVERTY, AN UNEXPECTED OPENING

Today, like many others, we are listening. We feel that God is calling us to leave what we are familiar with, a form of fraternities that has been well established over time, to invent something new, to dare to take new paths in docility to his breath of goodness. We are living at the *inter-*moment (interdenominational, interreligious, intercultural, intergenerational...), at a time of **inter-dependence**. Now this *inter-*, this "between the two", is a special place for the Breath who never stops working to bring about encounters like this one, to weave threads of friendship, of solidarity, to urge us further along the way of reconciliation. Perhaps we are experiencing more and more our need for one another, in community as in the Church and in the world, in order to seek together, in

the midst of the challenges of today, the way forward to a future for everyone. We are discovering more the Gospel values of poverty of means and the sense of the provisional. There is a grace hidden at the heart of weakness, of need: the gift of a communion. And something grows wider as we consent to interdependence, to sharing our poverty even more than our riches.

For several years, we have been committed in an adventure of faith among four communities of different denominations, at Lomme, near Lille. An ecumenical fraternity, born from the sharing of poverty. Six relatively old or even elderly sisters are seeking to be a **presence** of prayer in community life, open to the different faces of the Church in the region and to the different realities of life in the neighbourhood. They have had to take a step forward in the confidence that a little is enough – the little that we have, the little that we are – and to accept to go forward along a new, unknown way; to accept the loss of the usual familiar landmarks (liturgy, community life), to be destabilized and to be opened to something new, to a having their view widened in the gift of a communion.

We no longer have a fraternity in the Holy Land, but we remain open to some other form of being present there: could the way forward be in opening up to others in order, in this land torn apart, to be together a humble sign of reconciliation, of hope? To dare to take concrete steps, a quite provisional experience: this is what we are hoping to do this year with the Little Sisters of Jesus, with whom we are united by so many bonds of friendship for more than 60 years! To dare to live together, to share our everyday life in one of their fraternities and to continue to listen to what God expects of us.

Perhaps such experiences could be a way, among others, of responding to the invitation of Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter to consecrated people: *to create “alternate spaces”, where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive*. In a world in conflagration, is not the urgency of reconciliation more strongly felt than ever, already among Christians? Is not the monastic or religious life ecumenical at its very foundations? Should we not dare to take new, concrete steps, within our communities and with others to be together a humble sign of the communion that God wants for the whole of humanity?