

Living a Parable of Community

Sister Annaliese, Community of the Sisters of the Church, Bristol (UK)

Thank you very much Brother Alois, Brother Richard and the Community here at Taizé for the privilege of being invited to share some reflections with you all today.

Background

I first came to Taizé in 1978, at age 19, and then after university I spent a year living alongside the Community as a so-called 'Permanent'. It was during that year here that I experienced the call to the religious life (although it took some years for me to discover which Community was to be my home). It was at Taizé in the beauty and simplicity of the Prayer, in the music and in the silence that I experienced again and again the call to go deeper, to surrender all and to become 'yes' to God's Love in Jesus - a Love which knows no beginning and no end. I am hugely indebted to Brother Roger and the Community for giving me that year which became without doubt, the foundation for the rest of my life.

When Jesus looked up at Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree, he did not immediately call him to repentance but instead asked to come into his home. It was meeting the person of Jesus which touched Zacchaeus' heart and prompted his conversion of life and soul. Our 21st century world desperately needs places of encounter where people are welcomed and not judged but accepted as they are. In such places defences can be dropped and it is possible to listen to the longings of the heart; it is possible to meet Jesus. How freeing it is to feel honoured and valued as a unique child of God and from such experiences I do believe that the foundation stones of a life of faith are formed.

In a world that can seem to be polarised between secularism and extremism in the name of religion, I believe that the place of religious life is central in witnessing to 'Gospel Values' of love, welcome, (or hospitality to use another word) inclusion and acceptance.

Reflections on Taizé

Taizé is one such extraordinary place of welcome, and for me Taizé has always epitomised these values. The thousands upon thousands of young (and not so young) people who have come over the years have found space to come home to their own hearts, to pray and to be. One of Brother Roger's many gifts was one of quiet reassurance "Some days we pray with almost nothing.... Don't worry if you know so little about praying." (From *Prayer: Seeking the Heart of God*, pp.43-45.) His emphasis on simplicity and trust portrayed a faith that is accessible, relevant and held in the depths and mystery of silence. From simplicity of faith flows simplicity of life – for when our lives are not too complicated we can become more available to others and more open to God "The peace of your heart makes life beautiful for those around you" (*The Sources of Taizé*, p.62).

For me the greatest gift of Taizé has been the music. I have always said that Taizé teaches contemplative prayer not by lessons and instruction but by welcoming everyone into the

Prayer together and by making it accessible to all. The repetitive chants unite body, mind and spirit as the deep truths of the words we sing are internalised to become part of our being in the simplicity and beauty of the Common Prayer. "*O Christe Domine Jesu, O Christe Domine Jesu*". These chants have accompanied me most days ever since my time as a Permanent and have been there at times of celebration such as my Life Profession with the Community of the Sisters of the Church. The chants have also carried me at times of deep sadness such as when I was caring for my mother who was dying of cancer and after the murder of one of our callers here in Bristol. At such times I let the chants carry my wordless prayer when it is all I can offer at the time, "*Gott ist nur Liebe*". They remain a huge gift for my life as I know they do for countless others and for the Church as a whole.

Reflections on the Religious Life

The Religious Life is counter-cultural because it is not about who we are as individuals but as Communities. We are always 'more than the sum of our parts'. In our Rule (CSC) it says that 'we cannot belong exclusively to any one person' and this is because we belong firstly to Christ and in Christ we belong to all. This unique freedom carries with it great responsibility as we come alongside people not simply in our own name but in the name of God, the Church and our Community. The Religious Life is also counter-cultural because we dare to make a life commitment in an age where this is becoming rare.

The Religious Life is one of intimacy: intimacy with God and intimacy with life; they are inseparable. When we make our vows, I understand to be like the water and wine at the Eucharist which are mingled and changed forever. So (even though it might not feel like it a lot of the time) we are always in union with Christ. This union and intimacy means that we cannot approach the world at arm's length. We are I believe called to be immersed in the life in all its fullness and all its heartache, both in Chapel and on the streets. For each of us this will take a different form.

Reflections on Life in our Anglican Religious Community in Bristol, England

Here in inner-city Bristol our lives are intermingled and greatly enriched by those who come to us our door. When I came to our house in Bristol in 1994 we were already giving out food parcels to about 10 people a week, but this soon grew and now we expect most weeks up to 300 people come to us for food, support and for prayer. Just as Taizé has always emphasised the importance of offering a place of listening, this too is something we seek to offer in our own small way. We see many families and individuals struggling on inadequate Benefits, we see people trapped in cycles of addiction to alcohol or class A drugs. We see refugees and asylum seekers, we see women (young and not so young) who work in the street based sex industry... and although we may not see him, Jesus is there in each and blesses us.

Here are a few 'snapshots' from this week – a few of our many regular callers:

- A woman who has worked in the street-based sex industry for many years, comes in a bad way, she has been beaten up and fears for her life...
- A young Muslim woman comes with a small child, she is heavily pregnant and has had two stillbirths, and the child she is carrying has a hole in its heart. She is grateful to know that we will pray for her and her unborn child.

- An older homeless man who lives in the woods in a tent comes on his bike for food and to fill up his water bottle.
- Another woman, who works in the street-based sex industry, comes for some food and a chat, her flat has been burgled and everything smashed. Two days later her son tries to kill himself in prison.
- A man who has had cancer of the mouth and has constant pain after surgery comes with his dog, (his partner is in a high-security hospital).
- An older Christian woman who is a refugee from Iran comes for food. She has very little English but communicates clearly with signs and gestures the brutality of the regime there. She thanks God and our Government for her being here.
- A young couple from Ukraine come for food for them and their children, they have very limited English and I know not to ask about their country because it only makes her cry.
- A young man with learning difficulties visits with a support worker; he shows me a photo of his recent Baptism. He doesn't seem to want much, just came to say hello.
- A young woman who is trying to leave the sex industry comes to talk about concerns about her 4-year-old daughter.
- An older man who has no teeth always needs soft food and this week he also is among a number of our callers who need some money put on his electricity key, which we are glad to help with.
- A woman who is a refugee from the Congo comes, she is glad to have some tickets for the zoo to take her daughter out.

Like many Communities we have not grown in number and while there were five of us living in this house when I first came here, there are now only two of us plus another Sister who lives outside Bristol and comes to help when she can. However, as Religious Communities, our 'poverty' of size and numbers need not curtail the size of our visions and ministry too much! In our world today, so many people of all walks of life hunger for a sense of belonging or meaning and are eager to come alongside and share in a Community's life, prayer and work, just as Taizé has done for so long having 'Permanents'. It is I am sure part of our calling to welcome and receive from those who wish to support us and give of their time and enable our ministries to continue while still guarding the essence of our life. In Bristol we have a small core group of men volunteers who come four days a week day to help with the heavy work of carrying, sorting and storing large quantities of food especially tins. Four days a week we Sisters share a well prepared lunch (and a lot of laughter) together with 10-15 volunteers. I think it is a good example of what Brother Roger called "a parable of community" (be it at times a rather riotous one!) Some of those volunteers are retired professional people, while some are in recovery from drink or drug addiction and a few of the women have exited the street-based sex industry. A number have spent time in prison, others are living with mental health problems. Everyone is valued and accepted; everyone can make a contribution. We celebrate birthdays ... we go out for meals or on trips together.

Grace abounds.

For many of us Religious intimacy with God and with life means letting go of idealism and 'innocence'. I still believe that life is ultimately good and beautiful and yet alongside that I need to hold the accounts of brutality, violence and cruelty and injustice I hear and also witness. It is right that we are disturbed and unsettled. We are not able to respond to all the need in our world or even that around us, but we can say all before God in our prayer as it is, messy and unresolved.

Welcoming Displaced People at our Convent

As religious in the 21st-century world where there are so many displaced people fleeing their homes we may be able to welcome some of them into our Community houses. In our Convent we have welcomed eleven women from eight different countries who have suffered extreme exclusion, as a kind of 'alongsider'. The majority have stayed with us for several years. At the moment we have six women and three small children. We had not planned on having children living with us and they do pose some challenges to a Convent offering retreats (!) but they bring so much joy and fun and are very loved indeed. As a Community we responded to a need but could have no idea how many blessings we would be given in return. Our hearts have been widened along with our horizons!

Conclusion

Brother Roger always had an immensely wide heart – for the poor, for the marginalised, for young people, for the Church. From welcoming refugees to Taizé in 1940, to having the courage to welcome the many thousands of young people who started coming to Taizé in the 1960's, his has been a lived ecumenical vision, a passion for reconciliation grounded in prayer. And all through it was Brother Roger's openness to the Spirit and ability to discern the needs of the times which has rightly marked him as an outstanding spiritual leader. We do well to follow his example.