

BROTHER ALOIS, PRIOR OF TAIZÉ

What Is Distinctive about Taizé?

We are marking a triple anniversary this year, but this does not mean that we are celebrating the past. Brother Roger called the brothers to live in the present, and he kept his eyes turned towards the future, seeking, as he put it, to “sense the coming day of humanity”. We want to remain in that spirit. This week will certainly help us to highlight some of Brother Roger’s intuitions concerning the religious life, but above all it will help us to discern the relevance of this life for today and for tomorrow. So, welcome to all of you for these few days of sharing together!

To begin with, I would like to point out the elements that seem to me most distinctive in the thought of Brother Roger as founder and which still determine our searching today. Then I will hand over the microphone to Sister Agnes. She is the superior general of the Sisters of St Andrew, who have been present here alongside our Taizé Community for just on fifty years now. What we live out together is not just a practical collaboration, but also the richness of a complementarity between women and men at the service of welcoming young people.

A PARABLE OF COMMUNITY

When he was young, in the midst of the world war, Brother Roger came to believe that creating a community of a few men could be a small sign of peace and of reconciliation in a Europe torn apart by violence. He wanted already to prepare what would come after the war. The vocation he proposed to the brothers who would join him was to constitute what he called a “parable of communion”, or a “parable of community”.

Every life consecrated to God and at the service of others is a parable. Such a parable does not impose anything; it does not try to prove anything, but it opens a world that is shut in on itself; it opens a window on a beyond, an opening towards the infinite. Those who follow it have cast their anchor into Christ, so as to hold firm even when the storms come.

The specific parable that we, the brothers of Taizé, would like to bear is that of communion. Communion, reconciliation and trust are key words at Taizé. We would like to make it apparent that a community can be a laboratory of fraternity.

There are two areas where this search for communion and fraternity require a lot of energy: the reconciliation of Christians and the fact of coming from different cultures.

By uniting Protestant and Catholic brothers, and from time to time by welcoming a Orthodox monk to live with us for a time, our community tries to anticipate the unity which is still to come. This ecumenical life has become very natural to us. Those of us who have grown up in a Protestant family accept this life together without any denial of their origins, but rather as a broadening of their faith. The brothers who come from Catholic families find an enrichment in opening themselves, along the lines of Vatican II, to the questioning and the gifts of the Churches of the Reformation. It is true that this sometimes implies limitations and renunciations. But there is no reconciliation without renunciation.

The story of Taizé can be read as an attempt to come together under one roof and to stay there. Coming from about thirty countries, we live under the roof of the same house. And when, three times a day, we come together for the common prayer, we place ourselves beneath the single roof of the Church of Reconciliation.

This common prayer also brings together young people from across the world—Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox. In this way, they are associated with the same parable. We are often surprised to discover that they feel profoundly united without reducing their faith to a lowest common denominator or lowering their values. In the common prayer, a harmony can come to be created between people belonging to different denominations, different cultures, and even peoples who may be strongly in opposition to each other.

I want to underline a second aspect of this search for fraternity, that of being from different cultures. We come from all the regions of Europe, and also from Africa, Asia, and both Americas. Today, such a plurality is more and more present everywhere. But globalisation is sometimes felt as a threat. So we would like the harmony of our life to be a sign of communion also between the different faces of the human family that we represent.

But I do not want to hide the fact that in spite of our common faith, it can happen that we do not manage to avoid estrangements which remain. There are differences of character, of course. We can be clumsy, and make mistakes—that is obvious, too. But there can be something still deeper, which does not depend entirely on us: too great a distance between the varied faces of the humanity that we bear, a distance sometimes accentuated by the wounds of what has happened in the past between our countries and continents.

What can we do with the sadness that can then take hold of us? Not let ourselves be paralyzed. Avoid coming to a standstill. In spite of everything, live out the search for unity and reconciliation. That sends us back to Christ: he alone can really unite everything. And we would like to follow him in that. We are ready to suffer for it. Not to be afraid of the other, not to judge, not to let ourselves feel judged, not to interpret things negatively, to talk about things when a question arises. And above all, never to refuse our fellowship as brothers.

What I have just said may seem serious. But it is also, paradoxically, the source of a deep joy, the joy of going right through to the end in the call of the Gospel.

AT THE MEETING-POINT OF THE MONASTIC TRADITION AND THE VALUES OF THE REFORMATION

Now I would like to go more deeply into what is distinctive about Taizé. Just before the Second World War, Brother Roger felt called to create a community, but the monastic life had disappeared from the Churches of the Reformation. So he had of necessity to send roots down into the undivided Church, beyond Protestantism, into the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. When in 1949 the first seven brothers committed their lives in celibacy and common life, they were connecting with these traditions, and were undertaking a step that is in no way in the image of the Reformation, something that led to their being very often not understood in the Protestantism of the time.

Nevertheless, Brother Roger did not want simply to imitate something that had already existed in history: he sought to work out his own way, which implied among other things assuming the fundamental values of the Reformation. He did not want to deny his origins. He reconciled what for four centuries had seemed irreconcilable.

The certainty of justification by faith and not by works was at the basis of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Reformation rejected monastic life not so much as a matter of principle but because at the time it seemed to be lived in a way that was contrary to the *sola gratia* and the *sola fide* to which the Reformation is so strongly attached.

Attentive to this criticism, Brother Roger was led to underline strongly the disinterestedness of the common life that he envisaged. Praise of God without any self-interest became central for him. The Rule of Taizé begins and ends on this note of praise.

Concerned as he was not to give any “meritorious” value to the monastic life, and not to claim that it was in some way superior to marriage, he chose his words with care. Like the other Rules, the Rule of Taizé places at the heart of the life of the brothers the three commitments taken for a whole lifetime; but he avoids calling them vows, since the word could have led to misunderstandings, and simply calls them commitments.

And for each of the three, Brother Roger is careful about the expressions he uses:

He prefers the word celibacy to chastity. He does not want to appropriate for monastic life alone the beautiful term chastity, since this is also necessary in a certain way for a truly faithful marriage, and even in the life of every Christian.

He prefers to speak of community of possessions, both material and spiritual, rather than of poverty. For poverty has no virtue in itself, and it is experienced as a great misfortune by those who suffer from it across the world. What is important is simplicity of heart and spirit, linked to a simplicity of life.

And finally, Brother Roger avoids calling the brothers to obedience, since freedom is a value so strongly underlined by the Reformation and since he so desires his brothers to be free men. At the beginning he spoke of accepting an authority, but later he withdrew even that word, presenting the prior simply as a servant of communion. For this ministry of communion, he kept the word prior, meaning “first”, but avoided the terms abbot or superior.

He rehabilitates spiritual discipline, or asceticism, almost unknown in Protestant circles, but he speaks of it prudently, always avoiding a meritorious interpretation. He writes: “Assured of your salvation by the sole grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, you do not impose discipline on yourself for its own sake. Gaining mastery of yourself has no other aim than to render you more available. No pointless abstaining; keep to what God asks. Bear the burdens of others, accept the minor hurts each day brings, so as to share concretely in the sufferings of Christ: this is our first discipline.”

Perhaps what is most striking in the Rule of Taizé is the desire to indicate only the minimum necessary. There is no constitution, no regulations, no timetable established once for all, no practical details. It is up to each generation to adapt the essentials that are proposed.

I would like to mention two other evolutions that Brother Roger adopted later. At first, the new brothers were called novices. This word disappeared. Certainly they need a process of journeying for several years before making a definitive commitment, with—most importantly—a personal accompaniment, and they need theological and human preparation. But they are adults responsible for themselves, and they share our life totally. In the mentality of the end of the twentieth century, the word novice turned out to be a hindrance. Today we speak rather of the young brothers or the new brothers. Another word to disappear was office. The Office of Taizé was the fruit of long liturgical labour, but celebrating it became rather too complex for the young people who were coming to Taizé in ever greater numbers and speaking more and more varied languages. Brother Roger began to speak only of the common prayer.

These remarks about the use of words go well beyond a mere question of vocabulary. They show how the encounter of two traditions, that of the Reformation and that of monasticism, which seemed irreconcilable, even antagonistic, turns out to be creative.

Brother Roger bore within himself both the heritage of the Reformation and a profound adhesion to the treasure of the faith of the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches. It is perhaps this that enabled him to express the Gospel in a language adapted to today’s mentality, to which he was so attuned. He was not afraid to go to the heart of tensions and to hold together their two extremes—freedom and tradition, diversity and unity, personal faith and trust in the faith of the Church, autonomy and communion.

His journey indeed involved combats. How many times did he have to give explanations to Protestant leaders who thought, for example, that committing oneself for a whole lifetime meant limiting the freedom of the Holy Spirit! And at one point he also had to write an open letter to those who were living the monastic or religious life to make clear that his choices did not in any

way imply a criticism of them, but that Taizé was simply a shoot grafted onto the great tree of monastic life, without which it could not live.

Today these combats are over and done with. And we would like our experience to contribute to supporting the exchange of gifts that Pope Francis describes so well: he says that dialogue exists not only to get to know others but also to receive the gifts that God has placed in the others for us.

This leads me to end by asking a question: in view of the unity of Christians, could those living the religious life in different traditions create more links between the respective Churches to which they belong? Is not the search for communion and unity an integral part, in different ways, of their common vocation?