

SISTER AGNÈS GRANIER, SISTER OF SAINT ANDREW

The Sisters of St. Andrew at Taizé

A PATH OF MEETINGS

Before anything else, I would like to share with you the joy of our congregation, the Sisters of St Andrew, in being witnesses to the grace of God in this place for nearly 50 years.

Mother Tarcisius was one of the sisters present from the beginnings of this collaboration; she was in charge of the formation of sisters and of accompaniment in the community. She remembered: *"We have been here since 1966 (...) Yes, it's true, just by being here with my sisters day after day, I have been a witness to grace".¹*

At the origin of our presence at Taizé, there was a series of meetings, which I would like to recall briefly:

At Easter 1965, one of the sisters came to Taizé with several women students from Leuven, in Belgium. A few months later, Mother Claire, superior general, and Mother Tarcisius, drawn by what they had heard of this place, came to Taizé. They came back saying: *"Taizé is becoming central to Catholicism. You can meet people there from all over the world!"²* At the beginning of the following year, Brother Roger was invited to Leuven to meet some students in the context of an ecumenical group. He was accommodated in our community and, during the evening, he said to us: *"You have to come to Taizé."* At Easter that same year, two groups of sisters came to Taizé and Brother Roger expressed his desire again: *"We need the Sisters of St Andrew and the Sisters of St Andrew need us."*

So it was that we arrived at Pentecost 1966, to replace the people who had been working at the "exposition", for three months during the summer...

... and we are still here!

Brother Roger and Mother Tarcisius: a visitation

Amongst these events, I think special significance should be given to the personal meeting between Brother Roger and Mother Tarcisius. It was more than a meeting: it was a VISITATION. From the beginning, each of them recognized the gift of God placed in the other. So their meeting gave rise to an outpouring of thanksgiving, of shared praise.

Mother Tarcisius was always reticent about what she perceived of the spiritual life of Brother Roger, but the first gift she recognized in him, as in the brothers of Taizé taken together, was faith. When a journalist asked her what caused the success of Taizé, she answered without hesitation: *"It is the faith of the brothers, this outpouring of grace, which has drawn the crowds. The Taizé Community gives young people 'a shock of meaning'".³*

For his part, Brother Roger, in keen admiration for Mother Tarcisius, would say: *“That woman has a gift of listening. It’s something uniquely beautiful, this elderly woman with the freshness of the Gospel, always with the Scriptures beside her. I don’t know if she reads a lot (...) but I know that she has exceptional intuition.”*

The two of them shared a common vision of the religious life: *“What God asks of members of religious communities is to dare to believe, to dare to trust. (...) It is God who makes us pass from death to life, and who makes religious communities a sign of this new life”¹⁴*

Years of living close to each other led to the growth of a deep spiritual friendship, a sort of complicity in the foolishness of the Gospel, a being there for one another to confirm and encourage, especially when there were sufferings or misunderstandings to go through. A text that one of the sisters showed me expresses well the exceptional grace of this encounter! I would like to share it with you; it was written the night when Brother Roger died.

“At this moment of an unfathomable contradiction, an icon has come to dwell in my heart. The icon of a dance: Mother Tarcisius and Brother Roger were dancing to celebrate the Encounter. On their faces, a serene joy; in their eyes, the clarity of an open sky, the peace of still waters. They were dancing to the rhythm of the Beatitudes—simplicity, joy, mercy. At that moment, this door that opened appeared without roots, a space of eternity; the Kingdom of God is there!”

A Parable of the Meeting between Our Two Communities

The encounter and the complicity of Brother Roger and Mother Tarcisius is like a parable of the encounter between our two communities. From year to year, we support one another, often without knowing it.

The sisters expressed it in this way: *“We are a community face to face with another community, and we confirm each other in the foolishness of the Gospel (...). At the side of this young community of brothers that the Lord has called into being on the hill of Taizé, our own community, more than seven and a half centuries old, and which has gone through wars and revolutions, is a bit like a sign of God’s faithfulness over time.”¹⁵*

Today, with great thankfulness, we could say to you, Brother Alois and also to the whole community of brothers: *you remind us ceaselessly of God’s faithfulness, you awaken us to hope, and you bring us back to the heart of our own calling.*

A PATHWAY LEADING US TO THE HEART OF OUR VOCATION

These fifty years characterized by the audacity of faith and lived out in mutual trust have been a pathway for us. We have been led and we are still being led to the heart of our vocation as apostolic Ignatian religious.

Rediscovering the First Call

It was during the great movement of the Second Vatican Council that we arrived at Taizé. Just at the moment when the Catholic Church was inviting us to live out in a renewed way the charism of our origins, we found here a wide and generous welcome of guests, the same welcome that characterized our foundation at the beginning of the thirteenth century. As at our beginnings, we try to live out this welcome with the eyes of faith, as a discreet service, in simplicity and joy.

Our first sisters bear witness to this: *“The warmth of the first welcome must go hand in hand with discretion, in order to leave to the brother in charge of the welcome the freedom to guide everyone. This implies that all the sisters working there must have the same spirit, and a very great unity.”; “It is a grace for Saint Andrew to be able to return to its origins so naturally”.*⁶

Being a Presence of Unity

In the effervescence of the period of the Council, our congregation welcomed the ecumenical opening as a sign of hope for the witness to the faith. This thirst for unity was there within us. A small Catholic community rooted in a very long tradition, we were led to encounter the nascent Taizé Community, which was at that time composed uniquely of Protestant brothers. When we arrived, we met the other religious communities that were present then in this village or in the surrounding area and which took part in the life of prayer and in the welcome. We lived out with enthusiasm and deep feeling these first stages of the liturgical life and of the welcome, with the wonder of finding ourselves deeply united in the essentials of the faith.

Cardinal Bea, of the Secretariat for the Unity of Christians, encouraged us: *“Do all you can with your separated brethren!”* and our answer would have been: *“Selling postcards for unity—yes, we can do that!”*

A little later, Mother Tarcisius spoke to her sisters in these terms: *“The meaning of our presence here is to be ‘at the side of the brothers’, to be a congregation that responds to this call from the Church to be a presence of unity. That is what is first: to be a sign of the unity of the Church by our presence alongside the brothers. And then, only afterwards, we can see what services can be done”.*⁷

Opening More Widely to the Universal

In this place of Taizé, day after day we experience the catholicity of the Church, its universality. We discover a new ecclesial horizon where all boundaries are overturned, but where identities and

different memberships can be mutually enriching. Our congregation would be marked in a lasting way by welcoming sisters from more and more varied countries and cultures. Together, we experience this universality. Among ourselves, as well as with all those we welcome, we are impelled to grow in dialogue, in welcoming one another's diverse expressions of faith, in openness and mutual understanding, in forgiveness and trust.

As Sisters of St Andrew, we did not come to Taizé first and foremost to work with the young people, but to be a presence of unity. But little by little, the young people came to have a special place, and the welcome of them grew wider and wider. Daily life on the hill, marked by simplicity, helps the discovery of the inner life. Mother Tarcisius would note: *"We could be afraid of the presence of big crowds at Taizé, but each year something grows deeper; the brothers try to follow the journeying of the young people, all the while trying to dig deeper...."*⁸

Ignatians at Taizé

As the welcome grew wider and wider, the activities of the sisters on the hill would grow more diverse. Little by little, they would be able to give more freely what they had received in the school of St Ignatius of Loyola: a way of listening to help discern God at work, a way of praying based on the Word of God and of favouring a heart-to-heart encounter with God.

In the collaboration with the brothers, the daily life, the very different and often "impossible" services, keeping the checkouts at the "exposition", all these remain places which place us in the right tone, because they help us to "find God in all things and all things in God". We often live out these services in an attitude of "permanently not being settled in", something that already surprised our sisters coming to stay with us briefly and which often still surprises those who come to visit.

"We always seem to be 'camping out'; no-one really has 'her own room'... Within the framework of a fixed timetable, there are plenty of unexpected things to welcome!" one of the sisters recounted.

Mission in this place has led us on the way of simplicity, of availability in trust. These inner dispositions have helped us deepen the basic spiritual attitudes that St Ignatius proposes in the book of the Spiritual Exercises; they have left their mark on our way of living out our Ignatian spiritual tradition today, in fidelity to our long history.

Gospel Freshness and the Mark of the Beatitudes

The Gospel radicality of the vocation of the brothers of Taizé and the way in which they accompany the young people towards a personal experience with Christ have been for us a way of the Gospel. From the beginning and still today our sisters can testify: *"We are slowly learning that being here means investing all our faith and trust in a way of living the Gospel that has to be discovered every day"*.⁹

"It is the same spirit that motivates us, with the same note of joy and of peace," Mother Tarcisius would say. *"There are never ulterior motives: I believe that our great strength on the hill is this trust above all else, in the freshness of the Gospel."*¹⁰

Today still, we could say that we are here, alongside the brothers of Taizé, because of a "yes" which is renewed each day. There is no calculating beforehand, no long-term project; but there is

the call to live out an evangelical availability in the light of praise. And this yes transforms us, and places on our way of life the mark of the Beatitudes. The “yes” leads us to the truth of our vocation and opens a way of conversion for each day.

A PATHWAY FOR TODAY

In 1991, Brother Roger made a request: *“Over the last few years, we have clearly understood that the welcome is growing, and it will grow still more. This requires of us all sorts of adaptations. (...) So I have come to express our desire, which is becoming pressing: as everything grows, there is a need for the number of sisters to increase.”*¹¹

Five Loaves and Two Fishes; What Is That for So Many People?

This request was a source of deep questioning for us. As we attempted to accomplish this mission at Taizé over time, we had the impression that we were losing the lightness of the beginnings, that we were feeling more and more the weight of the welcome. Tiredness, the routine of the welcome and the repetitive nature of the work, the difficulty of taking real breaks for refreshment, for rest, for further education. How could we remain in the Gospel foolishness of the beginnings? We were strongly tempted to focus on the decrease in the number of sisters available or on the measure of our human energies.

Without a doubt, the experience of Brother Roger’s death on 16 August 2005 brought back clearly to our minds the central place of faith: *Faith was the most concrete, the most solid reality, during these days of Brother Roger’s death,”* one of us wrote. From this trial, we received great blessings for our community and for renewed momentum in our collaboration in the service of the mission at Taizé.

We know that many people shared in this same blessing. Just a year after the death of Brother Roger, a young woman from Germany shared with me: *“I was there a year ago. The day after Brother Roger’s death, I decided to stay on the hill. I gave everything that I had to help wherever I could. God multiplied all that we gave. It was incredible what we were able to do to welcome so many people. As I prayed this morning, I realised that, still today, I am nourished by what is left from that day!”*

Like Andrew, the Apostle whose name we bear, she believed that the five loaves and the two fishes offered to the Lord would be enough to nourish the multitude. At Taizé, day after day we find that we can always choose either to stop with the difficulties, the tiredness or the lack of this or that, or else to look with the eyes of faith by consenting to the “little” that we are and to the “little” that we have, in order to offer it, without reserve.

Together, Joyfully Available for the Service of the Gospel

Over the last few years, this looking with the eyes of faith has liberated a lot of creativity and initiatives at the service of the welcome. The Ursuline sisters had already responded some years ago to the call to come and help at Taizé; then, a little later, the Daughters of Charity came too. Each of these communities shares their own charism in the service of the welcome. More and more, various people, employed or volunteers, and families, collaborate in one or another aspect of

life on the hill. We welcome each other so that the welcome area may always be at the service of the grace that God gives in this place. Our desire is to maintain within us and among us a joyful availability for the service of the Gospel.

Yes, as Brother Roger told us in 1966, we certainly needed Taizé, and the grace of God (!), to become what we are today.

We hope that this same grace will help us to remain, wherever we are sent, women of faith, in a humble place, clothed with praise, messengers of the Good News! We entrust this to your prayer. Thank you.

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Interview with Mother Tarcisius, Vermeil, January 1995.

2 Conseil général of the congregation, 24 October 1965.

3 Interview with Mother Tarcisius, early 1981.

4 Mother Tarcisius, *The mystery of vocation*, dialogue with Brother Roger, undated.

5 Mother Tarcisius, June 1983.

6 Common Letter, 1968.

7 September 1972, Notes taken during a meeting with Mother Tarcisius on the meaning of our presence at Taizé.

8 *Ibid.*

9 May 1972, letter from Elisabeth.

10 Mother Tarcisius, 20 February 1978.

11 Letter of Brother Roger to Mother Claire, 14 May 1991.