

LITTLE SISTER MARIA CHIARA, SUPERIOR GENERAL OF THE LITTLE SISTERS OF JESUS

Brother Roger and Little Sister Magdeleine

I have a feeling of great gratitude and joy to be here for the first time and I thank Brother Alois and the Taizé brothers for this invitation.

THE LINK BETWEEN OUR TWO COMMUNITIES

In 1948 Little Sister Magdeleine, our founder, met the Taizé Community for the first time. *“Today we visited the community of the Taizé brothers. They want poverty, they dream of a single Church linked to Rome. They are new, surprising.”* On 7 November 1989, the day following Little Sister Magdeleine’s death, Brother Roger wrote us: *“Already on her first visit to Taizé in 1948, Little Sister Magdeleine understood so well what motivated us, a call to move towards reconciliation in that unique communion which is the Church.”*

The link was just as strong with the Little Brothers of Jesus, Fr. Voillaume, founder of the Little Brothers, wrote: *“On several occasions, the Taizé brothers have come to El Abiodh, in Algeria. In Algiers, where Taizé had a small community, very close ties united us.”* Fr. Milad noted, *“I felt in communion with these brothers whose leader, quite young, Brother Roger, told me he spent six months meditating on the writings of Father De Foucauld. I embraced them as brothers on my departure.”*

Kathryn Spink would write: *“The link between Brother Roger and the Taizé brothers and Little Sister Magdeleine would be deep and lasting, since both founders shared a similar conception of universal unity, to which the ecumenical endeavor was subordinated.”*

These two keywords, **unity and reconciliation**, would be the basis of the friendship between the Taizé brothers and the Little Sisters of Jesus down through the years until today.

THE FRATERNITY’S EXPERIENCE IN THE ARAB WORLD: THE BEGINNINGS AND TODAY

Regarding this common mission of unity that we have received, I will share here one aspect and some questions, focusing on a particular geographic area where we try to live it out: the Middle East and all the Arab countries.

It is indeed in the Muslim Arab world, in Algeria, that the Fraternity was born as a “guest” in the house of Islam. Soon afterwards, there would be foundations in several Middle Eastern countries, involving the discovery of the Eastern Churches to which we have belonged from the outset. This birth and these beginnings would influence the identity and mission of the Fraternity everywhere else. Through our vows we commit ourselves by a special consecration to our brothers and sisters of Islam.

This mission is basically to share the life of the poor, to build friendly relations with others who are of different cultures and religions, because of and in the name of Jesus. This form of

life asks us to witness to God's presence more through the poverty of our own lives and our relationships than by words and by direct evangelization.

During these almost 76 years of life, relationships, solidarity and daily sharing in peacetime and in times of war and conflict, the Fraternity has witnessed and received enormous riches of faith and tradition, of friendship and human and cultural values from both Arab Christians and Muslims.

Today, at the heart of the Eastern Churches which are persecuted along with other minorities, and in relationship with the Muslim world divided and torn in a context of such great violence, we live with our friends and neighbors the cruel upheavals of this martyred region.

Over the past three years, like millions of other people, our communities in Syria, Iraq and Libya have been affected directly by war, and some were destroyed or closed. We all know from the media the horror of the violence that continues to this day.

A violent end has been imposed on old decades-long friendships. It is like a storm that has struck and seeks to destroy, among other things, what is most valuable—the relationship between brothers and sisters who are different.

This upheaval is first of all physical and material, but it is also psychological and deeply spiritual. Questions arise and affect both flesh and spirit.

As a result of an extremely strong state of tension, and permanent precariousness and insecurity, people live between "stay or go", both of which are solutions with enormous risks. If this can be difficult for a community, imagine what it can mean for families with children, for the elderly, the ill....

Hence the question of the Church, which is ours, *"How can we live this event as Christians? What is God asking of us through the loss of land and property, persecution, exile? What does He expect of us in our relationship with Muslims today?"*

Another aspect of the problem that is lived in the same region, and which remains very burning even though people talk a lot less about it, is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, until today without any immediate hope of a solution. In 1967 (and these words are still painfully relevant), during the Six Days' War, Little Sister Magdeleine wrote: *"In many of the cities bombed today in the East there are Little Sisters...We are going through a terrible ordeal, that of our universal love during wartime. In Jerusalem there are two peoples facing each other, clashing and killing each other, two peoples each of which we must love with a love of preference.... The only solution is in loving...."* Throughout our history, relations between our communities in Israel and Palestine have been deeply affected by this conflict, going through moments of darkness and distance, in the daily pressure of a deeply desired brotherhood, and yet one torn apart, before experiencing, more recently, a stage of reconciliation and forgiveness.

UNITY AND RECONCILIATION IN THIS CONTEXT

The first thing one is confronted by in the struggle to love at the heart of these situations is **our own violence**. This comes from the experience, the personal and community journey of the Little Sisters there. Loving one's enemy, the one who attacks us, has nothing spontaneous about it. Aggressive reactions, closure to another, feelings of exasperation and despair, which have inevitable consequences for our personal and community life, can arise

and become manifest. Recognizing them without being afraid of them is the first step towards loving and the basis for the path of unity and reconciliation with others.

In practice, the fact of feeling weak and vulnerable, not heroes, not perfect people, allows us to recognize around us the everyday miracles of the Holy Spirit who inspires in the poor and the lowly, often people who have lost everything, authentically Christian acts of solidarity and words of forgiveness that support us on our way. How often an encounter with people in the street, on the run, were able to provide light in this hour of darkness.

A second finding is that the path of unity and reconciliation with others, especially in extreme cases of violence, leads us back to **the essential question of faith**. A Little Sister wrote: *“This event shook the foundations of my life and my faith.... Where am I and where is God? When the other dies in front of me and I remain alive, when friendship is betrayed, when I cry out to God and no one answers? This time compels me to turn back to myself and to ask myself: in what God do I really believe? In the great and powerful God, a vengeful God? What a conversion to the God of Jesus Christ this requires of me. Today Jesus is on the Cross; am I ready to be there with him?”*

The third and last point: **the relationship to others**, here the Muslims. If, in peacetime, it is fair and legitimate to demand reciprocity and mutual respect in the relationship, in times of violent crisis like the one we are experiencing we feel the insufficiency of criteria and arguments.... God calls us to go further. In this context we have heard these words: *We are unarmed, we were living in peace and without hostility; why did this happen to us? Maybe friendly relations were not enough? The mere fact that the militia of E.I. exist questions us: did we love them enough? Was our love for them not too lukewarm, too weak? What is our responsibility as Christians in this outburst of evil?*

Asking questions about love in wartime is already a cry of hope, a way of looking towards the future and refusing to be trapped in the madness of the present. Yes, as an Eastern priest said: *We are in darkest night, we have hit bottom, but it will not last, for daybreak is coming.... Today is the time of hope and we are all responsible.*