

SR. MIREILLE, Prioress of the Community of Deaconesses of Reully (France)

## Benefitting from the Work of the Spirit

I would like to thank the Taizé Community and Brother Alois for giving us this opportunity to see the great diversity of religious life, and in the midst of this diversity to meet these communities that come from the Reformation, in Europe and in Africa. And I cannot omit to mention the conjunction of this colloquium with the one that has recently ended at the *Protestant Institute of Theology* of the United Protestant Church of France on the theme “Protestantism and monastic life: towards a new encounter?” Taizé opened up this way, 75 years ago. We are now living a kind of new stage of mutual recognition.

### A BIT OF SACRED HISTORY!

A history crossed by the movements of the Holy Spirit: the community of the Deaconesses of Reully is twin to the community of Strasbourg (born a year apart in 1841/1842). One is situated in the Protestant Church within France; the other is in Alsace.

I am always sensitive to the different periods of history, particularly of the history of the Church. They allow us to see the action of the Holy Spirit in the needs of the Church and at the time of the world in which the Church finds itself.

During the nineteenth century, a great movement of the Holy Spirit—which in the Reformation Churches has been called the “awakening”—blew through the Church, and gave rise to new forms of commitment, including the communities of deaconesses. In the middle of the twentieth century, a new spiritual movement saw the birth of several religious communities within Protestantism. The same movement affected passed through different Churches, a proof, if we need one, that the Spirit breathes where he wishes, and transcends all the barriers, great or small, that we erect, supposedly in order to identify ourselves, to distinguish ourselves from each other.

For the community of the Deaconesses of Reully, from the first writings of the founders (Rev. Antoine Vermeil and Caroline Malvesin) the orientation is there. From the pen of Antoine Vermeil, one discovers his own discovery that obedience to an authority, lived out in community, could become a fertile seed of unity for the Church. Caroline Malvesin for her part had a great thirst for consecrated life, an echo of which she found in Teresa of Avila. They rediscovered the great coenobitic tradition. This is how the community of Deaconesses formed in 1841. But in the nineteenth century, the Churches of the Reformation were not ready to welcome such innovations within themselves and the opposition was extremely strong, to such an extent that the founder began to doubt.

On the other hand, religious life is, and ought to be, open to the world, whatever form that openness may take. That is part of its being in Christ for the world.

For the community of Reully, situated in a working-class neighbourhood of Paris, this openness to the world would be expressed by the concern to welcome little children, the ill, and women released from prison—a diaconal dimension of the poor and the suffering. The Protestant Churches only welcomed the charitable aspect of this initiative, to such a degree that for a century the deaconesses were seen simply as excellent nurses, social organizers and parish pastoral assistants. This diaconal activity continues with a growing number of institutions: hospice care, accompanying people at the end of their life, the

elderly and handicapped children as well as great poverty through centres of hospitality for the homeless.

But a community must always discern the call that is addressed to it today: the work that no one has done and that it has to do, the word that no one has spoken and that it has to speak (liturgical prayer from our office).

I think that this is the work of the creativity of the Holy Spirit in hearts that listen.

## **CONTRIBUTION OF TAIZÉ TO THE COMMUNITY OF THE DEACONESSES OF REUILLY**

Our community has benefited from the movement of the Spirit which, in the middle of the twentieth century, gave birth to the Taizé Community among others.

There were contacts between Reuilly and Taizé starting in the 1950s (among other things a Community retreat preached by Brother Roger in 1953, date of the publication of the Rule of Taizé).

I think I can see three things that the emergence of Taizé has favoured:

Three fundamental aspects of religious life in community:

- The reaffirmation of the three traditional commitments to celibacy, sobriety of life and obedience, commitments to be taken "for ever". If this reality was already being lived out in practice, it came to be explicitly reaffirmed in the words used during the consecration of the sisters.
- The liturgy: the liturgical work carried out at Taizé from the beginning, with the prayer of the divine office, was a great stimulant for our community. The office of Taizé little by little became the basis upon which our liturgy was able to develop in its own proper expressions, a liturgy that combines regularity and spontaneity in prayer.

And the liturgy is the core of a religious community, without which it would not be able to keep going.

- A Rule: the community of Deaconesses had lived since its foundation without an explicit rule. Still within this movement of renewal, the Community of Deaconesses took plenty of time to consider the different rules in use, whether ancient (St Benedict, St Basil, St Augustine) or modern, including the Rule of Taizé. After a long process, spanning thirty years, the community reached the point of asking the prioress of the time to put a text in writing (1983). This text is steeped in the Word of God and in the great monastic and spiritual traditions. It is a text in a style that is poetic and effective, with a deep balance, subtle and powerful at the same time. We are still in the process of reception of this text.

Let me conclude these three points by reading a passage from the Rule, which expresses a certain vision of the vocation to unity. This text is entitled "Joints", it is found between the chapters "Church" and "Church Unity".

"Joints: If we had to choose our place in the Body of Christ, let us not desire to be the eye, the hand, or the ear. Christ orders his work beautifully and no one can say to him: I want to be this or that, but Christ allows us to desire it. So if we can desire, let us desire to be the joints; these hidden places where all the parts come together so that we may share in his peace in the depths of the Church which is his body."

Thank you.