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The Challenges of a Religious Vocation

It is with real emotion and deep gratitude that I gladly reciprocate the invitation of Brother Alois and the brothers to speak to you on the relevance of the religious vocation. Emotion, because, a native of this area, I had the chance to visit Taizé in the 1970s. To my memory there returns the emotion I felt then before the sign of the community (a parable of communion, as Brother Roger liked to say), the emotion of plunging into the singing of the prayer, the reflection at listening to the Word of God, so simple, so right, addressed to each of the young people who were gathered here, joining each one on his or her own journey. Each person was touched at the heart of his or her own searching, sometimes absolute, sometimes awkward, for God, for truth, for freedom. And this emotion is not just something from the past, but rather awakens, again, the heart and mind to dare to believe and hope that the diversity brought together at Taizé, amazing, dazzling, without wiping away any difference, offers the richness of a common “capacity for communion” in the heart of each person. At this time of identity-seeking, where so often clashes over identity are a pretext for violence, this is a prophecy. Emotion *and gratitude*, if I may express it. In this place, I think, there sprouted in me the desire to choose a way of life that would be spent trying to getting to know the One who brings together the multitude and its diversity into his Kingdom, like grains of wheat, once scattered on the hills, were brought together to make a single loaf. Emotion and gratitude, so often heightened by reading pages written by Brother Roger.

The Taizé Community is, more than anything else, a parable of communion! And this beautiful communion word touches my heart, especially on the eve of the Jubilee Year of my Order. Eight hundred years ago, in fact, Dominic, in a society in a process of rebirth, facing a Church tempted by divisions, chose to learn from Jesus, the itinerant preacher. His conviction was that witnessing to this friendship of God, who comes to ask humankind for hospitality and to converse with each person, would open paths of communion and hope.

A parable is a story that touches everyone because of its simplicity. And the story of Taizé has such a simple character: a place in a magnificent region, close to the remnants of a great history, but keeping the same humility as that of the small Romanesque church, beautiful among the many others all around; men animated by the conviction that community allows everyone to remain true to himself while growing through encounters with others, whose concerns we learn to bear in shared friendship; hospitality rooted in the experience of humankind disarmed when brotherly friendship was the only way really to resist this madness of which human beings are sometimes capable, when they claim the power to impose their violence and their ideologies that trample on the dignity of others; words that are always discrete because they know how to listen, and so invite people to listen to another Word, vibrant, expressing tender compassion, friendship and God’s trust for everyone; a community that is resolutely open to the future because it seeks always to let this trust be heard by the young, who are the future of human history to the extent that God trusts them to write with him the future of his revelation. Is such a description that of an elusive “utopia”? No, it is rather like an echo of the expectation that Pope Francis expressed about the consecrated life when he wrote “I expect you to be able to create ‘other places’ where the Gospel logic of gift, of fraternity, of the welcoming of diversity, of mutual love will be lived out.” A parable of communion: the communion of a community that takes the risk, truly, of its humanity!

Taizé’s parable of communion brings to light at least three challenges of a religious vocation.

THE CHALLENGE OF A TRANSFIGURED HUMANITY

Taking the risk of humanity, in the name of the humanity of Christ which is its transfiguration, seems to me the first challenge of the religious vocation. Let us be clear: it is a risk that must be taken. We know well that humanity, not in general but the humanity of each one of us, is not perfect, without blemish and without weaknesses. But it is precisely that risk that we must have the courage to take: the reality of the "human dough" with its obscurities, its roughness and its flaws, is infinitely more beautiful and true than the humanity of our dreams that remains abstract and illusory. Sometimes we may be tempted to believe that religious life is a difficult ascent to the summit of perfection. It seems to me rather an invitation to engage in a slow working of the earth out of which human beings are fashioned. Like in a field on the slopes of a hill, where you have to pick up the stones scattered here and there to build irrigation terraces. This slow work is that of fraternity, in which each one learns gradually to bring everything he or she receives for the good of all, to serve communion. The challenge of a humanity transfigured in Christ, because irrigated by the life of the Spirit.

THE CHALLENGE OF FRIENDSHIP

The Taizé Community, like any community of religious life, takes the risk of humanity as a specific community (or tradition), bearing the fragile witness of the possibility of friendship between humans and with God amidst the vastness of the world. This is a second challenge of the religious vocation. How is it possible that one place and such a small and specific reality can bear in themselves all the aspirations of the world? How can they, by themselves, cause the light of a hope shared by all to shine out? This is another feature of the religious vocation, which perhaps best underlines its "prophetic" dimension: the most fragile human realities, the most singular ones, can recall at the heart of the world basic truths and bear them in the name of all, giving them their universal value. This is true, I believe, concerning the intuition of reconciliation based on the trust placed in the youth of the world to which Brother Roger wanted—or was mysteriously driven by the influx of the young themselves—to devote the Taizé Community in a special way. From this perspective, religious vocation is an appeal to faith. First of all, because it is, once again, a matter of believing that the world is not doomed to a fate closed in on itself, but that on the contrary it bears within itself the seeds of a possible future with God to which humanity is capable of witnessing. And secondly, because human beings do not find the audacity of this affirmation in themselves alone, but rather perceive the truth in the contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation of God, in the contemplation of the humanity of the Son who, himself, in a specific humanity at one particular point in human history and in one specific place, gave its full universal importance to the fulfillment of human beings in God. In a way, the specificity of each charism of religious life is the path on which its members commit themselves to dare, in their turn, to bear this prophetic reminder that human beings are "capable of God" to the same extent that, in Jesus, God wanted to manifest that he was "capable of man." The challenge of friendship that awakens people to the communion of which they are capable.

THE CHALLENGE OF A CALL

This leads us to identify a third challenge of the religious vocation, the challenge of being, for others, a "call." A call to discover one's true freedom, by confidently plunging into communion with others, by letting oneself be guided by others towards one's own freedom. Indeed, in Taizé, for example, at the heart of what appears to be a diverse crowd of young people from all backgrounds, everyone feels led to the most intimate and the most authentic dimension of his or her desire. A

desire that is challenged by the witness of this “way of life” that brings together religious men or women. This desire has two inseparable sides. It is the desire for a personal encounter with the God who, here, gathers together, is sung and celebrated, whose Word is heard, which is unconditionally addressed to everyone. A God who comes to us and is a brother of all because he is the Son of the one God. The desire for a personal encounter with God, heightened by the experience that the personal encounter with Jesus, a joy shared with others, is possible, tangible, and is realized in very concrete ways. A desire, then, to take part in a singular Christian presence which both seeks to love the world and to open for human beings paths of contemplation. And it is also the desire to set out oneself on the adventure of the courage of reconciliation. Based on the conviction that this “shared experience” of communion needs actors, here and now, with all their riches and without being ashamed of their inevitable frailties and weaknesses, because God wants to accomplish the future of human beings by associating himself with those whom he made “co-creators.” Let us be clear, it is not first of all a matter of committing oneself to do this or that, to be like this or like that—even if that counts too, since the different horizons of traditions offer projections with which one can identify. Rather, it is a question of entering into an adventure where each can offer, each in his or her own measure, their energy, their history, their culture, their gifts and their love of the world to unite them with others in a single sheaf and, with them, to aspire to communion and to let oneself be burnt in the fire of the Spirit, who calls us to serve and to contemplate unity in God, Father, Son and Spirit. An adventure where we learn to struggle, concretely, so that fraternity may be truly born among brothers and sisters, with the world. With the grace of God, whose presence can be contemplated in the midst of humanity. The challenge of the call to contemplation.

Struggle and contemplation...