

The Call to Monastic Life Today

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A place where one is allowed to ask questions

It is already more than 25 years since a young man joined a youth meeting at Taizé. One evening he was invited, together with other young men, to the brothers' house for a discussion. They were invited to ask questions.

Someone asked, "How can someone know whether or not he has a vocation to live as a brother?" Someone else asked, "What can I do with my inner woundedness."

He can no longer remember the answers, but he still remembers the questions and the fact that **Taizé is a place where one is allowed to ask questions.**

Religious communities are often rich in experience – but is there also the space to ask questions? It is my wish that our communities should be places where one is allowed to ask questions.

How I became a brother

I was this young man. I was unsettled and was searching for inner peace. I didn't doubt that God existed, but I wasn't sure whether it made sense to live in a relationship with Him.

While I was searching I met brothers from the Christusträger Community. **I was surprised at the joy and peace that they had even though they have promised to live in poverty, chastity and obedience.** I shared in their community life for two months. It was a time of great excitement and deep disappointment. Above all, it was a time when my faith became less something abstract in my head and more alive in my heart. It was also a time when I realised that it is less important that the work I do is exciting than that it was meaningful. Work is meaningful when it is for the benefit of my brothers and sisters.

Through all these experiences it seemed to me that God had gifted my life to me for a second time, on both a human level and on a spiritual level. I wanted to give it back to him and began to ponder whether life as a brother could be my vocation. That which had been unthinkable for me, as a young Protestant, became imaginable and not only imaginable but increasingly attractive. I lived with this question for three years and then at the age of 23 became a brother in the Christusträger Brotherhood.

Who are the Christustrager?

Our community grew out of a parish in Germany where a spiritual awakening took place among the youth. A businessman who had been deeply moved by his first-hand experience of poverty in the developing world visited this parish. He encouraged the youth not to store up spiritual and material wealth for themselves, but to be willing to share. Even if they only had a little, they were still richer than many people.

They founded a society and chose the name Christusträger, the German translation of Christopher, which means Christ-bearer.

The legend of Christopher concerns a strong man who wanted to serve the biggest and the best. He searched long and hard and finally arrived at river. He helped people to cross the river who could not manage it by themselves. One night during a storm he heard a child calling out to him. He took him up on his shoulders and steps into the water. The further he waded into the river the heavier the child became.

It takes all his strength to reach the other side of the river and to put the child down safely. Christopher asks him, "Who are you? It felt to me as though I was carrying the whole world on my shoulders." The child replied, "You have carried the One who holds the whole world in this hands."

This legend is a good illustration of our calling to be Christ-bearers. **Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25:40)**

Later he added, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19). This is our vocation as Christ-bearers.

What significance has Taizé had for us?

All this happened at the beginning of the 1960s. Most of those brothers and sisters who joined in the early days simply wanted to join the society for a few years. One of these was Dieter. I asked him what significance Taizé held for our community. He told me, *"Taizé has decisively helped us to find a suitable form for our common life. So what began as a shared house developed into a community. The Rule of Taizé helped us to understand more deeply the meaning of fraternal life as well as why we need the ministry of a leader. The book Marriage and Celibacy by Max Thurian was also a source of inspiration for us."*

Similarly to Taizé, the Christusträger did not want to comment or complain about the challenges they faced, but **our first brothers and sisters had the courage to enter the water at a place where no one had entered before them.** They connected with young people

through popular music, and even in the 60s our bands used the same instruments and similar rhythms as the Beatles. In this way, our brothers were able to help parishes to spread the Gospel over several decades.

Early on a young doctor called Reinhart joined the community. He has lived overseas for almost fifty years, first in Pakistan, then in Vietnam and most recently in the Congo. In January of this year he returned to Europe. I asked Brother Reinhart the same question: “What is the significance of Taizé for the Christusträger Community?” He said, *“At the beginning the Taizé brothers were an encouragement and a model of a Protestant monastic community. In addition, Taizé remains for us an encouragement and a role-model to create and maintain fraternal fellowship across denominational boundaries.”*

Over the decades our brothers have been able to help people in Pakistan and Afghanistan, in Vietnam and in the Congo. Similarly, our sisters have achieved the same in Indonesia, Pakistan, Argentina and Brazil, sometimes for a few years, sometimes over several decades. The political and economic situations in these countries has not always improved, nevertheless, even in difficult times, we have been able to share the skills and resources, the faith and the hope, that God has entrusted to us. It may have been only a drop in the ocean, but our brotherly presence, together with practical assistance, was like life-giving water.

Times have changed. **What remains is our desire to fulfill our mission without reservation: we strive to create opportunities for people to encounter Christ, or rather, opportunities for Christ to encounter people.**

And so I see my vocation as a religious to seek God in community with brothers and to create a space in my heart for Christ, for his Spirit, for his Word, for his Love. In this way we will give and share what God has entrusted to us.

Inspiration for today

How will we live this calling tomorrow? We don't know. A few thoughts that I have noted during my last visit to Taizé have become important principles for me.

Taizé teaches us that **the experts on the youth of today are the youth themselves. So we must find the answer to this question together.** To this end we have a sign on the inside of our cloister door which reads: Open for Renovation.

A few years ago Brother Alois said, **“Anyone searching for security will lose his ability to be flexible.”** Taizé has chosen adaptability and relinquished security. This is not in itself a recipe for success: it is simply following Christ.

My own answer to an old question!

At the beginning I presented to you questions that I had heard in 1988 in Taizé. I don't remember how Brother Roger responded at the time, but today when people today ask me, "How can someone know whether or not he has a vocation to live as a brother?" my answer is:

"If you feel a longing for this life and this desire grows within you, take it seriously. Embark on the journey. Take the first steps. Do not be surprised if questions arise, and do not be afraid when disappointments come your way. If in retrospect you can see that God was blessing you, then be encouraged that this may also happen in the future. In, and with, and through your search, God is working within you."

Let us look at the icon of friendship for a few minutes. (Silence.) Our story as a community, and my story as a brother, is not a success story, but a love story.