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A Passion for the Unity of the Body of Christ

Brother Alois, prior of the Taizé Community

The Christ of communion

The first day of this Eucharistic Congress wishes to deepen the meaning of our common baptismal faith. Mutual recognition of baptism among the various Churches is a great gift that God has given us in the last century. Despite the certainty expressed by the apostle Paul: "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4, 5), this recognition has not always been obvious. Definitively concluding a long period often marked by suspicion, the Second Vatican Council asserted confidently: "Baptism establishes a sacramental bond of unity which links all who have been reborn by it" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 22).

Can I allow myself today to illustrate the question of the meaning of our common baptismal faith by sharing with you our experience in the Taizé Community? The life we live in Taizé is intimately linked to the rediscovery of our common baptism as, in the words of Vatican II, a "beginning, an inauguration wholly directed toward the fullness of life in Christ" (*ibid.*).

Our experience in Taizé is of course far from covering all aspects of the question. But it can be shown that—and I continue to quote Vatican II—on the one hand, baptism is already "the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who have been reborn by it" and that, secondly, it commits us to continually seek "a complete profession of faith, complete incorporation into the system of salvation such as Christ willed it to be, and finally complete ingrafting into eucharistic communion" (*ibid.*).

I want to tell you specifically how we seek to highlight the unity of the faith that baptism implies and to anticipate it, both between the brothers of the community and with the young people of all denominations whom we receive week after week on our hill. And since Brother Roger, the founder of our community, participated in the entire Second Vatican Council, whose fiftieth anniversary we are celebrating, I would also like to speak about his personal journey, since he opened an original way to head towards the visible unity of Christians.

In the early days of our community, writing the Rule of Taizé, Brother Roger addressed to every brother of the community the appeal, "Make the unity of the Body of Christ your passionate concern." It is that passion which fills our hearts.

If you had asked Brother Roger what the essential of the Christian faith was, the focal-point of the faith confessed in baptism, he might have quoted the words of Saint John, "God is love" (1 John 4:16). For him, the heart of the Gospel was there. The vision of God as a stern judge had wreaked havoc in the consciences of many. He took the opposite tack, affirming that "all God can do is love."

He would also sometimes tell the young people gathered in Taizé, "If Christ were not risen, we would not be here." The resurrection is central to the faith; it is a sign that God loves without limits. It brought together the disciples dispersed by Good Friday and it continues to bring Christians together; its first fruit is the new communion born of its mystery.

The center of our faith is Christ, the Risen Lord present among us, who is in a personal bond of love with us and who by a common baptism brings us together. Brother Roger called this

reality “the Christ of communion.”

In his last book, published a few weeks before his death, Brother Roger wrote: “Christ is communion.... He did not come to earth to start one more religion, but to offer to all a communion in God... ‘Communion’ is one of the most beautiful names of the Church.”

Personally, I can say that it was this vision of the Church as communion that struck me on my first visit to the hill of Taizé. Still very young, I was impressed on the one hand by the prayer and silence, but also by the communion which was lived out concretely—the Gospel lived not individually, but in community. And I can affirm that, as a Catholic, it was in Taizé that I discovered more deeply the catholicity of the Church.

Reconciliation in the Body of Christ

I would like now to begin with the question: what do the words “the Body of Christ” mean, and why is reconciliation in the Body of Christ so important?

In the letters that St. Paul addressed to various communities of his time, he refers to the Church as the “Body of Christ” to try to help them understand the mystery of the unity between Christ and Christians, and the mystery of unity between Christians. “You are a body,” he writes to the Corinthian Christians, “and this body is Christ, each of you is a part of it” (1 Cor 12:27)

Baptism is the foundation of the unity of this body. That is why he writes: “In the one Spirit we were all baptized into a single body.”(1 Cor 12:13)

Forming one body in Christ, we belong to each other. “Is Christ divided?” (1 Cor 1:13), Paul asks, concerned at seeing the Christians of the same community separate from one another. And he called for them to be reconciled.

His words remain so relevant today: there is only one baptism, and you are the Body of Christ, so do not waste so much energy in opposition, sometimes even within your Churches.

Communion Received as a Gift

On the eve of his passion, Christ prayed, “May they all be one! As you, Father, are in me and I in you, may they also be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21).

Often the words “may all be one” are construed as a command to be put into practice. But they express first of all the gift that Christ gives to humankind: he bears us within himself; he brings us with himself into the communion of the Holy Trinity; he makes us “sharers in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). He does not only pray that all may be one but that they may be one “in us”.

Christ asks that “all” may be one: this gift is not restricted to a few individuals; it is offered to all those who bear the name of Christ, and is intended for all human beings.

This communion in God accomplished through baptism is an exchange. In becoming flesh, God chooses to take on human frailty. He comes to live amidst our divisions and our pain. Christ meets us at the lowest point; he becomes one of us so as better to reach out his hand to us. In him God welcomes our humanity and, in exchange, he gives us the Holy Spirit, his own life. The Virgin Mary is forever the guarantee that this exchange is real; she sustains our hope that it will lead to the life of humanity in God.

We can be immensely grateful to Orthodox theology for having demonstrated this in such a profound way. Last year I went with some of my brothers and 250 young people from across Europe to take part in the Holy Week celebrations with the Orthodox Church in Moscow.

“Christ is risen,” we repeated umpteen times on Easter night. And I felt down to the depths of my being the certainty that Christ enables us to participate in his resurrection already here on earth.

When we discover that communion with God is an exchange, then we understand better that reconciliation is not one dimension of the Gospel among others; it is the very core. It coincides with what is central to our life as baptized persons; it is the restoration by Christ of mutual trust between God and humanity, the beginning of a new creation. And that transforms the relationships between people.

Christ makes all the baptized ambassadors of reconciliation in the world. We are the Body of Christ, not in order to feel good together and to withdraw into ourselves, but to reach out to others. The human body has the calling of expressing the person on the outside. Likewise, the Body of Christ has the calling to express that Christ wants to reconcile all humanity.

We cannot receive unity with God without receiving unity among all human beings. The purpose of the Church is to be the visible sign, the sacrament of this. The Second Vatican Council expressed it with great clarity by saying: “The Church is, in Christ, like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen Gentium* 1,1).

Ecumenism and Communion in God

If communion, founded in baptism in one Spirit, is a gift from God, then ecumenism cannot be primarily a human effort to harmonize different traditions. It must situate us within the truth of the redemption of Christ, who prayed: “My wish is that where I am, they too may be with me” (John 17:24). The apostle Paul said, “Our life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

The first ecumenical effort is to seek to live in communion with God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. Maurice Zundel, a Swiss theologian of the last century, explained admirably how “it is in a mystical union with Christ that ecumenism can find its ultimate realization,” otherwise, he said, “ecumenism is just idle chatter.”

It is true that Churches and ecclesial communities sometimes demonstrate different paths to achieving this communion. However, the more deeply each one belongs to Christ, the more they are enabled to see the others correctly, seeing them as sisters and brothers. We should even go further: recognizing the others as sisters and brothers is the sign that one truly belongs to Christ.

Dorotheus of Gaza, in the sixth century, described this reality with an image: if God is at the center of a circle, the more the radii approach the center, the closer they come to one another.

This vision of communion requires a purification of our way of believing, a “conversion” undertaken over and over again in an *Ecclesia semper reformanda*.

One of the documents of the “Groupe des Dombes,” a group of Protestant and Catholic theologians in France, provided a solid basis for this view by calling for priority to be accorded to baptismal identity over denominational identity. Attributing a priority to baptismal identity over denominational identity: is that not also what we want to reflect on during this first day of the Eucharistic Congress? The Dombes document explains that, to define Christian identity, today in all the Churches denominational identity has been put first. People define themselves first of all as Catholics, Protestants or Orthodox. The Dombes theologians show that, in reality, baptismal identity should be put first; all Christians should define themselves first of all as baptized persons. The document therefore calls on Churches to enter into a “dynamic process of conversion.”

Reconciliation, an Exchange of Gifts

We sometimes have the impression that, over the centuries, Christians have become accustomed to being divided, as if this were something normal. To prepare reconciliation, it is up to us to emphasize the best of the different traditions.

Then an exchange of gifts can take place: sharing what we have received from God, and also seeing the gifts that God has placed in others. And this exchange is possible precisely because we have the foundation that unites us, baptism, in common.

An exchange of gifts has begun. Through common prayer and personal encounters, mutual appreciation has deepened. Many have realized that certain aspects of the Mystery of the faith have been exploited better by another tradition than their own. How can we go further in sharing these treasures? And what are these treasures?

Eastern Christians have focused on the resurrection of Christ, which is already transforming the world. Is it not because of this that many of them managed to survive decades of suffering in past centuries? The East has preserved the teaching of the Church Fathers with great faithfulness. Monasticism, which it gave to the West, has instilled in the whole Church a life of contemplation. Could Western Christians be more open to these treasures?

The Christians of the Reformation have emphasized certain realities of the Gospel: God offers his love freely; by his Word he encounters anyone who listens to it and puts it into practice; the simple trusting of faith leads to the freedom of the children of God, to the immediacy of a life with God today; singing together internalizes the Word of God. Are not these values, to which the Christians of the Reformation are attached, essential for us all?

The Catholic Church has kept visible, throughout history, the universality of communion in Christ. She has constantly sought a balance between the local Church and the Church universal. One cannot exist without the other. A ministry of communion at all levels has helped to maintain unanimity in the faith. Could not all the baptized go further in a progressive understanding of this ministry?

Brother Roger's Path

After expressing how our common baptism is the foundation of the call for reconciliation in the Body of Christ, I now turn more specifically to the path of Brother Roger and our community. Is it because Brother Roger was so consistent with this vision of the Church bringing together all the baptized, and lived it out with all its consequences, that he was recognized by different Church leaders as a brother sharing communion in Christ?

Five years after his death, Pope Benedict XVI wrote, "May his witness to an ecumenism of holiness inspire us in our march towards unity." Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople added: "This search for unity, in joy, humility, love and truth, both in relation to others, 'sacrament of the brother' as well as in the relationship with God, 'sacrament of the altar', sums up the essence of this approach, the path of Taizé." "Combining fidelity to the teaching of the Holy Fathers with creative adaptation to the needs of today, in a missionary ministry among youth, characterized the path of Brother Roger and that of the community founded by him," commented the Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill. And the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, Olav Fykse Tveit, recalled that what Brother Roger has done "has inspired churches throughout the world."

Brother Roger lived in Christ. Is that what enabled him to discern the presence of Christ in others? He did not let himself be brought to a halt by the splits between different tendencies. He discovered Christ in the baptized of all denominations. He even saw as "bearers of Christ" women and men who, without professing an explicit faith, were witnesses to charity and peace: some of them, he wrote, "go before us into the Kingdom."

In the course of his journey, he never worried about losing his identity. He saw the identity of a Christian above all in communion with Christ, working itself out in the communion among all those who belong to Christ.

He undertook a step that had no precedent since the Reformation, going to the point of saying, “I have found my own Christian identity by reconciling within myself the faith of my origins with the mystery of the Catholic faith, without breaking fellowship with anyone.” And sometimes he would add: “... and with the Orthodox faith,” since he felt so close to the Orthodox Churches.

Entering into communion with others without breaking with his origins: since this approach was so new, it was easy to misinterpret it and overlook its significance.

Our Taizé Community, a Little Parable of Communion

When he was still very young, Brother Roger had the intuition that a life of community made up of men constantly searching for reconciliation could become a sign. That is the primary vocation of Taizé, to constitute what he called “a parable of communion.”

But monastic life had disappeared from the Churches of the Reformation. So, without repudiating his origins, he created a community which had its roots in the undivided Church beyond Protestantism, and which by its very existence was inextricably linked to the Catholic and Orthodox tradition.

Brother Roger was convinced that such a community could give visible expression to the unity of the Body of Christ, which not only lies before us as a goal, but which already exists in God. The Church is divided, but in its depths it is undivided. In the heart of God it is one. So it is up to us to create places where this unity can emerge and be manifested.

Brother Roger lived a life so deeply rooted in the undivided Church that, born in a Church of the Reformation, he wanted the community he created to anticipate communion with the Catholic Church and with the Orthodox Churches.

Our community sought early on to express a communion with the Orthodox Church. In 1965, Patriarch Athenagoras sent monks to Taizé to share monastic life with us for several years. Bonds of friendship and trust with the Orthodox Churches have become deeper and deeper down to the present day.

And when, at the end of the 1960s, the first Catholic brothers entered our community, the question of how to anticipate communion with the Catholic Church became still more urgent within the community: how could the barrier of the separation between these two traditions be overcome?

For Brother Roger in his personal life, gradually entering into full communion with the Catholic Church became a reality in two ways—by receiving the Eucharist and by recognizing the need for a ministry of unity exercised by the Bishop of Rome.

He did not see this as expressing an “ecumenism of return to the fold,” because in his eyes, beginning with John XXIII and Vatican II, the Catholic Church had welcomed the basic demands of the Reformation: the priority of the grace of God, freedom of conscience, Christ-centered faith and the emphasis on the Bible. And he would have been glad to learn that in 2008 the Synod of Bishops in Rome, devoted to the Word of God, recalled that two realities already unite all Christians—Baptism and the Word of God.

Brother Roger’s path is a delicate and demanding one, and we have not finished exploring it. In his steps, we want to anticipate reconciliation in our lives, starting from the baptism that unites us, by living as people who are already reconciled, and this experience certainly

prepares theological developments.

In the history of the Church, has not lived-out faith always preceded the theological expression of it? In the future, we will continue to rely on two steps which our community took at the beginning of the 1970s:

–The first step: since 1973, with the approval and encouragement of the bishop of Autun, the diocese in which Taizé is located, we have all been receiving communion in the Catholic Church. It was the only possibility given to us to take communion together. The progress of ecumenical theology, particularly the work of our Brother Max on the meaning of memorial, allowed us to come to a common understanding of the Eucharist.

–And the second basic step of our community is this: during the yearly council-meeting in 1969, the brothers had found that the mere presence of Catholics brothers in the community led them “to live ever more an anticipation of unity by remaining in communion with the one who exercises the ministry of the servant of the servants of God.”

Our community had become convinced that the reconciliation of non-Catholics with the Church of Rome would not be accomplished by indefinitely setting conditions, but by helping it to evolve from within. The twentieth century has shown how the Petrine ministry has been able to change.

John Paul II himself has appealed to non-Catholics to assist with this evolution. In his encyclical *Ut unum sint*, he wrote these words: “Could not the real but imperfect communion existing between us persuade Church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church?”

The brothers in our community who come from Protestant families accept these two steps—receiving Catholic communion and anticipating communion with the universal pastor—without repudiating their backgrounds, but as a broadening of their faith.

For their part, the brothers from Catholic families find their faith enriched by opening themselves, in line with Vatican II, to the questions and gifts of the Churches of the Reformation. This has become quite natural for us. If these efforts sometimes involve limitations and sacrifices—can there be any reconciliation without sacrifices?—the broadening of a life of communion is incomparably more important.

A Period of Transition towards Reconciliation

I have spoken up till now about the brothers of the community. What about the young people who come for a stay at Taizé?

For us, all that has to do with the young is primordial. It is even a daily concern: how can we find new ways to communicate the Gospel to the younger generations today?

Week after week, we welcome to Taizé youth from all the countries of Europe, and also from other continents, with all their differences. Prayer three times a day brings us together in the presence of Christ, and in praying together, the Holy Spirit already unites us. The biblical teaching given each day to the young people enables them to go to the wellsprings common to all. And we reflect with them about how to continue this search in their everyday life.

These young people are growing up in a fragmented society, which does not offer clear points of reference. They are faced with life-choices which are often difficult. In the domain of ethics as well, the divisions between Christians do not help young people find ways of living out the gospel in their personal lives. In this delicate area, rather than defining positions too

quickly resolved, which distance them from one another, could not Christians take more time for dialogue and to look for a common path?

For our part, we try to help the young people glimpse “the one Church of Christ” in its visibility while respecting the traditions of the different Churches, and this necessarily involves a tension. Concerning the Eucharist, we give the young people the possibility of receiving communion in their own traditions. A Catholic Mass is celebrated every day. The Orthodox liturgy is celebrated when there are Orthodox participants who come with priests. When there are Anglican, Lutheran or Presbyterian groups, they are invited to celebrate a Eucharist according to their tradition.

We find that many young people, after having spent time in Taizé, are more active in their Church of origin, while at the same time having acquired a keener sense of the universal Church.

We do not claim to have found the solution at Taizé. Our ways of doing things are imperfect. We know that our situation is provisional, awaiting a fully realized unity.

The visible character of the unity that we attempt to live does not resolve all the issues. But we are trying to enter into an ongoing process of reconciliation. We would like it to lead separated Christians to become more aware of their common baptism, to learn that they belong to one another, to purify their respective traditions, to distinguish between the Tradition and traditions that are only customs, to go forward in an ecumenism which is not content to keep Christians on parallel tracks. In this way a period of transition towards reconciliation could be begun.

Common Baptism and Service

I now begin a final chapter to emphasize that the fellowship offered by Christ makes his disciples men and women with a universal outlook. It stimulates them to reach out to others, to be attentive to the weakest, to those who are poorer than they are, and also to seekers of God belonging to another religion or to those without any reference to God. In many places, Christians of different denominations live this openness together.

Brother Roger often repeated: “God is united to every human being without exception.” He held in his heart all human beings of all nations, especially the poorest, young people, children. This vision of universal communion led us to send brothers in small groups to share the lives of the most destitute in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and also to try and forge links between cultures and peoples.

These brothers are not equipped to change countless situations of distress. But for some of them, remaining each day before the Eucharist is a source of life that allows them, by their mere presence, to “wash the feet,” if I may dare say so, of the people in their neighborhood. And gradually modest initiatives of solidarity arise. They are only signs, but they can lead the way to Christ, who transfigures humanity and who opens, at the heart of the world, a horizon of hope.

I open a parenthesis here. Those of our brothers who live on other continents are in frequent contact with new assemblies of Christians which are arising in large numbers, especially in the Southern continents. Whether we like it or not, these new assemblies confront us all with a question.

Closing ourselves up in a categorical negative judgment can certainly be justified by good arguments. But a purely negative attitude ignores, in my opinion, all the reality of the situation. There is much diversity among these new assemblies; they sometimes profess doctrines that the great tradition of the Church cannot accept. But, perhaps more than we think, those who belong to those communities have a genuine love for Jesus because drug

addicts are cured, alcoholics give up drinking, men take up again their responsibilities as fathers...

Do not we Christians of the historic Churches have the responsibility to seek, with discernment, dialogue with these new assemblies? Instead of looking only at what they lack, could we not see the positive things they have as well?

Of course this question leads us away from our subject, that of baptism as a basis for communion, but Christ's call to unity requires this openness of us today.

One day, Brother Roger wrote these words that we would like to meditate and keep on meditating:

“When tirelessly the Church listens, heals, and reconciles, it becomes what it is at its most luminous—a communion of love, of compassion, of consolation, a transparent reflection of the Risen Christ. Never distant, never on the defensive, freed from all harshness, it can radiate the humble trusting of love right into our human hearts.”

I am coming to the end. I spoke a lot about Taizé this morning. This was not to put forward our experience, but to share with you our hope, and to express our certainty that it is possible already now to give visibility to communion in one and the same baptism.

Let me stress again: since Christ came “to gather into one the dispersed children of God” (John 11:52), it is essential in our eyes that our common baptism leads us to be visibly one in him. Christ is the Good Shepherd of all. He is also the Gate, to the Father and to others. Will we go through that gate to enter the Father’s house to meet all together, visibly united? This would certainly lead to a new dynamism for our Churches, filled with the joy of Christ and the trust that the Holy Spirit will show us the future step by step.