

Young People at Worship in Taizé:

Insights into a Transforming Experience

By Brother John of Taizé

Synopsis

Brother John of the Taizé Community speaks of the history of the community, particularly the history of the community's prayer, the attractiveness of that prayer to thousands of young people over the decades, and what can be learned from Taizé prayer by the whole praying community of the Church.

At a time when, in Europe (and is the situation very different in this country?), young adults are not exactly flocking to the mainstream Christian churches, I have the privilege of belonging to a monastic community that welcomes tens of thousands of young visitors in the course of the year for a week-long experience of prayer and community life. These young people, generally between 17 and 30 years old, come from all over the world, spend a week together on our hill in Burgundy, France, with many others, and then return to their own homes to continue their own Christian and spiritual journey, each in his or her own way.

It is therefore natural that I would be asked to reflect with you on the significance of this phenomenon, especially insofar as it concerns prayer. There might even be some feeling that my community could offer some sort of model able to be applied to other situations. Let me say it up front: I fear that those expecting a “secret recipe” for attracting the young are bound to be sadly disappointed. My community has never felt that it possessed such a recipe. Indeed, we have been just as surprised as anyone else at what has sprung up all around us. My goal today is much more modest. I can tell you who we are and what we do, and, as far as I know them, the reasons why. Perhaps this will suffice to spark a shared reflection on the meaning and importance of worship, especially for the younger generations today. In addition, your own insights and feedback will undoubtedly help me and my brothers to understand better the meaning of the life we are living.

I should begin by giving a very brief introduction to the Taizé Community, so that we can all be on the same page. Obviously not everyone knows what the word “Taizé” refers to, and those who think they know do not always agree. On this side of the Atlantic, many people consider Taizé a kind of singing: short phrases, often in Latin, repeated over and over again. Others use the word “Taizé” to refer to a style of communal prayer using these chants, together with Scripture readings, in an atmosphere of silence and peace. “Going to Taizé” for them means attending one of these services.

In fact, Taizé is first of all a place, a tiny village in eastern France where a monastic community

from different countries and from different Christian traditions is located. In August 1940, with France cut in half by the Nazi invasion, a young man from Switzerland named Roger came to that lonely village, first of all to welcome refugees, particularly Jews, who were fleeing the invaders. He spent two years together with his sister hiding refugees and helping them cross the border into neutral Switzerland. But Roger's reason for coming to Taizé went beyond the immediate political situation: he was motivated by the dream of a community that would be a sign of reconciliation among divided Christians and, as a consequence, a ferment of peace in a war-torn world.

After two years, Brother Roger was forced to leave Taizé and return to Switzerland. There he met three other young men who shared his vision. As soon as it became possible, the four men returned to Taizé and began living a life inspired by the great monastic tradition of Western and Eastern Christianity: praying three times a day, working to support themselves, and offering hospitality. In the immediate postwar years, this meant taking in a group of orphaned boys (for whom Brother Roger's sister became the surrogate mother) and visiting a German prisoner-of-war camp located in the vicinity. In 1949, the first seven brothers committed themselves for life to celibacy, material and spiritual sharing, and making their decisions in common.

In the 1950s, Taizé was a place of prayer, work and hospitality that welcomed clergy and laity concerned about the ecumenical vocation, the search for visible unity among the divided followers of Christ. At the same time, brothers went out to live in small groups in areas of poverty and division. Already at that time, the community was made up of brothers from different Protestant backgrounds. Because of the new climate following the Second Vatican Council, it became possible for Roman Catholics to join the community as well. Today the 100 or so brothers come from some 30 different countries; most of them live in Taizé, though there are also small groups located in Brazil, Senegal, South Korea and Bangladesh.

In all of this, there is nothing that deals specifically with the younger generations. In fact, as should be clear from what has been said, Taizé did not begin as a place of meeting for the young; the brothers have never had any formal training in youth ministry. Already in the late 1950s, some work camps and other gatherings were occasionally organized for young Christians, but it was really the socio-cultural changes we associate with the 1960s that gave the impetus to our adventure with young adults. In the course of the late sixties and early seventies, the numbers of these young adults who visited the hill of Taizé mushroomed. Their motives were incredibly diverse, but they were all searching: searching for a better world, for peace and justice, for a deeper and more relevant faith, trying to find their place in society, looking for others with a common vision, perhaps desiring above all to be listened to and to be taken seriously. They came to Taizé as they came to many places, perhaps attracted more specifically by the counter-cultural ethos of monasticism. They came, went away again, told their friends, and came back in larger numbers. By the early 1970s, during the Easter vacations there were already thousands of young people arriving in this out-of-the-way village in the middle of rural France, far from cities and the amenities of modern life.

What to do with all these young visitors? The community's answer was simple: we need to share

with them what lies at the heart of our own life. Hospitality is more than just offering a place to stay and something to eat; it involves sharing what is most important for oneself. So the experience offered to the young visitors (and the not-so-young: it should be mentioned that although 85% are between 15 and 30 years old, there are also adults and families with children) in Taizé is essentially the core of the brothers' own life—prayer and community.

I have been asked to focus today on the dimension of worship, and indeed as befits a monastic community, common prayer has always been the center of life in Taizé. Three times each day, the bells start ringing and everything stops. Everybody—permanent residents and visitors—heads for the Church of Reconciliation for a time of prayer together lasting about 45 minutes. In the evening, the worship is prolonged by meditative singing which can last, for those who wish, until the early hours of the morning. Worship in Taizé is based on the age-old monastic tradition. The services are classical in form, made up of psalms, Scripture readings, intercessions and, at the center, a long period of silence.

When the numbers of young visitors began to increase, the community was faced with a difficult challenge. How could the worship be made more accessible to them, while at the same time maintaining the sung, biblical and meditative quality which has always characterized it? One solution we came up with was the short refrains sung over and over again, first in Latin and then gradually in other languages as well, now associated throughout the world with the name of Taizé. More accessible and shorter scripture readings were chosen, and read in several languages. And instead of entire psalms sung in French, verses are sung in different languages by soloists to which everyone responds with a simple antiphon such as “Alleluia.”

If the worship was intentionally and willingly made more accessible to the young, it nonetheless remains the prayer of a monastic community. The young visitors know that it is not a prayer crafted especially for them but that, whether they are present or not, day in day out, we brothers will still be in the church praying. To their minds, this gives it a certain authenticity. At the same time, we have discovered that there is often a tendency to underestimate the ability of the younger generation to enter into a form of prayer which may be quite demanding. For example, at the heart of every service in Taizé, after the Scripture readings, there are eight or more minutes of total silence—a time to rest in God, to let the words listened to and sung penetrate one's being, a way of keeping worship from becoming routine. Eight minutes may not seem a long time to contemplatives used to silent prayer, but for the average churchgoer, and especially the younger ones, at first it seems quite daunting. When does the noise ever stop in our society? What pastor would dare to include eight minutes of silence at Sunday Mass? And yet in the summer months, when 5000 visitors, mostly young, are in the church of Taizé, you can still hear a pin drop during this period of silence. The experience never fails to affect people deeply, and it alone should keep us from selling the young short. When they grasp the significance of a spiritual practice, we have found that they are ready and willing to take part.

One misgiving sometimes expressed by those who hear about the prayer style of Taizé is whether it plays on the emotions and offers a superficial “high” rather than a deep encounter with the divine. It is true that in Taizé, we have always believed that worship is not just a cerebral process but involves the whole being. As during most of the Christian centuries, and still today in the Eastern Church, liturgy attempts to involve the whole being in a relationship with the Source

of life. In our community, using very simple means (candles, icons, soft lighting, some bricks and some cloth...) we attempt to create a space that facilitates attentiveness and inner silence. We believe strongly that beauty is a gateway to the mystery of God. And when beauty is allied with simplicity, it becomes more in line with the Gospel. In addition the prayer is sung and, as in many religious traditions, the repetition of the words sung helps one to go beyond superficial rationality and come closer to the core of one's being. What started out as a solution to a practical problem ended up placing us squarely in the great religious traditions of humanity—the Jesus prayer, the Rosary, the mantras of the East...

On the other hand, prayer in Taizé makes no attempt to appeal specifically to the emotions. It is, in fact, rather low-key. Its quiet, meditative atmosphere has little in common with many prayer styles that are consciously employed to try and attract the young. In fact, many of the participants need a day or two to enter fully the rhythm of the prayer. It can be unsettling at first. The visitors are not used to sitting in silence, to repeating words in different languages. While there may be an immediate fascination with the style of worship, it usually takes a little time for them to feel fully at home there. Could this not be because a meditative prayer calls out to a deeper level of their being where they are not accustomed to dwelling? They are challenged to discover a part of themselves often covered over by the busyness of contemporary society. They are forced to work a little bit to get to a place where they discover that they are more fully themselves, but not to expend so much effort that they become discouraged and abandon the search. Whether conscious or not, behind the prayer of Taizé there is thus a pedagogical intention in the deepest meaning of that term. A good teacher always starts where the pupils are at, using what is accessible to them to lead them beyond their prior unreflective understanding of life.

One way in which this type of worship is often described is by saying that it implicitly communicates a sense of mystery. I think many would agree that our modern or post-modern consumer and technological society, for all it has achieved in the mastery of the universe, has often led to an appalling superficiality, to a reduction of life to what can be measured, bought and sold. Is there any wonder that people are hungering, most often largely unconsciously, for a rediscovery of the depths of life? Is not an important role of our churches and religious institutions to help people rediscover these depths in a way made authentic by millennia of experience, so that they are not enticed by modern counterfeit encounters with the sacred? Perhaps what some people consider “emotional” is simply anything that does not correspond to a detached and superficial rationality, and it is our notion of the intellect that needs in fact to be reframed.

A word often used by the young people themselves to characterize the prayer of Taizé is freedom. “The prayer here is so free,” they not infrequently say. At first, these comments left me perplexed. Our prayer is at the opposite extreme from what is usually called “free prayer.” Each service is put together in advance; the order of worship does not change and there is little improvisation. Upon reflection, I came to realize that what they mean by “free” is the creation of a space which leaves room for body and soul to breathe. First of all the body: there are no pews in Taizé; most of the participants sit on the floor in a variety of postures, or on benches and steps

around the edges. After the service properly speaking, especially in the evening, the repetitive singing continues and one can come and go as one wishes. One can sing or simply listen to the others chanting, in an atmosphere particularly conducive to inner discovery. The time of silence offers a more explicit space of freedom which one can fill as one chooses, provided of course that one does not disturb others. Paradoxically, perhaps, the set organization of the prayer creates a framework that favors the creation of an open space where body, mind and heart are liberated; we discover that structure and freedom need not be mutually opposed, but that, correctly understood, the former can make the latter possible. Allow me to point out that this is another truth kept alive by the monastic tradition.

It is often assumed that contemporary Westerners, particularly the young, are impervious to liturgical symbolism. In our day the vestments, signs, postures and gestures used in the public prayer of the historical churches often seem to many a closed book. Our experience in Taizé is rather that such forms of symbolic expression still speak to people, provided they are kept simple and when necessary explained (though outside of the service itself). For example, for years we have celebrated a “weekly Easter” during our Friday evening and Saturday evening services. On Friday evening, a large icon of the cross is brought to the middle of the church and laid on some bricks. All who wish to do so are invited to come up to the cross for a moment of silent prayer while the meditative singing continues, perhaps placing their forehead on the wood of the cross. It is explained to them earlier that this can be a way of entrusting their lives to Christ on his pilgrimage through death to life, as well as committing to him all those near and far who are undergoing difficulties in their own existences. We have found that this prayer is very meaningful to all kinds of people, both those with an explicit liturgical background and those for whom such forms of expression are new. Similarly, on Saturday evening everyone is given a candle, a symbol of the light of the risen Christ. These tapers are lit by the children present in the prayer at the end of the service, and then everyone passes the flame to his or her neighbors. Such simple but basic symbols seem to give people access to a dimension that remains alive within them, even when it has been almost smothered by a culture that privileges other forms of communication.

Let me now add a few other aspects which to my mind are important in the prayer experience of Taizé. I have already mentioned the word simplicity. When you ask young people what strikes them about their time in Taizé, the word “simplicity” often comes to their lips. Simplicity is certainly a Christian and monastic value; we prefer it to the word “poverty”, which has different connotations that are not all positive. For us simplicity also has practical value; it is linked to our choice to welcome all those who come, and not to accept funding from any institutions, relying on our work (for our own life) and the contributions of those who come for the days spent with us.

This simplicity of life seems to offer a refreshing change to young people who come from societies that are drowning in excess, where nothing ever stops, where there is no time to just be, and be together. They discover that it is possible to be happy without an overabundance of consumer goods; they have a good time together without being burdened by expectations to meet or schedules to follow. Although a lot happens during the day in Taizé, there is no sense of rushing from one thing to the next, no deadlines to meet. The Italians have a good word to

express this simplicity; they call it “essenzialità,” which can be loosely translated as “focusing on what really matters.”

This simplicity helps to create an atmosphere of acceptance and friendliness on our hill. Coming from cities characterized by anonymity and the fear of strangers, many are astonished the first day to see that everyone says hello and people speak to one another while waiting in line for meals! Little by little, out of hundreds and even thousands of mostly younger people from dozens of countries, a sense of common belonging is created; one feels part of a large family or group of friends.

To my mind, this is part of the reason why our worship is such a powerful experience for many. One often hears people complaining about going to church in a parish and being a part of a large anonymous congregation, with little human contact between the parishioners. On the other hand, praying with just a small group of our own choosing runs the risk of becoming, in the long run, limiting or even sectarian. For various reasons, worship in Taizé seems to avoid both of these pitfalls. One prays together with many others, and yet there is an intimacy and sense of fellowship that makes the prayer all the more intense. This is true in part because at the center of the prayer there is a group of brothers who live in material and spiritual community 365 days a year and who try to share this with others. It is also because those who pray together spend the entire day working, discussing and having fun together. We are fortunate that, because of the structure of life on our hill, there is no separation between worship and the rest of life. While this is not feasible in the average parish or congregation, it may be more attainable on a college campus, particularly a residential college. In any event, if we look at the portrait of the first Christians given in the New Testament, it is clear that prayer together and the sharing of life were two sides of the same coin. Prayer works best when it is the prayer of a community, and not a lonely crowd.

A final element I would like to mention is that worship in Taizé has almost no explicit didactic content. In Western Christianity, particularly in certain strands of Protestantism, preaching has tended to occupy more and more territory in worship. In post-Reformation Europe, the architecture of church buildings, with pews in straight lines all focused on the front, often the pulpit, has often made them indistinguishable from schoolrooms, a place to be instructed about the faith. The concern to form adult, theologically literate believers took precedence over the desire to celebrate the mystery of God, which is beyond all our minds can grasp. Of course it is a matter of balance; the two desires are certainly not mutually exclusive. But in the post-Reformation West – and again, this is more visible in Protestantism, less burdened (if that is the word) with the ballast of previous centuries – the balance shifted greatly in the direction of the rational organization of liturgy, of verbal communication, with hymn-singing added to provide a certain emotional release.

In Taizé, as already mentioned, there are no pews. The seating is somewhat chaotic. And, to the surprise of not a few visitors, there is no preaching during the services. The first reason for this is practical: there is no one language that all can understand. And secondly, each day, outside of the prayer time, all of the visitors hear a Bible reflection lasting approximately 45 minutes, followed by questions, silence and small-group discussion. We are fortunate to have enough time with our guests to offer both them worship and teaching, though not at the same time.

This situation enables the prayer to access and awaken a different dimension of people's beings than can easily come to light in a teaching situation. Those who are familiar with the worship of Eastern Orthodox Christians will understand what I mean. Participating in an Orthodox service enables one slowly to enter into another dimension, what sometimes is referred to as "heaven's joy on earth". By means of the repetitive chanting, the icons, the incense, the gestures of priest and congregation, believers are drawn out of the mundane world and enter into the mystery of God, less through the rational intelligence than through a kind of global perception. Again, this is not a matter of gimmicks or of manipulation, but of allowing the soul to breathe. If so many young adults find the style of common prayer in Taizé freeing, for all of its rootedness in Tradition, perhaps that can help us reflect on the meaning and end of worship. Let me say it again: we have no desire to offer a model to be imitated, but we hope our experience can offer food for thought for all who are searching for meaningful ways of praying in the current context.

About the Author

Born in Philadelphia in 1950, Brother John joined the Taizé Community in 1974. He spends much of his time in Taizé helping the young adults who take part in the international meetings there to learn how to read the Bible as a source of meaning for their own life. In the 1980s he was part of a small group of Taizé brothers who were living in Hell's Kitchen on the West Side of Manhattan. He continues to travel in the United States and Italy for meetings and retreats for young adults. Brother John has written seven books on Biblical topics discussed in the meetings in Taizé; they have been translated into a dozen languages.