

Notes on the Taizé Community

In August 1940, Roger Louis Schutz-Marsauche (1915–2005), then a Reformed minister, arrived in the tiny village of Taizé in the southeastern part of France, approximately one hundred miles from the Swiss border. Roger had many doubts about his faith during his seminary years at Lausanne. In response to this and the conditions of occupied France, he cast his lot with the poor and disadvantaged. His dream was to live communally with others practicing the essential dimensions of the Gospel by offering reconciliation and hope in the face of the horrors of the war. As he became known, Brother Roger found a place for such a community in the village of Taizé, just north of Cluny. One thousand years earlier, Cluny had been the site of one of the great medieval monastic traditions of the church. The community of Taizé would draw from this heritage but expand it to fit the needs of a conquered France in search of hope. Brother Roger died tragically at the hand of a distraught pilgrim in August 2005, during a prayer at the community. Brother Alois (Löser, b. 1954) succeeded Roger as Prior of the Community.

The Taizé Community has become a place of pilgrimage for young people worldwide. The brothers still marvel that hospitality to young people has become the center of their vocation. The village is isolated with none of the popular amusements of life. A week at Taizé revolves around the three daily prayers, bible study, shared labor, and simple meals. Young pilgrims gather in simplicity and silence, learning to listen for the still small voice of God and while struggling with life's most persistent and overwhelming questions. The non-judgmental hospitality of the Taizé brothers attracts pilgrims searching for authentic community.

Today Brother Roger's work continues beyond his death in the life of the ecumenical community of over one hundred brothers who, like their predecessors in nearby Cluny, have taken vows of poverty and chastity. These brothers come from every corner of the globe and represent a broad spectrum of denominational beliefs. The community includes Reformed, Anglican, and Roman Catholic Christians and is in dialogue with Orthodox traditions. The overarching theme of Taizé is reconciliation through prayer. Most of the brothers divide their time between reflection and service—a contemplative life in the rolling hills of Burgundy surrounding Taizé-- greeting and counseling thousands of pilgrims annually from around the world, and a life of service in some of the poorest and most helpless situations in the world, such as Calcutta, Haiti, and New York City.

The usual Taizé service is based upon the historical service of daily prayer. Singing, silence, scripture (usually read in several languages), and prayer permeate morning, noon, and evening prayers. Daily worship at Taizé includes neither communion, except for morning prayer, nor a sermon. It draws from more contemplative roots where silence and reflection are central to worship, and mantra-like music allows the participants to center their thought on the adoration of God. To the average Protestant worshiper in the United States, prayer in the Taizé Community with fewer words and extended periods of silence may be both disturbing and refreshing. Icons from the Orthodox tradition are used to provide a visual meditative setting. The icons are a traditional representation of events in the life of Christ and provide “windows to heaven,” in the words of the Orthodox Church.

The music used in the three services of daily prayer was composed for the unique liturgical needs of the Community by the brothers in the Community and Jacques Berthier, a composer and friend of Taizé who died in 1994. With young people coming from around the world to see this tiny hamlet, the worship calls for a kind of music that is accessible to these global pilgrims. Through the singing of chorales, ostinatos (short, repetitive refrains), acclamations, responses, and canons, worshipers with radically diverse liturgical and linguistic backgrounds can participate immediately. While there are vernacular versions of Taizé songs available, worshipers often sing in Latin because it is a historical language of the church, unifying the singers in the mystery of prayer.

The ecumenical spirit of the Taizé Community captured the imagination of the broader Christian community in the years following the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). Pope John XXIII, presiding over the Council, summarized the freshness of this small but influential movement. After visiting Taizé, he reflected, “Ah, Taizé—that little springtime!” —C. Michael Hawn