

## **1. General background**

### **a) Origin of Taizé's way of praying**

The monastic Community of Taizé (Taizé is the name of a small village in eastern France) first began with the purchase of a house there in 1940 by its first member, now known as Brother Roger. Today the Community is composed of about 100 brothers, who live there or in small 'fraternities' across the world, men from nearly 30 different countries who have made a lifelong commitment to live together in a common life because of Christ and the Gospel. From the very beginning, the community has observed a rhythm of three moments of common prayer each day, moments when everyone in the community stops working and gathers in the church – in the morning, at midday, and in the evening. The form of prayer, inspired by the traditional monastic Office, always includes singing the praises of God, hearing a reading from the Bible, meditating together in a long time of silence, and praying for the needs of the universal Church and all humanity, especially those who suffer.

The community has always sung in a dynamic, joyful and 'masculine' way; the use of multiple voices and organ accompaniment always gave added beauty from very early days. The style of music was always classical, 'objective' and beautiful rather than romantic or noisy or sentimental. The church in which the common prayer is celebrated is arranged so that the praying community faces toward the sanctuary, the altar. The space is made beautiful by the use of many candles, of icons (art that is again classical and objective but prayerful), colored cloth hangings, and windows. The lighting inside the church is subdued, rather dim.

This common prayer serves as the centre in which the community's entire life finds its meaning. It is the time when the community experiences the source of its vocation in praising God, recalling the love manifested in Christ, discovering that the true meaning of life is only found in the invisible realities of the Kingdom of Christ by the Spirit. The experience of a praising community reveals to all who are present the true nature of the Christian Church – a living communion of very diverse people united in their trust in the Spirit of God who is love.

### **b) Young people experience the beauty of prayer at Taizé**

For over 30 years, young people have come to Taizé in increasing numbers and discovered there the power and beauty of common life and common prayer. The only point at which the community of brothers as a whole and the young people visiting Taizé come

together is the time of prayer, the three moments of common prayer that give the main structure to the day at Taizé. It is here that the community's creative ability to respond to changing situations has been most needed. For several decades, at the start of its history, the common prayer was very 'monastic,' centered on singing the Psalms, entirely in French. Visitors were few, almost always able to speak at least a little French, and for months on end only weekends saw more than 50 people staying overnight. By 1974, with thousands of visitors arriving from many countries, it was clear that the old forms were not adapted to the pastoral demands of a new reality.

One obvious response was the introduction of more and more languages for the Bible readings. But this was not enough. How could a crowd of young people from many different countries and cultures sing together the praises of God in such a way as to be led inward in meditation? So many modern forms of church music seem to imitate pop music – noisy and chaotic or superficially sentimental. They do not build up a person in the knowledge of God and a resolve to put his Word into practice. They often offer a dangerous sense of emotional catharsis. That was not Taizé's style at all. Another question was how the singing could last for a reasonable time -- the Psalms could not be sung together in many languages; traditional hymns were also no longer a solution. In the mid-1970s, brothers began to explore the use of simple musical phrases that could be repeated many times and they soon discovered a French church musician, Jacques Berthier, who shared their interest. So came the development of the utterly characteristic and now world-famed Taizé songs. The fundamental intuition was Brother Roger's – that by steady repetition in singing, a single phrase can become prayer deep in the heart, continuing even long after the singing has stopped.

### **c) The main features of Taizé songs**

The great advantage of the Taizé songs is that they are extremely flexible. They are composed of a single short phrase; many were originally composed for traditional Latin texts but they are now translated into dozens of languages. No book is needed, they can be learned in a flash. For large gatherings, special units composed for choir, solos, and many different instruments can be used to great effect, while it is also very easy for an individual or small group to sing just the melody, 3 times or 20 times, as seems best. By singing in harmony, even a small group comes to realize that the Church community at prayer is a place of beauty in joyful diversity. Above all, by these songs it becomes possible for people to come very simply before God in expectation and praise. The words used express essential aspects of the spiritual vision that Taizé shares with today's universal Church, echoing with great effect in the hearts of many:

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. . . These songs can be used in place of hymns during the celebration of Mass, or they can form the

main feature of the special form of meditative prayers described in detail below.

#### **d) The spirituality of Taizé**

The community of Taizé usually insists that there is no particular ‘spirituality of Taizé’ because that would suggest that the community possesses a ‘power’ of some special kind. Instead, Taizé feels that it simply echoes the deep intuitions about the essential directions of Christian spiritual life found across today’s world and shared by many.

Perhaps the core of Taizé’s liturgy and spiritual vision can best be expressed by the word ‘paschal’. From the very beginning, Easter, the news of the resurrection, has been the community’s main source of joy and hope. In this, it has been much helped by long contact with the Orthodox tradition. Where the western Church, both Protestant and Catholic, for many centuries made the Cross, the suffering Christ, the main focus of devotion and of the theology of redemption, the Orthodox have always known that without the passage (Pasch) represented by Christ’s rising ‘from death to life’ the cross would be a sign of despair. The greeting “Christ is risen! He really is risen!” on Easter Day is much practiced at Taizé, as in every Orthodox country.

During the weekly meetings at Taizé, every Friday is marked by a strong focus on the Cross, the suffering of Christ linked to, one with the sufferings of innocent humanity across the world. In the evening at the end of the common prayer the icon of the cross is placed horizontally in the center of the church and for hours people come to place a hand, or their forehead, on the cross, entrusting the sufferings of humanity to the risen Christ and also offering their lives in the hope that they themselves may be bringers of Resurrection joy in the midst of that suffering. The resurrection hope is then celebrated by the ceremony of light at the end of the evening prayer every Saturday, when everyone holds a candle, passing the flame from one to another.

The imagery of light shining in the darkness has also strong Orthodox roots, for the August 6 feast of Christ’s Transfiguration, much spoken of in Taizé, is almost unknown and unnoticed in the Catholic and Protestant churches, while for the Orthodox it counts as one of the great festivals with Easter and Pentecost. For Brother Roger, it has always been a source of hope that by Christ, the dark places in each heart can be transfigured by the love of Christ, allowing each person to pass from despair about their wounded humanity to hope and redemption. The recent expansion of the Catholic Rosary devotions to include the Mysteries of Light show the same Orthodox influence. In Taizé, people are struck by the large number of small candles and lights used; beyond words, they express the assurance that the light of Christ shines in the darkest places.

Finally, the spirituality of waiting is stressed at Taizé; this is central to the period of Advent, with its use of the word ‘Marantha’ but throughout the year, the Community often

stresses that prayer is largely a matter of waiting for God to make a direction clear, confirm hearts in love . . . The silence in each time of prayer is often seen as a time of waiting for God to speak. Certain words are central to the Community's vision: joy, simplicity, mercy or forgiveness, compassion, trust, peace, reconciliation, communion . . .

#### **e) Taizé prayer away from Taizé**

The community at Taizé asks the young people who take part in the meetings there (3-6 thousand from up to 90 nations every week in the summer months) not to use the name of Taizé much on returning home, because what is important is not Taizé but the experience of faith and prayer they have made there. Still, across the world many people use the terms 'Taizé songs' and 'Taizé prayer' to indicate something they have learned there. The main reason for the current universal popularity of the songs and the forms of praying learned from Taizé is perhaps linked to a great lack of meditative prayer in the traditional churches, Catholic and Protestant alike, a lack felt especially strongly by young people.

In many Catholic parishes the only public celebration of common worship is the Mass; there is often no easily accessible time of prayer in which each individual can find room to establish a more personal communion with Christ, simply to pray. The Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament was traditionally often a time of almost completely silent adoration but it is now often filled with the recitation of wordy prayers or songs. There is no form of community prayer that offers deep renewal in the love of God simply and joyfully without overwhelming numbers of words and without manipulative emotionalism. A moment of prayer at some point during the meeting of a group is not the same thing at all.

Therefore often the young people returning from Taizé have introduced others to something very new. They sit on the floor instead of on hard benches; they light a few candles, set up a copy of a traditional Orthodox icon, and begin to sing quietly. There is usually no one 'in charge' although someone has to choose the songs and lead the singing; they sing, a simple passage from the Gospel is read. After a long silence, they sing again, offer free prayers perhaps, sing some more, and go home. It is very simple but very essential. They have spent time renewing their relationship with Christ, opening their hearts to his presence, being 'Church'. Once outside, they are confronted with the many challenges life brings in family, study, work, neighborhood, private life . . . The time of prayer gives them strength to try to put their faith into practice, bringing love and trust into a loveless, skeptical world. During the prayer, as at Taizé, nobody tells them what they 'ought' to be doing. They know what that is, but they need this time of prayer with others to renew their vision.

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Taizé's Home Page includes much information in Korean, and allows you to listen to a 20-minute long prayer and to many individual songs, as well as providing files designed to help learn the songs. <http://www.taize.fr/>