

## **Learning from Taizé – Breathing the Air of Resurrection**

An Orthodox priest from Romania once said: ‘The air you breathe at Taizé is full of resurrection.’ In the Great Jubilee Year 2000, the Taizé Community in France quietly celebrated its Diamond Jubilee. The young Swiss pastor Roger Schutz arrived in this small French village in Burgundy on 20 August 1940, looking for a house where he could pray, where others could be welcomed, and where there could grow a community dedicated to reconciliation. From these small beginnings, from this ‘tiny awakening’, an ecumenical community has developed which since the late 1950s continues to attract young (and not so young) adults in their thousands. There are usually around 5000 when I go in July, rising to 6000 in August. They come from over fifty countries, from every continent. During my thirty-six years as a priest, Taizé has been a vital ‘source’ and ‘wellspring’ for my own spiritual life. Why does Taizé have such an appeal for young people, often at an age when they are drifting away from church at home? And what can we learn from Taizé for our parish communities in the second decade of this new century?

### **The Joy of Easter**

I know what the Romanian priest meant by Taizé’s air being ‘full of resurrection’. The Risen Christ is the silent and invisible Source of the life and worship of this extraordinary community. Joyful trust in the Risen Lord always lay at the heart of the spiritual life at Taizé, expressed in a special way in the prayers and writings of Brother Roger. This focus on the resurrection is far removed from the rather adolescent, carefree spirituality found in some forms of Christianity which seem to want to leave worshippers on a permanent emotional ‘high’. It is not for nothing that the icon of the resurrection in Taizé’s Church of the Reconciliation stands next to the icon of the cross. The brothers of the Taizé Community know that the only way to the resurrection is the way of the cross. But community life and worship at Taizé are deeply marked by the spirit of festival, the spirit of the Beatitudes, the spirit of joy, simplicity, and merciful love. Can we honestly say the same of our parishes? When we gather for Mass, above all on Sunday, is the air we breathe ‘full of resurrection’?

In his Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* in 1998, on keeping the Lord’s Day holy, Pope John Paul reminded us that ‘the resurrection of Jesus is the fundamental event upon which Christian faith rests’ (n.2), and that for the Christian ‘Sunday is above all an Easter celebration, wholly illumined by the glory of the Risen Christ’ (n.8). Sunday is ‘a sacrament of Easter’, our weekly Easter and weekly Pentecost ‘when Christians relive the Apostles’ joyful encounter with the Risen Lord and receive the life-giving breath of his Spirit’ (n.28). Speaking of Sunday Mass, he tells us that ‘efforts should be made to ensure that the celebration has a festive character appropriate to the day commemorating the Lord’s Resurrection’; any singing should ‘express a joyful heart’ and foster ‘the sense of a common faith and a shared love’ (n.50). Certainly, the Sunday Eucharist at Taizé has a real sense of ; ‘the joy of the weekly Easter’. Pope John Paul’s challenge is to make sure the same is true of every celebration of Mass, above all on Sunday, because ‘Sunday is the day of joy in a very special way’ (n.57).

### **Speaking to the Heart**

There is something deeply traditional about the faith and life, the worship and spirituality of the Taizé Community. This is clear as soon as you walk into the church. On one side of the altar are the tabernacle with the Blessed Sacrament, and an icon of the Virgin Mary and Child. On the other side are the icons of the cross and the resurrection of Christ. Joyful faith in the Holy Trinity, and in the incarnation, death and resurrection of God the Son, is at the heart of everything at Taizé, as is the much-repeated affirmation that the Risen Christ is present to every human being. Each week at Taizé reaches a climax with prayer around the cross on Friday evening, a candlelight celebration of the resurrection on Saturday evening, and above all the Eucharist on Sunday morning. This is the living tradition of the Church, but presented in ways which speak to the hearts of young people. It is essential that we constantly reaffirm the ancient doctrines of the Church, and ensure that our sacramental life is continued from age to age, but how much effort do we put into presenting and celebrating them in ways which truly speak to

the heart. For example, visiting priests at Taizé regularly wait up until midnight and beyond to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with 16 to 30 year-olds. Do we present that great sacrament as a sacrament of resurrection, where young people can breathe the liberating air of Easter?

### **Proclaiming the Word**

The word of God is central to the worship of the Taizé community, and also to the weekly routine for the young pilgrims. Each morning a Bible Introduction is given to groups by a brother, exploring the meaning of the Scriptures for our life today. They give neither academic biblical exegesis nor a simple retelling of the Bible stories but rather a presentation of the word of God which nourishes, challenges and inspires. The young people then go into small groups to share with each other. Sometimes in our schools and parishes, we seem to presume that young people cannot cope with exploring the Scriptures and applying God's word to their lives. Perhaps we need to explore new ways of proclaiming the word to them, and we can learn much from the simple but deep form of presentation used at Taizé. I have been to the Bible Introductions during each of my thirty annual retreats in the House of Silence. Only once did I come away feeling undernourished. I wish young people in East Anglia came away from my homilies saying the same!

### **Called to be one**

The most dramatic change in the last few years was the killing of Brother Roger by a woman with mental health problems during Evening Prayer at Taizé. Although we continue to miss his prayerful presence, not a great deal has changed in the way the community continues its life. Brother Alois took over a Prior of the community immediately afterwards and has provided a real sense of continuity since then.

Brother Roger found his identity as a Christian by reconciling within himself the faith of his Protestant origins with the mystery of the Catholic faith. Now over a hundred brothers from different Christian communions live together in community, already reconciled in their differences and yet still on the pilgrim path together towards full reconciliation. For them, and for all Christians, life together is a pilgrimage of trust. Taizé reminds us that pilgrimage is the very character of the Christian life. On that pilgrimage we learn to walk together with all our fellow Christians, whatever differences remain between us. As so often, Pope John Paul echoed the witness of Taizé: 'I thank the Lord that he has led us to make progress along the path of unity and communion between Christians, a path difficult but so full of joy' (*Ut unum sint*, n.2). Are our own Christian communities 'committed...irrevocably to following the path of the ecumenical venture' (*Ut unum sint*, n.3)? Taizé shows that it is possible not only to pray and work together as Christians, but also to be together something of what the Risen Christ calls us to be.

### **Welcome**

Taizé is a place of welcome. The word 'welcome' is the first that pilgrims hear when they arrive. Hospitality is a special care of the brothers, and also of the many young people who help with this ministry of 'welcome'. There is an all-embracing openness at Taizé which allows young people to know they are valued, to put their trust in God, and to be aware of their own responsibility as young adults. The welcome they experience is God's own welcome, made present through the openness of the community. How important is the ministry of welcome in our own Christian communities? Not simply allocating people to say 'welcome' to visitors at the church door, but a real sense of a warmly welcoming family. Do our own young people feel welcome and valued in our parishes? Brother Roger at 90 showed us



that age is no obstacle: it is the heart that matters. And besides our young people, do people of all languages, races and ages feel that they belong, and that they are cherished and valued? Our church communities are meant to be 'parables of communion'. Pope John Paul reminded us that this flows from the Eucharist: 'If Sunday is a day of joy, Christians should declare by their actual behaviour that we cannot be happy "on our own"' (*Dies Domini*, n.72)

### **Faith and Fun**

A pilgrim's week at Taizé revolves around the church, the meal queues and the Oyak. The Oyak is the social centre, serving refreshments but also a place for gathering, with multi-cultural spontaneous singing and dancing until late at night. After evening prayer, most young people head for the Oyak. And where afterwards? Often back to the church for prayer before retiring to their sleeping-bags. Taizé integrates with ease worship and welcome, reflection and relaxation, hours of prayer along with friendship and fun. Our church communities would be far more attractive to our young people if we achieved the same. As Pope John Paul reminded us, 'there is no conflict whatever between Christian joy and true human joys' (*Dies Domini*, n.58). Are our faith communities joyful communities? Is Christ's own joy complete in us, or at least evidently on a pilgrim path to completion?

### **Simplicity of heart**

Many young pilgrims are struck by the simplicity of life at Taizé. To some it comes as a shock! The living conditions, the sanitation arrangements, the food – all are very simple. But this simplicity draws people together. The fewer our possessions, the easier it is to be at-one with each other. This is the simplicity, the poverty of spirit, demanded by the gospel of Jesus, and yet how reluctant we often are to call people to such a life, and to simplify our own lives in imitation of Christ. On several occasions over the years I have witnessed the admission of young men to the community. They are clothed in a white robe and prayers are asked that they will witness in simplicity of heart to the joy and peace of the Gospel. That surely is the call to each and every one of us, a real challenge in the midst of our consumerist, grasping society in which, so often, it is seen as better to receive than to give, to have than to be. True simplicity of heart leads to simplicity of living. Brother Roger wrote 'Simplifying and sharing does not mean opting for austerity. Simplify in order to live intensely. In doing so, you will discover the joy of being alive. Simplify and share as a way of identifying with Christ Jesus, born poor among the poor,' Can we do more to simplify our own lives, rejecting society's lure constantly to acquire more and to improve and upgrade what we already have?

### **Teach us to pray**

Taizé is above all a place of prayer. Three times each day the bells summon young people to prayer from their tents and barracks, from their meeting, their sun-bathing and their sleep! Many make sure of getting to the church early, and leave well after the brothers have gone. There are young adults in the church any time of the night, sometimes singing, sometimes in silence, sometimes gently snoring their praise of God! Besides the well-known songs of Taizé, a long period of silence plays a central part in each time of prayer. It is inspiring to see over 4000 young people spend five or more minutes in silence without the need to plug in their i-pods. Many come back from Taizé remembering especially the power of the silence, a positive silence filled with the silent voice of God. The whole atmosphere of the church at Taizé makes prayer easy, the icons and candles, the subdued lighting, the music and silence, the Scripture readings and the prayers. Everything speaks not just to the changing emotions of these young people, but to their heart, to their soul. Our parish worship must do the same if we are to lead people into a deeper relationship with God, into the holiness of God's love. What could we learn from Taizé about our celebrations of Mass and our prayer services? Could we make better use of the silence and music, and do more to create an atmosphere for prayer? Do we try to help our young people to pray, and to lead them into a joyful and trusting love for the Lord, open to the Holy Spirit who seeks to light a fire in their hearts?

### **Struggle and Contemplation**

Taizé holds together as inseparable, struggle and contemplation, prayer and work for a better world. As Brother Roger wrote, 'If you pray, it is out of love. If you struggle, taking on responsibilities to make the world more fit to live in, that too is out of love.' Without an active live for the poor and oppressed, our Christian communities can far too easily become 'holy huddles', taking little if any part in God's saving mission to the world he created. As at Taizé, we need to ask the Spirit to kindle in us a love which is alive and active, and which ring re-creation to the world.

### **Go and Find Out.**

It is impossible to put a week at Taizé into words. Even the excellent videos and books catch only a glimpse of the reality. Taizé is a place of pilgrimage, of renewing encounter with the Risen Christ not only in the prayer but also in the groups, the food queues and the many new friendships formed. The simplicity of Taizé helps pilgrims to focus on what really matters: God's love for us, our trustful love for God, and our communion with one another in the joy of the Holy Spirit, breathing together the air of the resurrection. The only way to know Taizé is to go there. It is easy now, all details are available on their excellent website at <http://www.taize.fr>

### **Go Home!**

Taizé is not a 'movement'. The Community does not try to draw young people away from their home churches into something new. The whole thrust of a 'week on the hill' is to send young adults back to their parishes to live out their commitment there. They should return home with a deeper love for the Church and a commitment to worship and witness, to live and serve within their local parish communities. But if we encourage them to go to Taizé, many will come back enthused in a way which we may find challenging for our own parishes, chaplaincies and schools. If allowed and encourage, young people can contribute greatly to making our communities 'full of resurrection'.

### **'That little springtime'**

The Taizé Community celebrated when Pope John XXIII was beatified. It was Pope John who aptly described Taizé as 'that little springtime', and there have been close contacts between popes and Taizé ever since. When Pope John Paul II visited Taizé in 1986, he said.

One passes through Taizé as one passes close to a spring of water. The traveller stops, quenches his thirst and continues on his way. The brothers of the community, you know, do not want to keep you. They want, in prayer and silence, to enable you to drink the living water promised by Christ, to know his joy, to discern his presence, to respond to his call, then to set out again to witness to his love and to serve your brothers and sisters in your parishes, your schools, your universities, and in all your places of work.

Today in all the Churches and Christian communities, and even among the highest political leaders in the world, the Taizé community is known for the trust always full of hope that it places in the young. It is above all because I share this trust and this hope that I have come here this morning.

Do we share that trust placed by Pope John Paul and the Taizé Community in young people?

Taizé is not the only 'wellspring of the gospel' in Christ's Church across the world. There are many different wells with different gifts to share. But even if we never go to Taizé, even if we never sing a Taizé chant, the challenge of the Taizé Community will always be there, simply because it is nothing else than the call of the gospel of Christ. I find myself challenged every time I go to Taizé; all the question I ask in this article are ones I have to put to myself again and again.



Each Saturday night in Taizé's Church of the Reconciliation, candles are lit in celebration of the Risen Christ. Children light the candles of the brothers, and from them the light spreads to the thousands of young people. It is an awesome sight. In the same way, the life and love of the Risen Lord must spread from our parish churches to our neighbourhoods and towns. If only very visitor, and every member of our parish families, could come away from our churches saying to all they meet, 'The air you breathe there is full of resurrection'.

*(This article was first published by Fr. Michael Evans in 'Priests and People' – June 2002, and edited by him on July 6<sup>th</sup> 2011.)*