

Taize: A Memoir

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TAIZE—WHAT IS TAIZE? When somebody asks me, I answer: "An ecumenical community in France." Sometimes I add: "Catholic and Protestant brothers live there together. Young people from all over the world come to Taize throughout the year to spend a week at the community." But I know that this does not really express much about what Taize is. Can one really explain what it is? Isn't it necessary to go there in order to experience it for oneself? I guess that is true of any kind of community. In this little essay I'll try to explain a bit more about Taize—from my own experiences with the community. Maybe some readers will then go and find out for themselves.

Taize is the name of a tiny village in the province of Burgundy in France. It is located between Dijon and Lyons, or, more precisely, between Chalons-sur-Saone and Macon. Cluny with its long monastic tradition is close by. The landscape is beautiful and very peaceful with green hills, fields, and valleys.

The community of Taize was founded by Roger Schutz, "Frere Roger." He is originally from the French-speaking part of Switzerland, from a Calvinist background. During the Second World War he decided he did not just want to remain "neutral," but engage actively in helping those who suffered most. He came to Burgundy and helped refugees (most Jewish) from the Nazi-occupied part of France. He himself had to flee in the end, and when he came back after the war, he found a lot of destruction and decided to stay.

Why Taize? Brother Roger sometimes says that it was because a very old and poor woman begged him to stay: "We are so poor and so forlorn." so he stayed. Later some friends came and joined him. The men decided

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to stay together as a community and to take the monastic vows of poverty and celibacy.

In the beginning Taize was a Protestant community, but then Catholics joined and ecumenism became a very important part of life at Taize. Throughout the centuries the different Christian denominations have lost a great deal of energy in their struggle against each other—energy they'd need for "the world outside." The goal of reconciliation is not to be confined to the churches, but as Taize believes, should also be realized in everyday life. In fact it is to be extended to reconciliation between people of different cultures and nationalities.

Although the first years of the community were spent in relative seclusion, the brothers were never indifferent towards what was going on outside of their community. It was not until the 1960's that large groups of young people started coming to Taize on their path of seeking. Simple barracks were built to accomodate these guests. Living conditions were, and still are, purposely very simple at Taize. The largest number of people came in 1974 when a "Council of Youth" was opened. I still wonder how 40,000 people could have been accomodated.

Today the community consists of eighty or ninety brothers from many different countries. Not all of them live in Taize. Many brothers live in small communities which share living conditions with people in slum areas all over the world, including Africa, Brazil, and New York City. The brothers are committed to *Fight and Contemplation*, the title of a book by Brother Roger. They have called upon the churches to give up both their privileges and their prestige objects, and to share the resources of the earth more justly. This has caused some people (especially church-affiliated people who have never been to Taize) to say that 'Taize is Communist.' This happened especially after the publication of Taize's "Second Letter to the People of God," which was written in the early 1970's on a small boat in an Asian slum area. Taize has published many letters, written in different parts of the world, reflecting on how reconciliation can be realized.

The brothers of Taize support themselves by their own work, they do not accept donations. Some brothers write books, others paint, do pottery, work as beekeepers, make enamel jewelry, etc. All their produce is sold at the "exposition," a store at Taize. Records with Taize music are also available.

The youth meetings (it is mostly young people who come to Taize, but there are a growing number of adults as well) are supported financially by those who come. Everybody is expected to pay per day the amount he'd spend in his own country. A certain level contribution is suggested; American or Germans would pay more than people from poorer countries. The meetings take place throughout the year, and it is

especially busy during the summer and on special holidays such as Easter and Pentecost. There are probably an average of 2,000 people at Taize during the summer months.

I first came to Taize in 1980. I had read about the community but knew only that it "had something to do" with Christianity, simple living, and that it was an international place. I was excited when we finally arrived. Taize did not really look like what I had expected. Everything was muddy from the continuous rain. We went to the reception meeting, where somebody gave us a short introduction and explained the three basic choices of how a week in Taize can be spent: in a discussion group, in a working group, or in silence.

The discussion groups talk about the "Letter from Taize" (or, more precisely, use the Letter as a basis for their discussion). The tasks of the working groups include everything from preparing food, doing the dishes, or collecting the garbage, to fixing fences and tents or cleaning the toilets—anything that has to be done in order for the meetings of "function." Those who join working groups also have time for discussion meetings, and the people in the discussion groups will usually also have some kind of task. The third choice, silence, seemed rather strange to me at that time. I had never heard of anybody spending a whole week or even a whole day in silence and was not sure what to think of the idea.

I decided to join a discussion group. After receiving a map of the community and our meal tickets we found our way to our barrack. Visitors stayed either in their own tents, in large tents belonging to the community, or in very simple barracks. It was March and there were not many visitors, so all of us could stay in the barracks. Soon it was dinnertime. Something I came to appreciate, especially during later visits, was the serenity and patience of people waiting in line in order to get their meals. The queue was sometimes very long, but I learned that this does not have to be a reason for impatience or anger.

At half past eight it was time for evening prayer. The three daily prayers are central to the life of the community. They take place in the church building, which is called the "Church of Reconciliation." It was built in the 1960's with the help of a German group called "Aktion Suhnezeichen." The church is a rather large concrete building, and during the summer months tents are added so that there is enough room for everybody. There are no chairs or benches inside (except a few for the elderly) as there are in orthodox churches. Everybody sits on the floor. The church is quite dark inside with many candles burning. There are also some icons and a brick altar but basically the church is kept very simple. The prayer features meditative songs, readings from the Bible, and silence. The readings and the songs are in many different languages.

Everything was very new to me and I felt slightly uncomfortable. Why

were the songs repeated so many times? What about the silence—what was supposed to happen during that time? I think the whole first week I felt relieved when the silence was over and somebody started talking again. That stay in Taize was the first time I "got in touch with silence," and I did not know "what to do with it." So many thoughts kept coming into my head. Later in one of the Letters from Taize I read something written by a young American woman about these thoughts that keep coming back during times of silence. She wrote: "Whatever comes into my head, and it's many things . . . nothing is that important that I have to hold on to it now and nothing is so unimportant that I wouldn't let go of it and pass it on to God."

After the prayer during that first evening I went to a barrack where people could meet. I was anxious to meet French people with whom I could practice my French, but I found out that the majority of people were German, just like me. Finally I did run into somebody who turned out to be a "native," and together with the others we spent the evening singing songs.

Meeting people at Taize comes naturally, and often discussions that go beyond "what nice weather" develop quickly in the special atmosphere of the community. I met people with whom I kept in touch for a long time afterwards. Many different people come to Taize, but there seems to be a common search for a deeper meaning in life, an interest in religion, and a desire to "make this world a better place."

My first stay at Taize was not really a happy one. There were so many new things for me and I didn't know how to deal with the depth of prayer. But the experience did leave a strong impression on me.

I then spent a year in America, where I got to know a church quite different from the church I was used to in Germany. I had never before realized how much the church is influenced by its environment and its culture. It made me think a lot about the church—what I thought the task of the church ought to be and what I thought the church "should" be in general. I often thought of the brothers, their simple life and their fight for reconciliation.

I went back to Taize shortly after my return to Europe. I decided to be an "animator"—somebody who is "in charge of" one of the small discussion groups and passes information on to them, etc. That stay in Taize was a lot "easier" for me than the first one. The silence during the prayers meant something to me: it meant getting back to what is really essential, realizing anew truths that get lost so easily in the hurried pace of everyday life, and getting things back in the right perspective. I also understood the singing in church much better than the first time. The repeated chanting made the words go to the inside instead of just to the head where they would be treated only in an intellectual way.

A few months after this second stay at the community I took part in a meeting that was organized by Taize in London. Such European meetings have been taking place since 1978, when the first one was held in Paris. They were called "Pilgrimages of Peace and Reconciliation" and are scheduled for the time between Christmas and New Year's. About 20,000 people participate in each of these meetings. They are hosted by the local churches, which are of many different denominations. People who come to participate in the meetings stay at these churches, often with families that belong to the church. That way the visitors (who come from many different countries) and the people of the local churches can get to know each other. There are common prayers with the Taize brothers twice daily in the big churches. In London, I stayed with a Bengali community in the East End. People there were very poor, but we were warmly welcomed and I learned a great deal during the five days I spent with them. We had workshops in the morning where we learned more about their situation in London and told them about our everyday life. It was a great chance to let go of prejudices—simply by getting to know the other. Of course, it's impossible to get to know another culture by living with the people for a few days, but even a short stay is enough to break down some barriers.

I went back to Taize several times and finally I decided to spend a week in silence. We slept in tents on the "silence field" and also had our meals there.

The field is a little bit apart from the "regular" meetings. At first it seemed very strange to be together with other people but not talk to them, and to take the meals in silence as well. But I got used to it very soon. We went to the three common prayers with everybody else and in the morning we had a biblical introduction by a brother. How we would spend the rest of the day was up to us. Even though I had no "flash of enlightenment" during that week of silence, it was a very important experience for me. Silence stopped me from running away from myself and let me listen again to what was inside me and see what was around me, especially in nature. The first days that I talked again, I really talked "out of silence" and not "just to say something" or out of insecurity. For several months after that week I felt that there was still an "effect" of the time spent in silence, some kind of calm even in my everyday life.

The thing that I remember best about the biblical introduction during that week is the brother talking about Dostoyevsky and recounting how somebody had once told Dostoyevsky how he admired him, his genius and his writing. Dostoyevsky responded: "Yes, but you don't know where it comes from, the depth, and also the dark." Both these aspects of life, the high and the low, are important in the life of the community. Easter is celebrated each weekend, Friday being Good Friday

when the suffering, crucifixion and death of Jesus is remembered. The evening prayer on Friday is followed by a "prayer on the cross," which comes from the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox church. The icon of the cross is laid down on the ground in the middle of the church and people are invited to come and pray while kneeling in front of the cross and touching it with their heads. My Protestant background made me think of this form of prayer as being rather "strange" at first. But Taize has brought me to a better understanding of religious traditions different from my own, especially Catholicism. I still can't relate to liturgical forms that seem to be only form without content, but I have learned that many symbols used in the liturgy correspond to the "whole" of our human nature—there is more to man than just a head.

Saturday is the celebration of the resurrection. Everybody gets a candle before the evening prayer. They are lit at a certain point during the prayer and I found it wonderful to see the church getting lighter and lighter as people passed on the fire.

When I was in Taize in spring this year, I decided to stay for a month and work. There are always people at Taize who work as volunteers. I had never realized how much work there is at Taize, how many things have to be taken care of in order for the meetings to take place. I worked on one of the campsites letting people know where they could put their tents and trying to answer all kinds of questions. My other duties during that month included cleaning rooms and working in the laundry room. I enjoyed the work, especially working with others and the rhythm of work and rest.

I have asked myself what it is that makes me go back to Taize again and again, but I have not been able to define it in a few words. Naturally, it has to do with the ideals Taize stand for and the way they are practiced in the community. It also has to do with the unity of prayer / silence and social actions. It has to do with the brothers' humility—the lack of a "we are the best club, so join us, become a member, or if not, you'll go to hell" mentality.

Taize never wanted to be a "movement." The brothers wanted no "Taize fan clubs" around the world. Instead, they encourage people to go back to their local churches and help revive the church from within. Brother Roger talks of a "spring of the church" and encourages us to "precede dawn." The aim is not to spread a "Taize theology" but to produce a reconciled and contemplative people in the church, a renewal that offers an option for those who are suffering, oppressed, and poor, the same kind of option Jesus offered.

This year the large annual meeting is going to be held outside of Europe for the first time. It is going to be in Madras, India, and is already being prepared several months in advance. It will be an experiment. But then again, that's what Taize lives by: the "dynamics of the provisional," taking risks while moving on with simple means instead of choosing the security of a perfect organization.