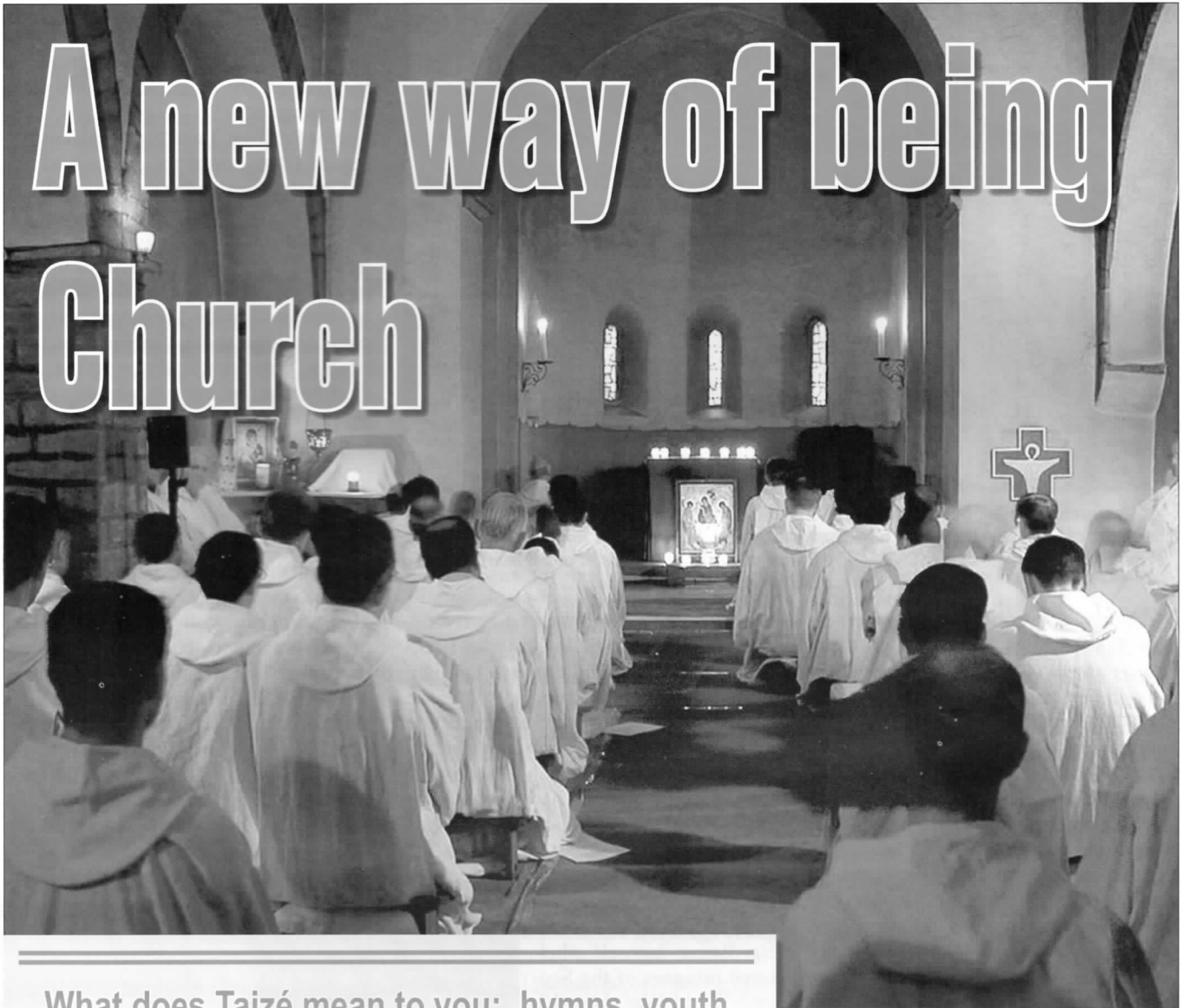


A new way of being Church



What does Taizé mean to you: hymns, youth gatherings, Br Roger? At least to me, Taizé meant only this much since my first contact with it during the international “Pilgrimage of Trust on Earth” held in Madras, India, in 1988. However, after twenty years, this naïve picture fell apart during my recent stay there in April 2008. This coming month of November, Taizé comes to Kenya.

By Sahaya G. Selvam

Taizé is a new ecclesiology. It is not an abstract theology debated about, but an existential lived-out experience of a church as a community of faith and reconciliation. Taizé, once an insignificant hillock, is today the mountain that bears the torch of Christian faith for Europe and the rest of the world. As I curiously explored into the history of the founder and the community, while living through the daily experience of just being there, and attentively listening to other participants – young and old – I became aware of the following aspects of this impressive experience of the Church:



The author of the article in front of Taizé Community (France). Below, Br Roger Schutz, founder of the community, who died in 2005: *"The Christian message is a matter of the heart. That is the secret of Taizé."*

A Faith Community Open to the World

As you anxiously make the bus journey through the countryside of France, in a place that is almost nowhere, the signboard says "Taizé Communauté". In 1940, at the age of twenty-five, when Roger Schutz-Marsauche (1915-2005) left Switzerland to go to France, to live dangerously on the warfront, he desired to create a community that would be a sign of reconciliation.

I belong to a religious order in which the religious community is a necessity to continue the apostolic dreams of the founder, whereas in Taizé it is the opposite. As an overflow of the communion among the Brothers who gathered around their founder, the community became open to people, especially the young. Since 1958, people began to come to Taizé to participate in the common search for the God of Jesus Christ, through the cross and reconciliation. The welcome in Taizé is a credible symbol of Christian hospitality. Brother Luc, whom I met later in Nairobi, reiterated to me, "The young people come to Taizé, because of the community of brothers." These brothers live a religious life in their vows of celibacy, simplicity and common life.

This community is also ecumenical. The community of over hundred broth-

ers who come from around thirty nations also have various Christian backgrounds: catholic and protestant. Right from the beginning, seen today in the icons in the Church and the architecture itself, was also the strong contribution from the Eastern Orthodox Church.

For all the silence there, Taizé is far from being a monastic castle tucked away from the world. It is a community also open to the contemporary realities of the world of today: poverty, war, marginalization. Br Roger himself sheltered refugees of the Second World War, later his sister cared for orphans in a nearby home, and today some of the brothers share the lives of the poorest of the poor in different parts of the world. A church open to the world!

A Sign of the Kingdom in Simplicity

Another aspect that strikes the visitor to Taizé is its simplicity: in structures, in food and lifestyle and above all in the life of the brothers themselves. It is well known that, "The brothers of the community

live solely by their work. They do not accept donations. In the same way, they do not accept personal inheritances for themselves; the community gives them to the very poor."

Not far from Taizé is the ancient Abbey of Cluny, once the greatest edifice in Christendom, today a mere exhibit of ruins and commercial complexes. Just the opposite is being unveiled in the green hillock: humble structures that are powerful symbols against the consumerist society of today. Br Roger was very conscientious about keeping structures simple. Medium is the message. And the Christian message is a matter of the heart. That is the secret of Taizé.

Having lived in the comfort of Italy two months prior to my visit to Taizé – often eating in three or more plates, the message of simplicity of daily life in Taizé – with just one plastic plate and a spoon that became also a knife to apply butter to the bread, was very impressive. My European colleagues themselves often commented about this, as they enjoyed the adventure of the ordinary life. The Christian message: "Blessed are the simple", has also a contemporary implication: being a concrete solution to the ecological crisis! One of the afternoon workshops that I attended during my stay, led by Br Maxim on Environmental Responsibility, was made credible by the simplicity that we lived in Taizé.



An Assembly of Pilgrims in Silence and Prayer

The bells chime three times a day. A call for prayer. There is a unison movement of people towards the church – the simple, cosy, quiet, haven for souls. The prayers are simple too: songs, short reading of the Word of God, quiet moments, petitions, more hymns. No one tells us how to pray, we just do it. We join the community of brothers who pray. This community, that faces the same direction in an attitude of pilgrimage towards the Divine, also allows sufficient space for the inner movement of the individual.

No preaching. Only teaching, sharing, discussions, and workshops in small groups outside the prayer moments. Reflection in the adults group that week was led by Brother Pedro, who shared very simple but deep thoughts on Genesis 1 to 11.

My two room-mates in Taizé came from Germany. Both, professionals, felt the need for prayer and silence, so

It is a community also open to the contemporary realities of the world today: poverty, war, marginalization.

they came there. About ten minutes of silence during the three common prayer moments, silence around the church and in some areas like The Source, and silence after night prayers, create an experience of tranquillity.

Besides these particularities, Taizé continuously bears a feeling of silence and prayer. This is yet another gospel contradiction to the contemporary world which, with its broadcasts and billboards, is full of noise.

A Community on the Way to Holiness

Wanting to know more about the Taizé Meeting in Nairobi in November 2008, I met Br Parfait. I took very little time to recognise him as the one who had



Young people in pilgrimage to Taizé: "The young people come to Taizé because of the community of brothers."

prepared us for the Taizé Meeting in Madras twenty years ago. I also met Br John Patrick from Madras.

Anyway, I got invited to lunch with the brothers. The first part of the meal was in silence, as we enjoyed a simple wholesome food. The music was soft and gentle. I was not new to this. We too do this during retreats in my religious community. When the music stopped we spoke. My companion at conversation was Novice Adam from Indonesia. My curiosities about the internal workings of the community were sufficiently clarified. I perceived everything to be

simple, yet orderly and joyful.

Then a gentle person spoke in French with a hush voice; his eyes were filled with compassion. It was Brother Alois, the Prior of the community. I had expected him to be older. Brother Roger had appointed him to the leadership role even before his death. Brother Alois shared news about the brothers who were outside Taizé. There was a lot of fraternal laughter; there was a feeling of oneness – even with those in Bangladesh and Nairobi.

When the prayer was over, Adam wanted me to meet Br Alois. I wanted it too! But Br Alois came to me. He greeted me with such openness and gentleness that there was certain holiness visible. Br Parfait joined us together

with Br Sebastian. The four of us went to the room of Br Roger.

There was something extraordinary about that "sacred space". It was very ordinary in fact: the simple bed covers, the books, the prayers on the noticeboard, the photos on the masterpiece, the light gushing through the French window and the icon of the Blessed Virgin gently seated in a corner. Br Alois invited us to pray a 'Hail Mary' in front of that icon, before which Br Roger himself had prayed everyday. Then Br Alois asked for *my* blessing. A humbling experience! "Stay as long as you wish", he said farewell to me with the characteristic hush tone.

I was in the room of Br Roger. Oh, Sacred Space! Indeed, I knew, in there once had lived a holy man. The community that he founded is also on the Way.

No wonder, someone in our group remarked, "Would paradise be something like Taizé?"

Epilogue

Taizé visits Nairobi this November. Will the political impasse in Kenya make it difficult? No! The youth of the world will bring hope to their Kenyan counterparts, because it is going to be a "Pilgrimage of Trust on Earth." Only trust can bring hope to the youth of the world. And to the political leaders too. This is the mission of the church in the world today.