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Brother Emile of Taizé

Praying with the Songs of Taizé

Molitev s taizéjskimi spevi

Abstract: The article retraces the origin and the development of prayer with Taizé songs that has spread throughout the world. The various components of this style of prayer and why it speaks to contemporary mentalities are examined along with the insights of liturgists, theologians and the philosopher Paul Ricoeur who was a frequent visitor to Taizé.

Keywords: prayer, liturgy, song, Taizé, repetition, personal, community, heart, peace, trust, silence, duration, distractions, protest, attestation, language, transcendence, Roger, Berthier, Gelineau, Ricoeur, Clément

Izvleček: Prispevek prikazuje izvor in razvoj molitve s taizéjskimi spevi, ki se je razširila po vsem svetu. Obravnavane so različne sestavine tega sloga molitve in razlogi, zakaj nagovarja sodobno miselnost, ter spoznanja liturgikov, teologov in filozofa Paula Ricoeurja, ki je bil pogost obiskovalec Taizéja.

Ključne besede: molitev, liturgija, pesem, Taizé, ponavljanje, osebno, skupnost, srce, mir, zaupanje, tišina, trajanje, molnje, protest, potrditev, jezik, transcendenca, Roger, Berthier, Gelineau, Ricoeur, Clément

It has been said of Brother Roger, the founder of the Taizé community, that he had the gift of putting himself in other people's shoes.¹ This was particularly true of prayer. In this area, as in many others, Brother Roger was able to understand the obstacles encountered by the women and men of today, in particular by young people. Putting himself in their shoes, he could easily imagine what it might feel like to enter a church for the first time. But Brother Roger didn't just understand. He had a passion and an ability to create, to elicit from others fruitful responses and

1 The invitation from *Edinost in dialog* to write an article on prayer at Taizé has encouraged me to publish for the first time in English a text I wrote several years ago on praying with the songs of Taizé. It was first published in *Sal Terrae* (in Spanish) in 2007 and by *Christus* (in French) in 2008. I have updated the article and made a few minor changes. The French also appeared in my book *À vous de commencer* (Taizé: Presses de Taizé, 2020).

collaborations. The sociologist observes, and that is undoubtedly useful. However, the prophet does more: the prophet opens paths, and transforms ideas into visible realities. For many of our contemporaries, prayer seems inaccessible. They might think: »Yes, others can pray, but not me!« The Taizé songs were created so that the sources of trust in God – that is the sources of prayer – might be accessible to everyone.

Seeking new ways

Before the massive influx of young people to Taizé, and even many years after, French was the language of community prayer. In his book *La belleza sencilla de Taizé*, Salvador García Arnillas (2018) has traced the evolution of common prayer at Taizé and the collaboration with several composers. As witnessed by successive editions *La louange des jours*, the community's book of prayer, texts, psalms and hymns were plentiful. Although translations were often provided, participation by the uninitiated and those speaking foreign languages remained marginal. Brother Roger was not satisfied with this and felt compelled to seek new ways that would allow everyone to participate in the prayer. He entrusted a brother with this task. It soon became clear that the texts to be sung needed to be brief. Brother Robert, who spearheaded this research, became aware that in the Middle Ages, pilgrims often prayed with just a few words, crafting repetitive chants, sometimes in the form of a canon/round. Such was the case at Montserrat in the Middle Ages.

Jacques Berthier was soon involved in the project. Composer and organist in Paris, well known to the community for which he had already composed in the 1950s, Jacques Berthier took seriously the question of composing chants, and soon gauged the challenge at hand. Soon after, he began sending out his first attempts. So as not to favour one living language over another, the first songs were all in Latin, but in the years that followed, most of the European languages were employed. If the rehearsals carried out with young people in Taizé were not conclusive, Jacques Berthier, at the request of the brothers, made alterations, each song becoming the fruit of close collaboration between the composer, who was humble enough to revise his work, and the Taizé community.



The songs composed by Jacques Berthier began to occupy a place in Taizé prayer as early as 1975 (a first round goes back to 1974). But this place was relatively limited. As was explained earlier, prayer with fairly lengthy texts in French was the norm. However, instead of ending at a specific time, as was previously the case, the common prayer was now extended, thanks to the new, shorter compositions by Berthier, in this new style, often in the form of a canon or ostinato. The prayer now felt almost as though it was composed of two parts. The entire community of brothers was at the heart of the first part. Then, just a few brothers, along with all those who wished to remain in the church with the young people, continued singing. It soon became clear that no one could predict how long this second part of the prayer would last, just as no one could tell in advance the duration of each individual song.

A space of freedom

If prayer with just a few repeated words is not unknown in history (think of the Rosary or the Prayer of the Name of Jesus), examples tend to be restricted to personal prayer. In proposing repetition and by not fixing the duration of each song within the framework of *community* prayer, Brother Roger was breaking new ground. To this fact, Father Joseph Gelineau S.J., who himself composed several Taizé songs, provided an insightful commentary:

In the history of Western music, there has been a very important phenomenon that has left its mark on liturgy and on song within liturgy - and that is the mastery of duration. In the liturgy, things are well framed. This is particularly noticeable in the new Liturgy of the Hours, with a hymn, three psalms, a responsory etc., and we know exactly how long each item is going to last. This has undeniable advantages, but something important is lost as well. Finding that continuous music, music that starts and stops whenever one decides, has one huge advantage: it creates a space of freedom. Paradoxical as it may seem, that space is a kind of emptiness that, like silence, allows the Spirit to intervene. Especially when you repeat the same words because you're not occupying your intelligence with concepts, nor is there a need to worry how long the song is going



to last. There's something very important here in rediscovering a dimension of prayer that is gratuitousness. We are no longer called to look at our watches or attempt to master duration. (2006)

Personal and community prayer

Another interesting aspect of this prayer is its ability to articulate both personal and community prayer. Those who enter the Taizé church can have no doubt that they are being invited to take part in a communal prayer. The voices mix harmoniously, everyone is facing the same direction, and all are listening to the same Word. It's an assembly in expectant waiting. At the same time, prayer remains unmistakably personal. The dim lighting – only a few icons are illuminated – is an invitation to be inward-looking. Nobody can sing »Jesus Christ, your light shines within us. Let not my doubts or my darkness speak to me« without thinking of their own struggles with darkness, their own journey towards light. Singing the final verse of this song, »Let my heart always welcome your love« is already a means of relativizing the darkness, of denying its grip. In these struggles, and in each person's striving to be open to light, there is more than just a sum of individuals sitting side by side. To sing these words with others is to understand that the most personal battle is also a shared struggle, waged with brothers and sisters throughout the world (1 Peter 5:9). Agreeing to fight »the good fight of faith« means accepting one's share of suffering, while situating one's own inner struggle within a larger whole. We come to realize that we are all in the same boat where what is at stake is a life based on trust. And it is with the aim of helping us to persevere in that life of trust that God brings us together, allowing the dynamic of »becoming believers« to prevail over the dynamic of unbelief (John 20:27).

Silence

Silence is what makes each prayer personal. Can we compare it to the beautifully crafted case containing the jewel, highlighting the beauty of song? Or is it the other way around? Experiencing silence in prayer with others is not the same as a silence experienced in isolation. As one young



Irishman once said to me: »The songs prepare the way for silence. And my thoughts become good.« Perhaps the singing has pacified the heart; freed of its anxiety, it can be open to a presence. Silence then becomes an »inhabited« silence. God is present. And perhaps it's not too much to say, along with Psalm 34, that the goodness of that presence can be »tasted«, generating the desire to sing again.

I spoke of a pacified heart. But it would have been just as accurate to say »an awakened heart«, for what else is going on in this prayer if not an awakening of »the deepest heart«? The brothers of the community often hear young people speak of their experience at Taizé by saying: »I feel at home here.« They are obviously not referring to their accommodation or food (we wish them a more comfortable home and heartier meals!) but rather to a profound faith experience that has awakened what is most personal in them, that place which the Bible calls the »heart«, the true self, an identity that has nothing to do with performance, ostentation or artificial and cosmetic means of enhancing the self. They are talking about what it means to discover oneself as a child of God. To pray is to put on the robe of the beloved child.

Olivier Clément, an Eastern Orthodox Christian who has written one of the most insightful books on Taizé, has pointed out how rare are the occasions that allow for this awakening. This is what he had to say about prayer at Taizé:

There are times of silence during the prayers at Taizé, which are preceded and followed by singing; and the result of this is that the singing can penetrate them so that the silence becomes prayer. And in the prayerful silence, the deep forces that exist in everyone but which are normally dormant begin to wake up. [...] Our culture puts enormous value on the intelligence, on desire and sexuality and sometimes also on a kind of aggressiveness in group expression; but we put much less value on the »heart«, by which I mean the central part of the human being. [Just a few lines later, he write »the forces of the heart, the spaces of the heart, rest fallow.«] People today live mainly in these three dimensions: either the intellectual dimension; or that of aggressiveness and violence; or in the dimension of desire, which is constantly being beaten into



us by the whole atmosphere of the age. So the problem is, how can we make the intelligence descend, and how can we make the desire rise up into the »heart«? This is important because the heart is the crucible where they will find themselves purified in the fire of grace and where the human being can truly become unified and go beyond itself; it is the place where we can be unified within ourselves and opened up. (1997, 51)

And Olivier Clément, so well versed in the practices and writings of early Christians, added: »Christianity has a whole tradition of repetitions which can pacify us and which can, in a sense, empty the intellect of its agitation and allow it to be united to the 'heart'. And this makes us ready for prayer.« (53)

Distractions

Restlessness and distractions are not realities we get rid of at will. Those who wish to pray today often find it difficult to focus. Inner silence seems remote. The mind is forever busy, anxious, still mulling over the events of the day, plagued by worry and questions about what has been done or what one has not yet had time to do (which can be equally exhausting). Technology has made it possible for work to follow us just about everywhere. Endless email, texting, and phone calls compete for our limited time. All it takes is one glitch: the internet is down, or you are unexpectedly caught in traffic, and tensions quickly mount. Our ancestors, with fewer means at their disposal, had more modest appetites and were afforded more time to transition from one task to another. The accelerated pace of contemporary life has spawned unprecedented stress. It's hardly surprising that with this widespread nervous fatigue prayer is difficult, appearing almost out of reach. Nervous exhaustion is not abated by an abundance of words. In fact, their abundance increases one's feeling of being out of touch. Words slip to the surface without penetrating the heart, and the person who wants to pray either blames themselves for their inability or simply tires of the uninterrupted flow. This is where repetitive chanting can be useful because it doesn't demand unwavering attention. At first, the words may not get through to me or may reach me very little. As I sing, what I'm singing begins to penetrate me. *Nada te turbe, nada te espante.*



I'm being called upon to let go of my anxiety in a way that makes room for something else. Something manages to fracture my shell. I open up to a presence. But the worry remains. After leaving me for a few moments, it returns. My mind is once again summoned by my problems. I turn over a thousand solutions in my head. The singing continues, issuing the same call, beckoning me to let go. I become conscious once again of what I'm singing. Nowadays, our ability to focus, to pay attention is more tenuous, intermittent or impossible to predict. Demanding perfection in this area only increases frustration. Our prayer is poor. Prayer with repetitive chanting is the prayer of the poor.

Embers and the heart

I'd like to add one last remark on the subject of time. Speaking of prayer, a desert father explains that just as wood in contact with embers needs time to ignite, so does our heart. The heart too needs time. True, our busy schedules often force us to keep our prayer times short (granted, it's better than nothing), but the words of this desert father are also for our time. At Taizé, those who take part in the weekly meetings know that evening prayer goes on for a long time (in fact, no one knows when it ends). The brothers are all present for almost an hour, and then the community withdraws. As mentioned, several brothers remain, some to lead the songs (with the help of one or two young volunteers at Taizé), others to listen to young people who wish to speak about their spiritual life. While the singing continues, some priests are also available for the sacrament of reconciliation.

When, in response to an invitation, I travel outside Taizé to lead a prayer in a church, I'm sometimes worried about those who are not familiar with this style of prayer, who don't know that after a time of prayer together, the singing will continue and those who wish can leave freely, without having to wait for the last song. To make them feel more at ease, after an hour or so, I get up and go to the sacristy to remove my prayer robe and discreetly return to sit in the congregation, thinking that this way others will understand that they are free to leave. It's always a surprise to me that hardly anyone does. The chanting continues, sometimes for an extra hour. No one wants to leave the immense peace born of this prolonged prayer.



To the word »peace« we should add another key word in Brother Roger's life, perhaps the word he was most attached to in the last thirty years of his life. In a documentary on prayer with the songs of Taizé, Brother Roger explains what prayer should lead to. He too expresses himself like a desert father, deliberately laconic: »Prayer aspires to express a very simple, a very humble trust in God.« With what seems to me an intentional and educational abruptness, he adds: »Anything that departs from that humble trust leads nowhere.«

In order to find trust once again it can be necessary to sing for an extended period of time. In times of deep-felt anxiety, Brother Roger liked to gather the brothers in the village church for a prayer of praise. He remembered the words of the psalm: »I cry: 'Praised be the Lord and I am delivered from my enemies.'« (Psalm 18:3) Later, he wrote these words: »Dare to pray, dare to sing until serene joy returns.« (2006)

From protest to attestation

I once asked the philosopher Paul Ricœur why he regularly came to Taizé. He replied: »I need to verify my conviction that however radical evil may be, it is not as profound as goodness. And if religion, if religions, have a meaning, it's to liberate the core of goodness in humankind, to go and find it where it's completely buried.« The great philosopher added:

We must liberate this certainty, give it a language. And the language given here in Taizé is not that of philosophy, or even theology, but that of liturgy. And for me, liturgy is not just a practice, it's also a way of thinking. There's a hidden, discreet theology in liturgy, summed up in the idea that »the law of what is prayed [is] the law of what is believed«. (2002, 206)

To give a language to liberated goodness, one might say »to give a language to salvation«. The historian of dogma knows that the oldest texts in which the effects of God's saving action are acknowledged are not formal statements of doctrinal belief but liturgical hymns. One characteristic of these texts, as H. Schlier has pointed out, is that they insist on the significance of the event of salvation for believers and for the cosmos. (1972, 343)



Centred on Christ, these hymns do not attempt to define Christ or conceptually spell out his identity: they sing of what he has done, but in doing so, they effectively say who he is. We know, moreover, that the »soteriological argument« has constituted the backbone of all the christologies proposed by the Fathers (Doré 1982, 247).² It seems to me that Paul Ricoeur suggests something similar when he evokes prayer at Taizé. The climate, however, is no longer that of the early Church. Atheism has entered the scene. In a dense discourse that addresses questions of evil, the absurd and meaning, Paul Ricoeur traces the path that can be taken by a young person who participates in prayer at Taizé:

We are heirs to a civilization that has in fact killed God, in other words that has caused absurdity and meaninglessness to prevail over meaning, and this gives rise to a deep protest. I use this word »protest«, which is very close to »attest«. I would say that attesting follows from protesting, that nothingness, the absurd, death, are not the last word. That relates to my question of goodness because goodness is not only the response to evil, but it is also the response to meaninglessness. In protest there is the word *testis*, *witness*: you pro-test before you can at-test. At Taizé there is the road from protesting to attesting and this road passes by the law of prayer, the law of faith. Protest is still negative: you say no to no. And there you have to say yes to yes. There is thus a seesaw movement from protesting to attesting. And I think that it comes about through prayer. I was very touched this morning by the singing, those prayers in the vocative: »O Christ.« In other words, here we are neither in the descriptive nor the prescriptive mode but in the exhortative and in acclamation! And I think that acclaiming goodness is really the most basic hymn. (2002, 206–207)

2 The soteriological argument is used by the Fathers Church to speak of Christ's identity: in order to save us, Christ must be a true man, for he cannot save what he has not assumed and he must be God, for only God can divinize us. Christology and soteriology are thus inseparable.



The state of not being an orphan

Many people today, not only the young, are suspicious of the tidiness of definitions and wary of what claims to capture the divine in human concepts. They would agree with Philip Wheelwright: »To try to deal with all matters by logico-scientific language is as self-defeating as to try to capture water in a net, or a breeze in a bag.« (1962, 39) Their discovery of Christ as Savior may occur firstly by means of the liturgy, and particularly through singing, acclaiming who He is, receiving the gift of his peace, the healing of the heart that he works. There's something here that ties in with the emerging faith of the first Christian generations. If I understand Paul Ricœur's text correctly, the shift from protest to attestation takes place in prayer, because that's where the absurd fades and meaning begins to emerge. This meaning is not translated into concepts (even if liturgical expression is also linked to reflection), but is first and foremost sung.³ It is inseparable from a Presence. The last word in the face of evil is not one that I can utter; it has already been uttered by someone other than myself. This Other is called Savior, meaning that he does, has done and will do what I cannot. When singing this truth, I discover that I'm not an orphan, I enter this state of not-being-an-orphan, which is perhaps the best definition of prayer.

Perhaps we could express this in a different way: singing opens onto transcendence. The beauty of song points towards a non-threatening transcendence.⁴ Nowadays, helping others open up to transcendence is perhaps first and foremost about allowing them to sense a non-threatening presence. Then it becomes possible to pass from fear to trust, from isolation to communion, in gratitude and surprise that it is possible to mingle my voice with those of a multitude.

3 Reason nevertheless has a place. At Taizé, the morning prayer is followed by biblical reflections on faith led each day by brothers of the community. The listening I wanted to emphasize, would not be of the same quality without the experience of prayer.

4 I borrowed this expression from P. Gustave Martelet S.J., who used it in a different context.



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