

## ***Many Religions under one roof in France give meaning to Ecumenism, Brotherhood - An encounter with Frère Roger***

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TAIZE, France - They said it was a fad, that within a few years it would disappear and be replaced by some other craze.

But for some 3 decades now, this spiritual community north of Lyon has continued to be a rallying place for people from all over Europe seeking truth or inner peace in the hills of southern Burgundy.

For some mysterious reason, the tradition of visiting Taizé was maintained and passed on to new generations, and each Easter about 40,000 people make a pilgrimage here.

Founded in 1940 by Brother Roger, the son of a Protestant minister, Taizé has attracted hundreds of thousands of people from Western Europe and increasingly from Eastern Europe and even other continents.

During a recent visit, in the off-season for Taizé, there were about 1,000 guests and plenty of space to sleep.

As the years pass, travellers to Taizé are "becoming more mature in their understanding of life and God," said a guide in charge of welcoming visitors.

You can come to Taizé at any hour of the night and be welcomed and given a place to sleep, but it is better to give advance notice.

"In the 1960s and 1970s, some people were coming here arguing we should not pray because prayers were demobilizing people in their struggle against exploiters," said Brother Roger. "Today we do not hear so much this kind of argument; people are less disturbed by ideological or political debates."

When Brother Roger founded Taizé, he never thought of receiving so many visitors but wanted to start a monastic community dedicated to reconciliation, in particular between Christians of different denominations.

During the first years of Taizé, Brother Roger was mostly helping refugees and Jews trying to escape from the Nazi police.

This lasted until November 1942, when he himself had to take refuge in Switzerland to escape from the Gestapo.

After the war, the community helped the German soldiers from two prison camps near Taizé, because at that time they were the most disinherited people.

They tried to help villagers to overcome feelings of revenge toward the former occupying troops, and Brother Roger once told with sadness how he could not prevent the women of the village from beating to death a German soldier who happened to be a Catholic priest.

Later the community grew to a dozen members and the papal nuncio to Paris, Angello Roncalli, who later became Pope John XXIII, took the courageous step of allowing this small non-Catholic group to reopen a long-abandoned 12th century church in the village.

In the 1950s, visitors began to come, particularly from Switzerland and Germany, and in a gesture to make amends for the wartime occupation, a German group built a larger church which at that time looked much too big. Today, visitors come to Taizé to stay for a couple of days or for a week-long program, or sometimes for longer periods.

For a very modest price, they eat some simple food, often soup with more or less water according to the number of people, hot chocolate and biscuits and sleep under large tents and in wooden cabins.

The atmosphere is youthful but not over-excited with a daily program including various activities according to one's choice but interspersed with three periods of common prayer, singing and Bible reading in the morning, at noon and in the evening which everybody is supposed to attend and ample time for reflection.

At the center of an improvised village of tents and cabins lies the German built "Church of Reconciliation," where people gather for common prayer.

Inside, there are a few icons and it is dimly lit by colorful candles. Most people sit on the floor with the Taizé permanent brothers, dressed in white for the service, seated in the middle.

Some passages from the Bible, sometimes from the psalms, upon which everyone can meditate, are read in several languages. After the reading, short chants reminiscent of the Gregorians and easy for newcomers to learn, are repeated over and again, followed by a period of silence and prayer.

Taizé is not the kind of place where people are asked whether they have been saved, or where people argue with each other using Bible quotes. Rather, the purpose, Brother Roger told the New York City Tribune is to learn more "about the wide ocean of the heart". The elderly brother is still filled with enthusiasm and projects to bring together the youth from the Eastern and the Western regions of the world, as well as from Northern and Southern countries.

And surely, a striking aspect of Taizé is its international atmosphere including many people from Eastern Europe but also some Japanese and American youngsters discussing about peace in the world, a hot topic these days.

People from all religious backgrounds including atheists are welcomed at the daily services.

During the day, visitors can spend some time talking about personal problems with one of the 80 permanent members, or participate in group discussions and study about how to unite daily life with prayer and Bible teachings,

Topics such as what does it mean to "dedicate our lives to God" or on how to develop both an inner life and human solidarity are introduced by the brothers, and everyone in the group adds their personal contribution.

Some people go to Taizé for a silent or semi-silent retreat under the guidance of members of the community.

There are also daily "North-South, encounters" in which people from Western countries and under-developed countries get to know each other and discuss various projects and activities, brothers from Taizé having opened small Communities in India, Africa and Latin America.

In the evening, groups from various parts of the world like to perform songs, dances or sketches.

A strong point of Taizé is the genuine ecumenical character of the community. The brothers in Taizé come from various Christian backgrounds, and since 1966 sisters of an international Catholic community have come to Taizé to help them in welcoming the guests.

When joining the community, a new member makes a vow of celibacy like a Catholic monk, but the community is not under the authority of the pope or the Catholic church.

In the 1950s, Brother Roger tried in vain in a meeting with Pope Pius XII to persuade him not to make use of the dogma about the Assumption of Mary, as he was about to proclaim a doctrinal point.

Brother Roger argued that this would add a new obstacle on the way to reconciliation between Christians.

Since then, Brother Roger, a pioneer of ecumenism, has kept very good personal contacts with successive popes since John XXIII, and particularly with John Paul II. The current pontiff made an official visit to Taizé in 1986, having been here twice when he was Archbishop of Krakow in Poland, and he praised the work done here, calling Taizé "that little springtime."

Brother Roger emphasizes the centrality of the teachings of the Beatitudes among the New Testament scriptures as the main source of life in the community, and speaks about "the simple, compassionate and joyful way of life" that comes from putting the Beatitudes into practice.

Members of the community usually discourage visitors from remaining in Taizé for too long, asking them in to go back home and help revive their own parishes or local student organizations.

"Be a person of reconciliation" and build bridges between generations and between people of different backgrounds, they are exhorted by the brothers here.

Not only young people but an increasing number of retirees come here and are called to play a key role in sharing their experiences with young people and reviving Christian communities.

"There is no retirement age for Christ," 80-year-old Brother Roger is fond of saying. There are also several children in Taizé, and Brother Roger himself, after a visit to Mother Teresa in India, brought back an Indian girl who was near the point of dying, and adopted her.

Part of the magnetism exerted by Taizé may come from the personality of Brother Roger, and his ability to express Christian teachings in a simple and direct manner. In his speeches and writings, one often finds a reflection on suffering and the necessity to go through difficult times to learn to open one's heart to others and to forgive.

God, he insists, can never be the author of suffering, but He can make a good use of it

"The more a person wants to live in the absoluteness of God," he wrote, "the more essential it is for this absolute to be rooted in the midst of human suffering."

At the same time, he speaks of the simple joy of living the Beatitudes, and the peace coming from a trusting heart.

He does not want Taizé to become a powerful new movement. He prefers instead that it simply remain a place where, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "one passes through as one passes close to a spring of water."

For more information on Taizé, follow the link [La communauté de Taizé](#)