

A desire for God: Pilgrimage to Taizé

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The enormous ecumenical impact of the Taizé community, with its haunting music and its tradition of silent prayer and meditative chant, is astonishing given that the community never promoted itself. No doubt many American Christians who have made the pilgrimage to Taizé had to suppress their initial disappointment at its unprepossessing buildings and casual presentation. If the brothers of Taizé had just a touch of the American entrepreneurial spirit, surely they would have added a welcome center with a gift shop, some illustrated pamphlets, and a café with views of the Burgundy hills.

Taizé offers no brochures for the spiritual journey. It offers only space and silence, and some simple words for expressing one's longing for God.

The death of Taizé's founder, Roger Schutz, murdered last month, closes a chapter in the life of the community. In his reflections on Brother Roger, Lukas Vischer sums up the atmosphere of Taizé in three words: simplicity, commitment and freedom. These three traits seem intimately connected with one another: the simplicity of the words, coupled with the humble earnestness of the commitment behind them, creates an atmosphere of freedom in which diverse people can feel welcomed and challenged, and united in a "mere Christianity" of devotional practice.

The implicit assumption of Taizé and of its worship style is that the simplest words of scripture are sufficient material for a lifetime of meditation and response to God. No need to delve into theological argument or self-conscious engagement with the issues of the day. Brother Roger's own writings were markedly simple, and they preached simplicity. "Do we think that many words are needed in order to pray?" he asked. "No. A few words, even inept ones, are enough to entrust everything to God, our fears as well as our hopes."

Over the years observers have often expressed surprise that young people from the heart of secular Europe flocked to services at Taizé. Noting the community's appeal to the young, Pope Paul VI reportedly asked Brother Roger, "What is the key to the heart of the young?" To which Brother Roger replied, "We don't have a key and we

never will.”

If there is a key to Taizé’s appeal to the young, as well as a key to its appeal across denominations and confessions, it has something to do with its confidence in the power of prayer, however halting or feeble, to establish communion with Christ. As Brother Roger assured visitors, “The simple desire for God is already the beginning of faith.”

“All of us have doubts,” Brother Roger advised in his final letter to the community. “They are nothing to worry about.” But “our deepest desire is to listen to Christ, who whispers in our hearts.” And “the more we make our own a prayer which is simple and humble, the more we are led to love and to express it with our life.”