

BROTHER MARCELLIN THEEUWES, FORMER PRIOR OF THE GRANDE CHARTREUSE

## ***Brother Roger: A Life Close to the Gospel***

### **Who am I ?**

I was born in the Netherlands, in a Christian family, the youngest of seven children. From my early childhood, I realized I was called to the consecrated life, more specifically to the monastic cloister. At the age of 12 I entered the Juniorate of a Cistercian abbey; I wore the habit of that order until the age of 24, when the call to greater solitude became pressing. Then I joined the Carthusians, made profession and was ordained a priest. Recently I was prior of the Grande Chartreuse and minister general of the order for fifteen years. Currently, I am prior at the service of the Charterhouse of Montrieux in the Var.

### **My Meeting with Brother Roger**

I met Brother Roger during my novitiate years as a Carthusian (1962-1966). During the recreations we used to discuss the Council, ecumenism and Teilhard de Chardin. This meeting with Brother Roger never took place physically, but our novice master put us into contact with Brother Roger's writings: *Living Today for God*, *The Dynamic of the Provisional*—especially that one!—*Unanimity in Pluralism*; were writings that marked me deeply and that guided in large part my inner journey.

What struck me in those small volumes is that nothing was there systematically. Brother Roger did not provide a spirituality, a theology or a philosophical vision. He simply shared the fruit of his meditation on the Word of God, the fruit of his daily prayer and experience with the brothers of the community and the people from all over, encountered for years on the hill of Taizé. Everything is simple, direct and goes straight to the heart and soul.

Even though, over time, his influence gradually spread to all the continents and his journeys at the end of the year with young people bore the name of the great metropolises of the globe, Brother Roger was always the same simple man, not changing anything in his appearance but gradually gaining in depth through his prayer.

Until one day, ten years ago, when he was deep in prayer to God during evening prayer, God allowed him to seal his constant availability by the total gift of his life, by the shedding of his blood. He thus became a Christiform icon of God's holiness and mercy among men; his vulnerability itself was the mark of his holiness.

## **BROTHER ROGER'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE RENEWAL OF RELIGIOUS LIFE**

Gathered here to recall his memory and to let ourselves be questioned by the message he delivered to us, let us ask what personal dimension the first Prior of Taizé brought to religious commitment in the Church, and to the ways in which this commitment will have to be expressed in the XXI<sup>st</sup> century to remain a living invitation to encounter God.

Religious life has a long history, almost as long as the time of the Church itself. It has taken on very different forms according to the times, the places and the charisma of the founders. But it has always wanted to be a realization of the Gospel's call to holiness, in the steps of Christ. A gaze

directed towards God, with concern for the sanctification of human beings and the transfiguration of the world and the created order.

Brother Roger's personal contribution is clearest in his short "*Rule of Taizé*" (1954) which begins: "*Brother, if you submit to a common rule, you can do so only for the sake of Christ and the Gospel*" (p. 3). Then he adds: "*This rule contains the minimum necessary for a community to grow up in Christ and devote itself to a common service of God*" (p. 5). And indeed, in this short writing we find no structured teaching on prayer, spirituality and asceticism, no directions about food, sleep, the number of psalms to say and the time to devote to *lectio* or to manual labor, but only the indication of some basic duties and personal attitudes so that the community can be built up harmoniously in the service of God. Among them, Brother Roger particularly favors "*joy, simplicity and mercy*" and "*limpidity (purity) of heart.*" (The expression returns four times in the chapter on celibacy. I want to emphasize that it means more than simple transparency. It touches the being and makes one think of the purity of water, of crystal.) In so doing, he describes a religious commitment not conditioned by a particular observance or spiritual teaching, but the entry into a life, a daily life truly inspired by and close to the Gospel.

Historically, founders have drawn upon the Gospel to propose a way of life for personal sanctification and service of God in the Church. The references most often quoted are the following: "If someone wants be a follower of mine they must deny themselves, take up their cross and walk in my steps.... Whoever wants to save their life will lose it; whoever loses their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16: 24-27). "Not everyone can understand this language, but only those to whom it is given.... And there are eunuchs who have become so for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. Let those who can understand, understand" (Matthew 19:10-12). "You are still lacking one thing: sell all you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me!" (Mark 10:21); "There is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or sisters or mothers or children or fields who will not receive a hundred times as much now in this age, and in the age to come eternal life" (Luke 18:29-30).

However, there is a reference that Brother Roger seemed to favor and that he cites four times, it is the passage from St. Matthew 6:16-34, which corresponds to one of his major concerns: *living God's today in the dynamic of the provisional*. I quote: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Having no ties to this world, not projecting oneself into the next day which is not assured, but living the present moment before the face of God who is always, at the same time, total transcendence and merciful closeness. Brother Roger links this attitude of detachment and waiting in the provisional directly to poverty. "*The poor of the gospel,*" he says, "*learn to live without certainty about the morrow, in joyful confidence that all will be given*". And again, "*The spirit of poverty is to live in the gladness of each day.*" (Rule, "Community of Possessions", p. 83).

## LIVING IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

By accepting the present moment as a fullness of life, man comes closer to God in both his unity and his Trinitarian relation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Attraction for silence is born of this relationship, which makes the soul sensitive to listen and creates space to enter the presence of the Present. Silence hears what is being said in the secret of the heart, which is like "*the holy land, the place where God and his servant converse frequently, as occurs between friends.*" (Statutes of the Carthusian Order, 1.4.1). In this way silence becomes the language proper to the inner self

present to God and creates the conditions for inward prayer and worship, for listening and waiting. (It is remarkable that, for Brother Roger, waiting and contemplation often overlap, and have almost the same meaning.)

## THE PROPHET HAS HIS SECURITY IN GOD

As part of the “Year of Consecrated Life”, what can we retain from the example and the words that Brother Roger left us? To better understand him, we could begin with Pope Francis’ proposal to religious men and women to be prophets. What does being a prophet mean? All the accounts of prophetic vocation in the Bible emphasize some common features: the prophet is chosen unexpectedly, almost against his will. He is sent where he does not want to go. He accepts his mission as a cross falling on him and which he painfully bears. He would like to be able to escape from what God asks of him. By answering anyway, the prophet no longer belongs to himself; he is led totally beyond himself and is obliged to make great sacrifices. Under the mighty hand of God, he is forced to accept no dichotomy between how he lives and what he says. The unity of his life and his words is the very basis of his credibility, otherwise he immediately becomes a false prophet. The prophet can accomplish this mission only through the strength of the One who lives within him and has sent him.

Currently, prophets are primarily the religious who go far away—geographically but also metaphorically, let us think of the peripheries of Pope Francis!—to embrace and share the precariousness of the most deprived, in whatever situation. But it is also a call addressed to us who live and work in a world of abundance. The dynamic of the provisional advocated by Brother Roger is mainly meant for us who need to leave our securities and our assurances behind to join, by the heart and by love, those who not know what tomorrow will bring. This dynamic is the condition of being able to live in “*joy, simplicity and mercy*”, as recommended by the Rule, the only arguments able to convince others, all others. “*The spirit of poverty*,” said again Roger, “*lies in the joy of the person whose security is in God.*” (*Dynamic of the Provisional*).

## GOSPEL SIMPLICITY

Let us end with some simple advice that Roger gives in one of his last writings, *Glimmers of Happiness*: “*I realized that in order to go forward with confidence it was essential to root my life in a few simple Gospel realities to which I could constantly return. ...those who attempt to surrender themselves to the Holy Spirit have to allow themselves to be built up inwardly by means of a few intuitions from the Gospel, sometimes discovered early in life. They can become a kind of rock on which to rely.*” (p. 73-74)

### A Question to Conclude

Would the grace proper to Brother Roger for the current renewal of consecrated life not consist in bringing us back, with a gentle hand but with a great deal of persuasion, to the simplicity of the Gospel?