

BRIDGET HEWITT

An extraordinary gift

After spending just a week with the brothers of Taizé, one retreatant found herself more able to embrace the source of all being back home amid the frenetic rush of everyday life

To those British Christians who have heard of it, Taizé is likely to mean a form of worship centred on singing repetitive chants, perhaps in candlelight. Some find this a helpful way of worship, others find it at times atmospheric, still others not. Some are attracted by it; others less so.

Taizé is in fact a tiny village in rural Burgundy, on the edge of which lives the Community of Brothers, which, for the past 60 years, has been welcoming people to join their way of life and worship for a while. Many thousands of people, mainly young adults, go to Taizé every year. Why do they go, and what do they discover?

To find out, I recently spent a week in Taizé with a group of young people, mainly 15- to 20-year-olds, from the United Kingdom, and returned with a profound sense that each person in the group had in some way been awakened to a dimension of life of which they had perhaps been scarcely aware. One 15-year-old girl described it as “one of the best experiences of my life [which] has really changed my whole outlook”. Another said it gave “a lasting impression about the way the world should be and how to live”.

What are the elements of a week in Taizé that enable this changed perspective to awaken within us? Perhaps the first thing that hits one on arrival, at least during the summer weeks, is the sheer number of people from all over the world. Learning ways of communicating beyond the boundaries of language is one of the great gifts of a week spent at Taizé. It is to feel oneself opened to new dimensions of being. While it may not be possible to speak at great depth, owing to lack of a common language, the efforts of sharing and trying to understand bring a sense of communion that is perhaps rarely reached in our everyday life.

Then there is the simplicity of life – life in some way stripped to its bare essentials. Each day revolves round the times of worship: morning prayer, mid-day prayer, evening prayer, each heralded by the wonderful bells of Taizé. It also revolves around queuing. Living in a reasonably small area with between 2,000 and 3,000 others

involves queuing not only for food and showers, but even sometimes for getting into church.

One learns quite quickly the important fact that one is only one person among many others. Both food and living conditions are simple, very much part of the experience of Taizé. The simple and “back-to-basics” lifestyle comes to be experienced as something refreshing, making one acutely aware of the consumerism that surrounds so much of life at home.

Added to these is the time spent with the brothers. Each day, one of them leads a Bible session with groups of people, formed either

by age or by language. The brothers also lead workshops on a variety of themes: these reflect their commitment to being alongside the marginalised of the earth, and encourage thought as to how to live in a confusing world. My experience of the input from the brothers is that it provides, in a sense, the “meat” of the week in Taizé, food to chew on throughout the times of quiet and reflection, an offering of a different way of looking at and thinking about life.

Finally, and crucially, there is the time spent in the church. The church in Taizé is huge, with no seats: an open space of presence and quiet beauty. During the times of prayer it is of course anything but empty: thousands of people sit cross-legged, or in whatever position they can find comfort, crammed together on the floor or steps. The brothers, in their white habits, sit in the centre of the vast church during each of the thrice-daily prayer times.

Their presence there is the hub, the essential centre, from which all else flows. The worship of Taizé follows the ancient monastic tradition, singing the psalms and reading the Scriptures. However, what dominates each time spent in the church is the repetitive singing of short chants, and the 10-minute period of silence.

While these two aspects have come to epitomise the worship of Taizé, and are probably the overriding reason for its attraction to so many people, I think it is important to realise that what is essentially happening

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is a sharing in the regular prayer of a monastic community. And it is this sharing of prayer – perhaps unrealised in some ways – that comes to permeate our beings, as we live within its precincts and let it wrap itself around our inner selves.

Chanting in repetitive phrases, as has been realised by many of the world’s religions, is a very real way in which to enter a deeper dimension of ourselves, to reach under the surface of lives lived too often in a superficial way.

Most of us are, as has been well said, “circumference people”, and it is not easy for us, in our world of instant access and delivery,

to reach a deeper level of life. The idea of God, too, is so often only a concept that lives on the periphery of our consciousness. What begins to emerge in Taizé, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say what we find ourselves being invited into, is a meeting – a meeting with our own deeper selves, but also a meeting with a greater Presence, which many of us will name God.

The time of silence, wrapped around as it is by the chanting, provides time for this meeting to sink into deeper places within ourselves. Whether or not God is named as such, a week spent partaking in this regularity of prayer and invitation to depth is to experience an opening of oneself, and an extraordinary expansion of vision. It is like a deep sense of homecoming, a glimpse or a beckoning as if from a far-off place.

This awakening, this depth of meeting and meaning that begins to permeate one's being during the week in Taizé, is almost impossible to describe once one returns home. It is as if there is a tiny seed planted within each person, and the soil and conditions that this seed finds in Taizé allow it to begin to grow and to find spaces to spread itself that it has never found before. Each of the ingredients, as I have described above, are part of and essential to the whole, but central to it all is the prayer of the brothers, which flows out to and over the huge numbers of people who visit every year.



Young people involved in daily discussion following the Bible session with one of the brothers

spent at Taizé is an extraordinary gift, providing a window through which one sees life very differently. It offers a glimpse of living once again united to a source, to the Source of all Being, to God. Difficult as it is to hold on to that once we return to the frenetic life that most of us live, it is a glimpse that lingers in

one's psyche, an invitation to continue on the journey of exploration.

The way may not be clear, but the light that shines out from the heart of the prayer of the brothers remains as a magnet. The question that we really need to work at is how to enable that return to the source, that reality of prayer, to become available in our daily life. This perhaps is the real challenge of Taizé, the vital question that the community of Taizé is inviting – and encouraging – us to embrace.

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