

Changing times in the Church and in Europe

I am very touched by your invitation to speak with you today on what is the birthday of Frère Roger who began our Taizé Community in 1940. He felt called to live a sign of unity among Christians in the wake of the Second World War, a sign of reconciliation which would make the Gospel credible and help build peace in Europe and throughout the world. His love for what he would later call the mystery of communion which is the Body of Christ, the Church, was central in that. As he was an observer at the Second Vatican Council, the participation of my predecessor, Frère Alois, in the Synod on Synodality, was a great joy for our community.

What I am about to share cannot pretend to be an academic study. It is based on our experience of welcoming young Europeans in Taizé, but also from further afield. What I will say is not exhaustive but covers three points which seem important to me and my brothers in the current context.

I will look firstly at the question of what it means to listen to witnesses of hope in today's world, then secondly touch on the urgent need to adapt our forms of worship and finally try to understand what is the common testimony that we can carry together. Underlying certainly the second two points is the question, "How can the Church be a place where people with different and sometimes (at least in part) incompatible convictions can come together?"

1. Listening to witnesses of hope in today's world

Since the ending of the Covid pandemic, we have been confronted with what seems like an ever-increasing wave of anxiety, fears and pressure from all kinds of different directions. The impact of social media brings into play a "click mentality" where we move from one item to the next with little time to reflect or step back from what we are seeing. The need to be "liked" or the role of certain influencers increases fighting within and fears without for many young adults today.

For many it is already too late to find a solution to the climate crisis. War is present on and close to our European continent. In many countries, the presence of people who for various reasons have migrated from elsewhere is presented as a threat. Fears are deftly exploited by politicians of increasingly many different political colours.

And yet, when we listen well, we can encounter people of hope in the midst of all this. As I prepared the text that we use for our meetings in Taizé this year, entitled "Hoping beyond all hope", I realised that I couldn't honestly write about hope purely from a theological starting point from my safe room in beautiful Burgundy. My experience is that we can only truly do this when we make an active choice confront these different situations face on and to meet up with those who are exposed to them. This is the "Chiesa in uscita", so dear to Pope Francis.

I visited and met with young people from Ukraine, from Lebanon and the West Bank, and also from Myanmar. My only question to them was, what gives you hope in the situation you find yourself in? What came out of these conversations was an incredible sense of a rooted, incarnated faith. A trust in the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus. A firm hope that suffering and death would never have the last word.

In situations where I expected only despair and lack of hope, something was alive. More than enabling young people to simply survive, what they expressed in turn push them to commit themselves for others who were in a worse situation than them. In many places the local church was an important support.

These conversations gave the fabric for the text I prepared. Let each of us dare to go out and meet these people of hope in the situations of distress that are closer to our homes than we often see. How do these voices convert us? How do they lead us to link up with others, from within the Church but even more so with people of goodwill from outside it.

As we listen, are we not led by the Holy Spirit on the path of synodal conversation as communion grows through active participation and shared mission?

2. The urgent need to adapt our forms of worship

During a visit to Rome last March, with my brothers we were invited to prepare an ecumenical prayer service for all who were sick and in particular for Pope Francis at the invitation of friends from the Methodist World Council and the World Communion of Reformed Churches. The Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity and the Vicariate of Rome also took part actively.

A simple prayer of song, psalm, Gospel reading, silence, intercession, the Our Father, a blessing given at the same time by representatives of the different Churches and further songs to close constituted the make up of this time of worship.

Over the following days, several people said to me, “Should we not have more regular ecumenical prayers in Rome, because they give us a greater degree of freedom than the usual forms available in the Catholic Church?” Their words questioned me.

The form we used mirrored our way of praying in Taizé and which was used in a collaboration with many different movements and communities for the “Together” prayer vigil which took place on September 23, 2023 shortly before the first session of the Synod on Synodality, to invoke the Holy Spirit on the work of the Synod. The common blessing given by Pope Francis together with around 20 leaders of different Churches remains a very strong image.

But is this really an invitation to hold more ecumenical prayers? Perhaps. Or is it more an invitation to reflect on the importance of adapting our forms of worship? Certainly.

When at the end of a week in Taizé, we ask young people, what has touched you most, they almost always say “the silence”. They speak of the silence which surrounds our village, but even more so of the 8 minutes of silence which follow the reading of the Word during our thrice daily community prayer.

When we see young people today, we surely don’t imagine that a thirst for silence could be at the heart of their longing, do we? And yet that is our experience in Taizé. It takes a few days for them to understand, but by the end of the week, the silence is not long enough for them! Their spiritual thirst is quenched first and foremost by silence.

In a hyper-connected world where we are constantly solicited by notifications and advertisements, where communication is expected to be immediate, do we not need to create havens of peace in our worship where people can re-centre themselves in the essential?

It was the experience of God's people in the desert or on the mountain, embodied by Jesus in his earthly ministry, the longing of the desert mothers and fathers and the monastic tradition that grew out of their way of life.

The other thing which strikes young people who visit us is the ease with which they can take part in the worship. The simplicity of the songs, the absence of someone standing or sitting in the front leading the worship, the place given to the Word of God, but an attention to not use too many words, all contribute to the impression of being included in worship rather than having to make an effort to join in.

What is amazing is that all these young people come from different countries, different Churches and speak different languages. Worship becomes a synodal experience as each one discovers the beauty of praise in a communion which goes beyond what they normally see in their own parish.

Yet our parishes today are multilingual and multicultural. How can the times of worship give value to the differences and help us to rejoice in the gifts of each culture or tradition?

A final point: during our Sunday Eucharist in Taizé, young people prepare the altar and bring the gifts at the offertory. They then remain in the choir of the church during the Eucharistic prayer. Immediately, this gives an image of the People of God being present as the priest consecrates the gifts which become the Body and Blood of Christ. The priest is not isolated but surrounded by the people, perhaps as Jesus was with his friends during his final meal with them.

Can we seek more visibility for the People of God in this and other ways during our Sunday celebrations?

3. What is the testimony that we can carry together?

We encounter a huge diversity of spiritual expression today. How can we listen to and accompany the different ways in which spiritual thirst is expressed? In our unstable world, some people are drawn towards more clear-cut forms of spirituality seeking a way of worship that seems sure and rooted in a certain conception of tradition.

Yet at the same time, we meet what seems to me an increasing fluidity in spiritual identity. A while ago, I read an article in "La Croix" which spoke of certain young people as being "Tradismatic", taking part one week in certain forms of worship and in the next in something entirely different. Is this the product of a consumer society mentality of tasting what attracts us in the moment and then moving on to something else? Or an events-based pastoral approach? Or does it reflect that many people live with complex identities?

Changing denomination seems to be more and more common today. Wounded by such and such an experience, people seek comfort in another Church. Or simply they feel more welcomed elsewhere than in the Church they grew up in.

On the other hand, it is not uncommon in Taizé to meet with young people who describe themselves as non-believers or even atheist, but who take part willingly in the times of prayer and Bible sharing. How important it is with such youth to listen first, to confirm that we are happy to welcome them and not to immediately enter into judgements about how we might see some of their views. If they have taken the step of asking to take part in a week of retreat in a Christian community, do we not need to trust that somewhere the Holy Spirit is at work in their lives?

And when they ask questions, will we have the simplicity and humility to put ourselves truly at their level and express our own faith in a non-imposing but welcoming manner? In that way, through the wind that blows where it wills, they will help us in our own conversion.

Is not the common testimony that we can carry today, that of belonging to a worship community where all are welcomed (Pope Francis' famous Lisbon WYD "todos, todos, todos") and where through a process of listening and accompaniment, where the pastoral gifts of all the baptised valorised? Where even the non-baptised can feel welcome?

On the inter-religious level, what a privilege it was for us in Taizé to receive Easter greetings from the local Muslim community where the imam speaks of the importance of the message of joy, peace and forgiveness that the feast of feast proclaims! And that is the result of meeting together and listening to each other. Can I dare to say that even people of other religions contribute to our synodal conversion?

As a rabbi friend once said to us in Taizé, whilst speaking about the conflict in the Holy Land: "It's not easy to hold those multiple, and sometimes opposing, truths, all at once. But it's something I feel I must do."

Holding together multiple and sometimes opposing truths together? If "through Christ, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col 1.20), then is that not our challenge as a synodal Church today?

Brother Matthew,
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