

# Taize Monks Dedicated to Christian Unity

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In the late 1940's, Bishop Julien Lebrun of the diocese of Autun, France, did an unparalleled thing: he opened the parish church of Taize to regular Protestant worship. This action was, to say the least, unusual; it was an unusual response to an unusual situation.

The first community of Presbyterian monks, having taken up residence in Taize, had no place to hold their eucharistic service and sing their monastic office. And so, with a charity that he has been showing to them ever since, Bishop Lebrun gave them unrestricted use of the old Romanesque church in the small, hilltop town.

On a warm day last August, I got off a train shortly after noon at the tiny station of Taize. There was no one at the station, so I set off on foot with my suitcase along the road which leads across a small valley to the hill upon which the town is located.

As I walked slowly under the hot sun, stopping frequently to rest, I wondered what my reception would be like. To tell the truth, I was a bit hesitant, since I had given no advance warning of my arrival and did not even know whether I would be able to stay the night and take the next day's train. Only late did I read the Rule of Taizé which states, "It is Christ Himself whom we receive in guest." I learned before I left that the monks follow the spirit of this rule to the letter.

When I finally reached the village, I saw a young man dressed in work clothes in a garden off the main street.

"Je voudrais parler avec un moine," I called out to him. "I'm one of the monks," came the surprising reply in the most American of accents.

He turned out to be Brother Pascal Walsh, who had come from San Francisco to join the Community. He is one of sixty monks, whose average age is only about thirty. They come from over a half dozen different countries: France, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, and the United States.

While waiting for the arrival of the guest master, Brother Jean Paul, Brother Pascal took me to a nearby building in which are displayed articles for sale. Since the monks of Taize refuse to accept any gifts, they must support themselves from other sources. They publish books and a magazine, make phonograph records of their chant, paint pictures and sculpture, make pottery and ceramics, practice medicine, and are members of an agricultural cooperative.

Many of the books are written by Max Thurian, the principal theologian of the Community, and by Roger Schutz, the Prior, whose "Living for God" has an introduction by Cardinal Cushing, who said that he was "deeply moved by the timeless spirituality which is reflected in its meditative pages."

Brother Jean Paul soon arrived and conducted me to the guest house, which looks out upon the gently rolling hills of Burgundy. We sat and talked for a while, and he told me about the history of Taize and the life that is lived there.

THE HISTORY of Taize actually begins in 1940 after the fall of France, when Roger Schutz, founder and Prior of the Community, who was then a theological student in Switzerland, went to the almost abandoned village of Taize, north of Lyon. For two years he lived there, giving help to refugees, many of them Jews fleeing from the Nazis in nearby occupied France. He returned to Switzerland for a time, then moved back to Taize to begin the foundation of a monastic community. It was an appropriate location, being only a few miles from Cluny, the great monastic center of the Middle Ages.

On Easter morning in 1949 the first seven brothers made



Catholic parish church at Taize where Protestant monks began their unique program of "reconciliation" between divided Christians.



Interior of medieval Catholic church used by Taize monks prior to building their own new structure.

their profession and began their life of poverty, celibacy, and obedience. Each brother is counseled by the Rule never to resign himself "to the scandal of the separation of Christians" and is urged to be "consumed with burning zeal for the unity of the Body of Christ."

This, then, is the purpose for which Roger Schutz founded the Community: to work toward and pray for the visible unity of all Christians, the realization of Christ's wish that "all may be one."

In the relatively short time since its foundation, the Community has become an important force in the growing ecumenical movement. In recognition of this, Prior Roger Schutz and Sub-prior Max Thurian were invited by Pope John XXIII to be observers at the Vatican Council.

The life of the monks is centered about the three-daily singing of the office, which is made up of psalms, prayers

of unity and reconciliation of the father with his son, of the husband with his wife, of the believer with the unbeliever, of the Christian with his separated brother.

This church, as every other such building built by the Sign of Reconciliation, is meant to be a symbol of the brotherhood that man yearns for and seeks so much for in our day.

On the feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1962, more than one thousand persons gathered for the dedication of the Church of the Reconciliation.

The group was a very distinguished one, including Bishop Lebrun of Autun, also the Archbishop of Rouen, four Catholic abbots, two Anglican bishops, the Lutheran archbishop of Sweden, three priests of the patriarchate of Moscow, and many others.

The litany sung that day contained invocations for Pope John XXIII, and Cardinal Bea and Ottaviani.

The following day, Bishop Lebrun said Mass in the crypt, which is reserved for Catholic services. He spoke warmly of the bonds of charity which existed between the Community and himself since they once came to his diocese.

IN CORMATIN, a small town nearby, study sessions and retreats are held regularly. These "Cormatin Encounters" are centered on ecumenical themes, the participants concerning themselves principally with way of promoting the unity of Christ's Church. During my visit, there were forty Catholic college students there, accompanied by two Benedictine priests, who spent several days there in earnest discussion and prayer. Many such groups come and go throughout the year.

Towards seven o'clock the afternoon of my arrival, I made my way from the guest house to the Church of the Reconciliation, which is located just outside the village. Nearby I saw a group of students from all over Europe hard at work on foundations of the new building which will replace the one used for the Cormatin Encounters. As I reached the church, I joined the stream of visitors which continues steadily each day, reaching its peak at the hours of the office.

Prests and nuns, boy scouts and youth organizations, those attending the Cormatin Encounters, and many families and individuals were gathered in the arrival of the monks. (Catholics have the bishop's special permission to join in the office.)

Promptly at seven o'clock, the solemn, white-robed figures filed in silently and took their places in the choir in front of the altar. After a few moments of quiet reflection the office began. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity," they sang in the words of the psalmist. "May God look with favor upon us, that men may know His way on earth, His saving power among all nations."

After the office a group of about twenty of us who were going to remain overnight made our way through pouring rain back into town.

A Calvinist pastor from Dakar, Africa, seeing that I had no raincoat, shared his umbrella with me during our walk to the guests' refectory. "Just call me St. Martin," he quipped, referring to the saint who had shared his cloak in bad weather with someone in need.

A welcome fire in the huge, open fireplace greeted us where the simple, monastic supper was provided. The flames flickered and danced on the rude, brick walls, and the chill of the damp evening was quickly dispelled. We sat and ate without talking during the first part of the meal, with the strains of a Bach sonata as an effective counterpoint to our reflective silence. Then, at a sign from the guest master, who had placed us in German, French, and English language groups, we finished the meal in spirited conversation, which continued before the fire long after the meal had ended.

There were two Anglican curates from the slums of London several Protestant seminary students, a Salesian who had interrupted his missionary studies a year before ordination to fulfill his military duties, and a French priest, Father Feder, whose missals are as well-known in France as Father Stedman's in the United States.

The next morning I said Mass in the crypt of the church. It is very chaste in style, in keeping with the over-all architecture of the church. Next to the altar is Brother Eric's painting of the Blessed Mother, done in the style of a Byzantine icon. The prayers of the Mass were answered by some of the members of the Benedictine group who had come for the Cormatin Encounter. In the flickering candlelight I offered the holy sacrifice of the Mass for the intercession so close to Pope John's heart, the reunion of all Christians.

Later that afternoon, as I left Taize, I reflected on what Roger Schutz had said about "the meaning of the Community of Taize. He sees the Commu-

## Taize Prior Voices Hopes For Unity

Vatican City (RNS)—Vatican Radio, in an unusual step, broadcast excerpts from a press interview in which a French Protestant, guest observer to the Vatican Council's second session stressed the importance of the scheme on ecumenism.

The observer was Brother Roger Schutz, prior of the Protestant community of Taize, founded in 1959 for the purpose, among others, of helping to bring about reconciliation between divided Christians.

"Without ecumenism," the Vatican station quoted him as saying, "it is impossible to bring about that pastoral spirit of the masses at which the great Council session was aiming."

"If we are not to find unity in a visible manner, how shall we be able to approach the millions of non-baptized persons or the hundreds of millions of the baptized but non-practicing?"

Pope Paul VI and Pope John XXIII noted the sorriest part of our whole position, which consists in being separated within ourselves in a constant process of introversion in our Christian society, of being incapable of going out to seek the non-Christian masses who are growing stronger in number every day.

"The Council will reach its goal if it succeeds in working out a way of entering into contact with the contemporary world."

Brother Schutz attended Council sessions as a guest of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

unity as a living witness to the division that exists among Christians, a division which he terms "intolerable."

Shortly after having lost his faith at age eleven, he had occasion to stay for a time with a Catholic family. He had experienced the sincere and lively piety of his own Protestant family; now he saw a Catholic family living a life of deep faith. He saw both families living a Christian life of deep piety, yet there was a communication between them, despite the fact that they both turned to Christ as the source of their inner lives.

He made himself a promise that if he ever returned to Christianity, he would do all that he could to help heal this separation among Christians.

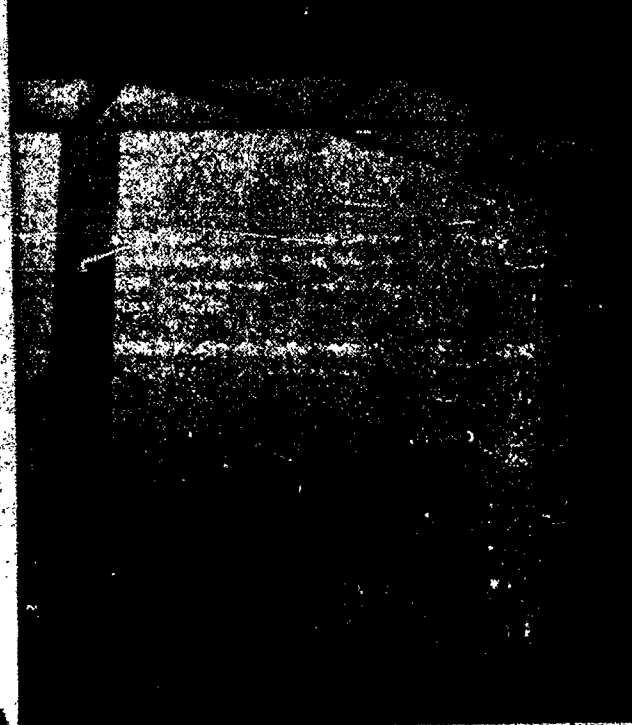
It is precisely this question of communication to which the ecumenical movement is addressing itself at the present moment. Christians have been faced since the Reformation with the situation of the followers of Christ lining up against one another in the name of Christ. A tragic irony!

"See the Christians: how they love one another," has not been a remark that has been made often during the sad times which have succeeded the break. Each side has blamed the other for this deplorable situation.

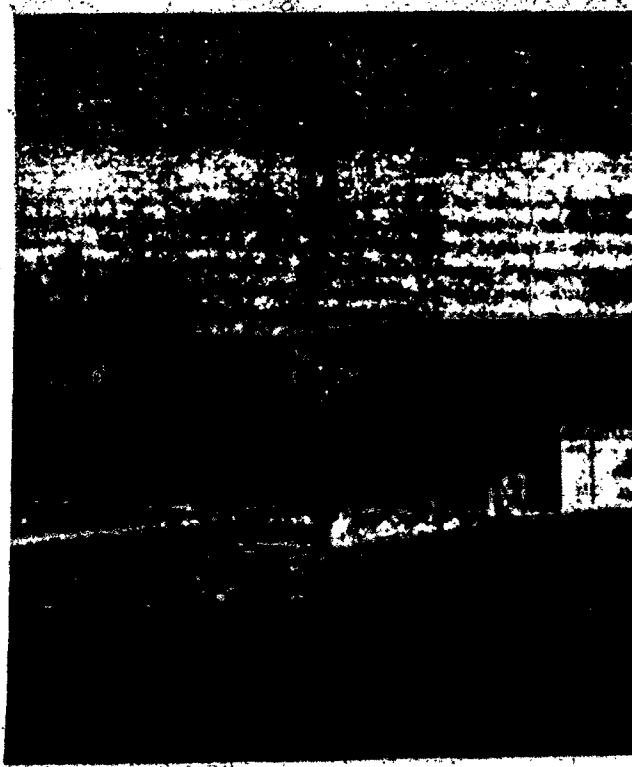
Pope John XXIII, who felt deeply this rending of the seamless garment of Christ, spoke thus to the clergy of Rome: "We do not wish to put anyone in history as a trial; we shall seek to establish who was right and who was wrong. Responsibility is divided. We only want to say: Let us come together, let us make an end of our divisions."

And so, after four hundred years, we have at last begun to speak with one another, to communicate with one another on this question that means so much. The rather unlovely, but useful, name given to this beginning of communication is the "Dialog."

"Let us come together, let us make an end of our divisions." What a typical expression of



Monastery church of Protestant monks at Taize, France.



Church of Reconciliation is built on hillside in central France, serves Protestant monks and, in crypt chapel, Catholic priests.

Pope John's fatherly heart this discussion our mutual problems and difficulties will not suffice to compose the very real and deep differences that separate us."

It is difficult to see how any one can deny that unity will come day come about. Christ Himself said, "There will be one fold, and one shepherd." During the course of His solemn discourse at the Last Supper, Jesus prayed to His Father that "all may be one." No one can conceive that the prayer of Jesus will ultimately remain without effect simply because of the obstacles that men may place in the way of its fulfillment. If we believe in Him, we know that all will be one. The great problem is, "How will this be accomplished?"

It is unrealistic to think that unity will eventually come about by itself, or that God will bring it about merely by His own divine action. God works through men; He expects the cooperation of men in the working out of His will here on earth.

It is most likely that God will bring about unity, not by some sudden and marvelous flash of a new revelation, but rather in a way adapted to the ways of men—a long, slow process, aided powerfully by His grace, yet in harmony with the human condition.

Roger Schutz and the Community of Taize, Cardinal Bea and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, Jesuit Father Gustave Weigel and Presbyterian Rev. Robert McAfee Brown, and all those engaged in the ecumenical movement and the Dialog are realistic, too. They know well that a few kind words cannot wipe out hundreds of years of bitterness, and that a mere willingness to

His inspiration and with His help, have done all that we can in our poor, human way."

The Dialog is being carried out as it should be by trained theologians under the direction and with the encouragement of the Holy See and the bishops. The Catholic who has not been expertly trained will not be able to participate profitably in the Dialog.

But every Catholic can participate in the ecumenical movement.

In practical terms, he may participate in three ways. First, every Catholic should recognize the dimensions of the problems and should never be resigned in the words of the Rule of Taize, "to the scandal of the separation of Christians." Secondly, the Catholic should be "consumed with burning zeal for the unity of the Body of Christ," and pray frequently and fervently that this unity may be achieved. Thirdly, he should exercise the deepest and warmest charity to his fellow men, whether they be Protestants, Orthodox, Jews, or unbelievers.

Pope John, in meeting a group of Jews stepped towards them with wide-open arms and said, "I am Joseph, your brother." His spirit should animate our contacts with all of God's children.

Roger Schutz frequently quoted St. John of the Cross who said that we shall be judged by love. Pope John gave us practical lessons in love that have had tremendous and far-reaching influence both inside and outside the Catholic Church. Pope Paul is continuing in John's footsteps in showing love. Those who are not Catholics will, indeed, be judged by love and we, too, will be judged by the love of God and love our neighbor. That is one test that we must not fail.

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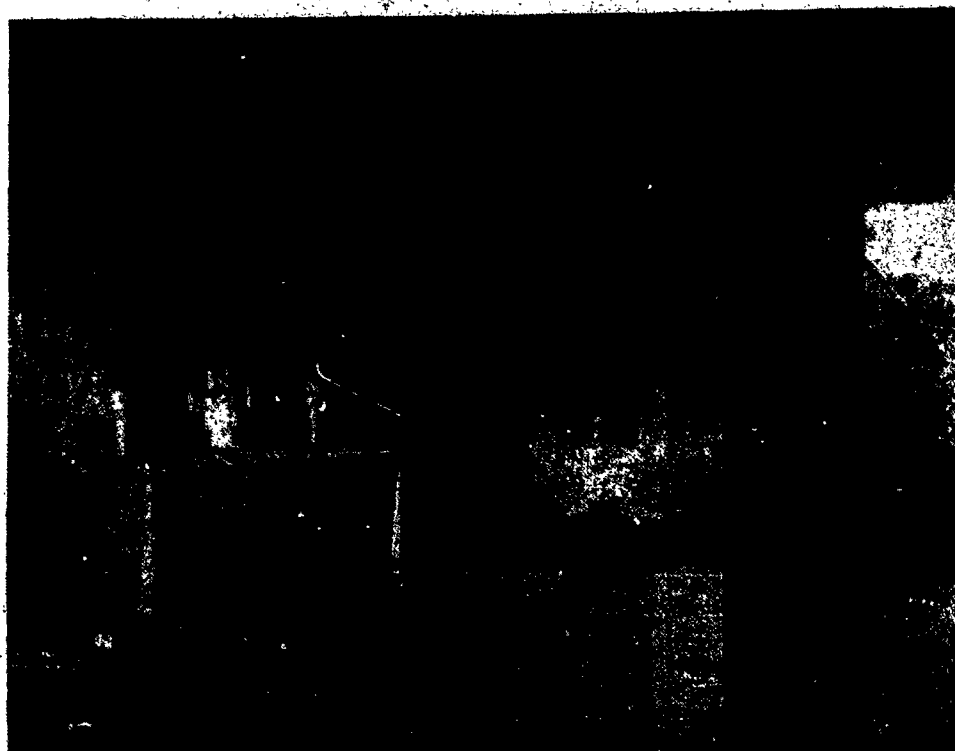
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Village of Taize in central France near Paray-le-Monial where St. Margaret Mary lived, is cluster of a few homes but fame of its Protestant monks has made its name widely known in ecumenical movement.



Crypt chapel, where Mass is celebrated at the Church of Reconciliation at Taize.