

Taizé Community: Ah, that little springtime

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relieve suffering in the world.

Taizé now has 90 vowed brothers living not only in the original community, but in smaller communities in such far-flung corners of the world as Seoul, South Korea; Brazil; and New York City. All of these communities are located in areas of poverty.

"Early on the idea was we wanted to be present in situations of poverty, of tension, of problems," observed Brother John, a Philadelphia native who joined Taizé in 1974 and currently heads the New York City community. "We wanted to feel more connected to the world. And, of course, to see if we could do anything."

In addition, Brother Roger and the community's original members sought ways to promote healing among peoples in the aftermath of World War II, Brother John noted. "They were trying to be a sign of reconciliation," he said.

Part of that reconciliation was to take place among Christians, Brother John said. Consequently, he noted, Taizé has been from the outset a center of ecumenism.

The Taizé community itself consists of vowed brothers drawn from different Christian denominations, including — since Vatican II — a number of Catholics. These brothers, Brother John pointed out, do not break with their respective churches.

"It's not turning your back on your church," said Brother John, who is a Catholic. "If anything, it makes you become more involved in your church."

In Taizé's early years, the brothers worshiped — with the permission of the local bishop — in a Catholic church. The growing numbers of people who began coming to Taizé for services led to the construction of the Church of Reconciliation in 1962.

Father David Murphy, former dean at St. Bernard's Seminary and currently a professor at St. John's Seminary in Boston, said he first heard of Taizé while he was studying in Europe from 1948-54.

The priest — who visited Taizé in 1963 — recalled that news of Protestants using a Catholic church for their services "at that time was astonishing, exciting. (Taizé) was one of the first great symbols of what lay ahead as far as ecumenism."

The community's reputation spread so rapidly that when Pope John XXIII first met Brother Roger in Rome in 1958, the pope remarked, "Ah, Taizé, that little springtime."

Pope John Paul II, who visited Taizé several times as Archbishop of Krakow, quoted John XXIII when he returned to Taizé as pope on Oct. 5, 1986.

Also that day, John Paul II declared: "By desiring to be yourselves a 'parable of

Brother John said. "We didn't want to start something new, but we didn't just want people to come here and have an experience, then say to them, 'Now be on your way.'"

The pilgrimage gives people a taste of the Taizé way of prayer and music, but also puts them in contact with local groups engaged in social ministry. "We want to provide a framework to help people search for meaning in their own situations."

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community,' you will help all whom you meet to be faithful to their church affiliation, the fruit of their education and their choice in conscience, but also to enter more deeply in the mystery of communion that the church is in God's plan."

In the years since Vatican II, the greater emphasis placed on ecumenism by the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations has led Taizé to broaden its mission to include ministry to youth.

The need to focus on youths became obvious in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Brother John observed. At that time, he said, thousands of young people "were searching for meaning in their lives, for meaning in their faith."

Young people began to flock to Taizé, and in August, 1974, the community organized a Council of Youth. Approximately 40,000 people attended the three-day gathering. The community has since held youth councils annually, and has organized a series of councils in other nations.

In 1982, Brother Roger further broadened the ministry of Taizé by launching the Pilgrimage of Trust on Earth.

The pilgrimage consists of conferences held at intervals in cities around the world. Its purpose is to provide ongoing support for individuals who have visited Taizé, and to introduce others to Taizé spirituality, ecumenism and social activism, Brother John noted.

"We didn't want to start a movement,"

At the conferences, the brothers talk about the need for "reconciliation and justice," Brother John explained. "We try to link the inward dimension of prayer and reflection with the commitment to a better world."

The weekend of Oct. 19-20, one of these conferences will take place at Nazareth College in Rochester. The two days will feature prayer and music in the Taizé tradition, as well as discussion of social action with members of the New York Taizé community.

Next spring, Taizé members will conduct an international gathering of young adults at the University of Dayton, Ohio. The May 21-25 event is sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth.

Although Taizé's ministry in Europe has focused on youth in recent years, in the United States the community is probably better known for its music.

According to Jura Litchfield, associate director of liturgical music for the Diocese of Rochester's Office of Liturgy, simplicity is one appealing aspect of Taizé music. She explained that the brothers chose to write simply so that Taizé's visitors — hailing from many different nations — could learn the music quickly for services.

More important, however, is the music's reflection of Taizé's emphasis on prayer, Litchfield said.

"You can memorize the refrain quickly, close your eyes, repeat it and let the deeper message of the text penetrate your being," explained Litchfield, who will be coordinating the music for Taizé's visit to Rochester.

The music's simplicity also reflects the overall atmosphere at Taizé, noted Carol Doran, associate professor of worship and pastoral music at Colgate Rochester Divinity School.

"That's the whole thing about Taizé," said Doran, who visited the community at Pentecost of 1990. "It's all designed to help you to be prayerful. They get rid of every distraction they can."

At Taizé, prayer services are conducted three times a day, Doran said. "It's the center of the whole community," she added, pointing out that all other activities are halted during the services — which last an hour each.

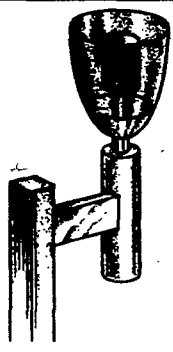
But Taizé is more than a place for prayer and music, Doran acknowledged.

"The concern for (social action) is as strong as their concern for prayer," Doran said. "Those brothers are living out what they believe in the most severe way."

The New York community, for example, is located in the city's Hell's Kitchen section — an area plagued by poverty and crime. Doran noted that among the brothers' efforts has been helping homeless people in their neighborhood reclaim, repair and purchase an abandoned building from the city.

Ultimately, Brother John observed, social activism, youth ministry and music are all tied to Brother Roger's original intention: promoting reconciliation among people and especially among Christians.

"Right now we don't talk about ecumenism as such," Brother John said. "But by living our lives and by welcoming young adults from all different backgrounds and by having a place they can share, that's the way we believe we can form a greater sense of understanding among Christians."

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