

Taize prayer mixes songs with silence

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

On the third Wednesday evening of every month, between 20 and 30 people gather to pray at Rochester's Blessed Sacrament Church. Using songs, chants and periods of meditative silence, they follow a tradition that began decades ago with one monk in the small French village of Taize.

Brother Roger Schutz left his home in Switzerland in 1940 and moved to Taize, where he helped Jews flee to Switzerland, according to Michael Raha, who recently led a Taize day of reflection at Greece's Borromeo Prayer Center. In 1942, Brother Schutz himself had to flee to his homeland after he was discovered by the Gestapo, but he returned in 1944, and this time several monks accompanied him. The monks lived a simple life, praying three times a day and singing worship songs, and eventually opened a home for young boys orphaned by the war, Raha said.

"Sometime during the late 1940s and '50s, young people, about 17 to 30 (years old) started to come to Taize from all over the world. This phenomenon just kind of mushroomed for no apparent reason, and they went with it as what the Holy Spirit

wanted them to do," Raha said.

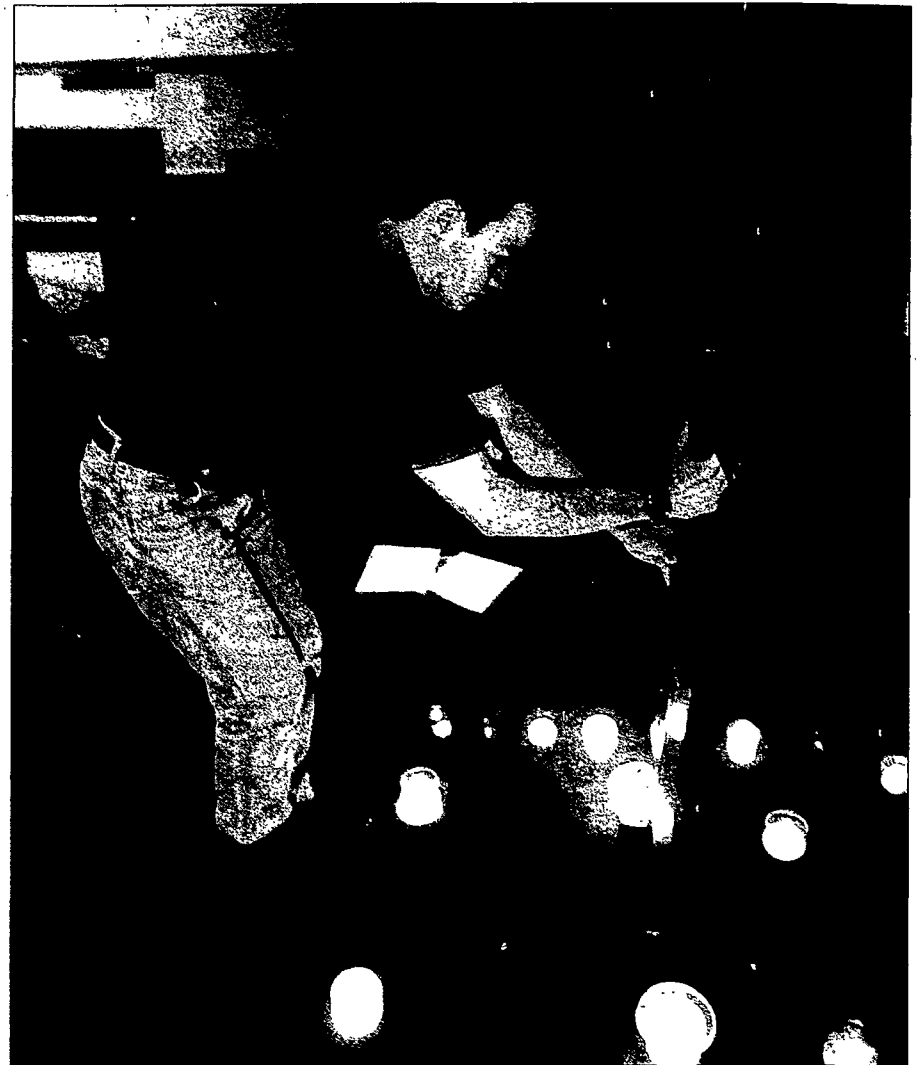
So many people traveled to Taize that in the 1960s, a group of Sisters of St. Andrew moved to a neighboring town and opened a hospitality house, taking care of the dignitaries and elderly who traveled to Taize, according to Raha and the Taize community's Web site, www.taize.fr. Dignitaries who've visited Taize include Pope John Paul II and three archbishops of Canterbury. Young people visiting Taize sleep in barracks — with bunk beds stacked three high — or in tents in nearby fields, Raha said.

"Hundreds of thousands of young people come there. If they have 2,000 people it's a light week. There is no paid staff, and the people who are there and the brothers do all the work. Everyone gets an assignment as part of their time there," Raha said.

In the fall of 2001, Raha was in Paris teaching English as a second language. He'd heard about Taize, and decided to visit the community to see what all the fuss was about.

"I just kind of drifted there, and I had a life-changing experience. After a day I was absolutely changed. I was caught by it," Raha said.

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Eric Sucar/Catholic Courier

At the end of a Taize prayer service Oct. 20 at Rochester's Blessed Sacrament Church, Mike DeLuceney places the cross back into its stand. Taize is a form of contemplative prayer that involves chants, songs and periods of silence. Blessed Sacrament offers a Taize service on the third Wednesday of each month.

Taize community don't see themselves as Catholics or Protestants, but as followers of Christ, Raha added. Everyone gathers three times a day for prayer, which is mostly sung or chanted in a number of different languages, including English and Latin. Visitors also listen to readings from Scripture or the writings and letters of Brother Schutz, but there is no preaching, Raha said.

"There's an otherworldly quality to it that just kind of prepares you for what the Holy Spirit wants you to hear. It was like he was speaking to my heart. ... This was one of the things that the Holy Spirit got my attention with. When he gets your attention, you better go with it, or he'll keep you awake at night," Raha said.

Raha eventually went back for a second visit, and upon his return to the United States, began leading Taize reflection days in the Rochester area for anyone interested. He starts each six-hour session by giving a brief history of the Taize community. After that, each hour includes song, readings and several minutes of meditative prayer, with a half-hour break for lunch.

The monthly Taize prayer sessions at Blessed Sacrament are a joint pro-

ject of the Sisters of Mercy in Rochester and the parish staff, according to Jamie Fazio, pastoral associate at Blessed Sacrament. Three years ago, the sisters and the parish were looking for a way to provide an alternative opportunity for prayer that would be attractive to young adults, Fazio said. The silent, reflective component of the prayer makes it especially attractive to participants, about 80 percent of whom are young adults, he added.

"It's a meditative, contemplative prayer. None of us experience silence in our day, so to have that period of silence and reflection really adds a lot," he said.

The prayer sessions were successful in bringing young adults together, even spawning a small Christian community, Fazio said. After the sessions are over, many of the participants go out for coffee and some socializing.

"A little community grew out of it," Fazio said. "I had not much to do with it; it just sort of happened."

EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information on the monthly Taize prayer sessions, contact Blessed Sacrament Parish at 585/271-7240.

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