

The Secret of Taizé

by Godfried Cardinal Danneels

On 2 February this year, Brother Roger of Taizé received a doctorate honoris causa from the Catholic University of Louvain. There was much enthusiasm among the many young people and among the not so young who were present in large numbers. The applause was long and warm. A few days earlier, in the church of Saint Jean du Grand Beguinage, 2000 young people held a prayer vigil which lasted nearly the whole night. The church was full.

It caused me to wonder: what is the secret of Taizé? Whenever Taizé organises a meeting, making do with what is available, young people turn out in droves. In contrast, why do our churches see so few of them on Sunday morning? One is tempted to ask, "What is their secret? Is there some trick involved?"

Certainly, there is the personal charism of Brother Roger himself, his gospel simplicity, his depth and openness. But this does not explain everything. What makes young people run to Taizé?

One idea comes readily to mind. Taizé celebrations contain only prayers, singing, and long silences—few words, no sermons, no commentaries. There is nothing didactic, but much that is lyrical. And it works. Praying and singing together is more attractive than being taught or sermonised to, and also much more important. The secret of Taizé is also partly due to its music: short refrains that are melodious and comprehensible, and repeated a thousand times. There is no need for books nor practice sessions. You only have to hear them twice to be able to sing them. And what is sung infiltrates the nerve centres, the heart, the lungs. What is being rediscovered here is the ancient custom of singing litanies which nurtured generations of Christians and from which the oriental Church still derives much life.

But there is more: Taizé imposes nothing. Everything is allowed; nothing is obligatory. There is a profound respect for the point where the young people are at. There is never a time when they feel constrained, but at every moment they feel an invitation to participate. In Taizé, there is a great deal of listening, and few verbal replies to questions. People do not grow weary. The charm of John-the-Baptist is all pervading. With his cry, "There is the Messiah", John was not drawing people to himself but directing them beyond himself to Christ. And so is Taizé. It is saying, "Do not stay here, return to the parish you have

come from. That is where you will find the Messiah!"

Another element of Taizé's secret is their profound awareness of the unity of the whole of humanity: East-West, North-South, black or white, Protestant or Catholic, all this variety must converge, meet, and call out to one another.

Young people understand immediately that what comes from God cannot be allocated according to race, or colour, social class or denomination. Taizé does not gloss over differences and suffers patiently the slow process of ecumenism. But the community persists in its faith and hope that one day all will be one.

Taizé has also rediscovered the profound meaning of simple symbols. In the church of reconciliation, the play of light and shadow evokes something quite personal even in the midst of the crowd. There is also the profoundly symbolic character of the icons that look down upon us, and the sobriety of decoration culled from nature: branches of greenery and sprays of wild flowers and, above all, the famous icon of the cross of Taizé, which travels round the whole world and to which thousands of young people have touched their foreheads in a gesture of faith, entrusting their own cares and those of all the young to the Crucified Christ.

There is also the Christocentrism of the piety of Taizé. The bread of the Word and of the Eucharist are at its centre, but also the Redemption and the Forgiveness of Christ. In Taizé, more people have recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation than in many other places. And it goes without saying that where people look toward Christ, there they perceive Mary. Taizé practises a sane, balanced, and warm devotion to the Mother of God, without undue exaggeration and complexity.

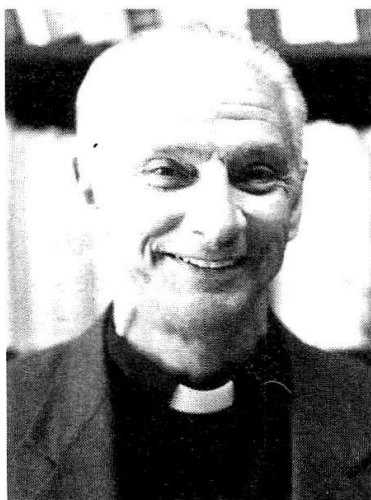
Perhaps the miracle of Taizé stems also from the charism to which the community of brothers has been bearing witness for over 40 years: moving along the knife-edge between interiority and activism. Even at the height of the tensions of the sixties, Taizé kept repeating that the vertical dimension of contemplation, of interiorisation, and of prayer is fundamental. Taizé never let itself be led into a process of sheer confrontation. Yet this has not prevented frequent protests against injustice and oppression. Today, prayer and interiority are no longer taboo and, as young Christians begin to manifest a diminishing spirit of combative activism, it is once more in Taizé that they are reminded of how much more vital it is to effect genuine solidarity. This solidarity is not only North-South but also East-West. Every summer for many

years, young people have been flocking to the Burgundy hillside by the hundreds; perhaps they will now be going in their thousands. This wonderful balance of the horizontal and the vertical through various junctures is the special characteristic of Taizé.

And there we probably have the key to the heart of the matter. At the heart of Taizé, like a hidden spring, there is a fellowship, silent and discreet, sober, entirely turned towards God and open to every guest, using means that are absurdly inadequate and having no pretentious ambitions to push themselves forward in the concert of the Churches. Day after day, they sing the praises of God, they give thanks, they intercede. There is the final secret of Taizé: the exemplary strength of the monastic life, ancient and yet so new.

Looking Toward the Future of the Church in China: An Experience of Teaching in a Mainland Seminary

by Edward J. Malatesta



(Editor's note: Edward Malatesta is the director of the Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History at the University of San Francisco.)

From September 17 to October 29 of last year, at the invitation of Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian, I lived and taught in a Catholic seminary in the Diocese of Shanghai. Six weeks is not six years or six months, but I believe it was a long enough period to become fairly well acquainted with at least one training ground for future leaders of the church in China. I would like to share something of my experience as the first Western professor to teach a theology course there.

About 18 miles outside of Shanghai, on the highest of a few small hills that rise above the rich farmland, stands a Romanesque basilica dedicated to Our Lady Help of Christians. Jesuit missionaries built the church toward the end of the 19th century to fulfill a vow made to Mary. The Christian communities of the area had been spared the violence that marked that period. From then until now the church has been the national shrine to Mary. A famous statue of the Virgin holding the child Jesus above her head dominated the highest tower until it was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1965-68). The base of that