The Taizé Community

In 1940, a 25-year-old Swiss Protestant student, Roger Louis Schutz-Marsauche, purchased an abandoned house in Taizé, France. What began as a young man's dangerous gesture of hospitality to refugees fleeing German-occupied France, has grown into an international, ecumenical community, hosting 2500 guests a week, with a focus on prayer and song, Bible study and reflection, reconciliation and peace-making.

Worship for All Ages

The chant-like songs of Taizé have made their way into the hymn books of all the major denominations (e.g. Voices United, 22, 208, 290, 466). But what is particularly challenging to consider is how the worship and work of Taizé have evolved into a focus on youth and young adults. While many of our churches continue to assume that pop/rock-based musical styles are the only strategies capable of reaching this age group, Taizé draws from the deep well of the contemplative tradition, setting it in a contemporary global context. The busloads of backpackers unloading next to the Church of Reconciliation have created a kind of post-modern Woodstock of prayer. And while youth may be the majority in the three prayer services each day, all ages are present—including the children who sat next to Brother Roger during his life as Prior.*

Cyclical Musical Structures

Michael Hawn, in Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally, characterizes the songs of Taizé as cyclical musical structures, to be distinguished from the sequential musical structures of traditional hymnody. Sequential structures are organized in a linear style, are textually oriented, and are content driven. By contrast, cyclical structures are organized in a circular pattern, are movement oriented, and are more communally focused. Sequential structures are rooted in a reading/literate tradition, while cyclical structures tend to be concise and rooted in a hearing/oral tradition. The challenge some worshippers face in entering into Taizé prayer is that they bring sequential expectations to a cyclical experience. This is often evident in their comments and questions: "There's not much to this!" (They expect the songs to be content-driven hymns rather than simple/profound prayers.) "How many times are we supposed to sing this?" (Looking for a beginning, middle, and end, they are confused by the cyclical structure.) "This is so boring!" (They have no experience in the communal demands of cyclical prayer/song.)

Worship: The Original Multi-Media Event

Cyclical structures also presume a level of participation which deepens the experience of worship. There is no passive audience in Taizé prayer. It is a deeply "liturgical" style—it is the work of all the people which makes this worship work. And it is the simplicity-and-profundity of the form which enables participation by all ages. Moreover, the repetition is particularly conducive to liturgical integration. You can engage in the actions of worship while singing/praying (e.g. singing "Eat this bread..." while receiving communion). Such incarnational experiences of worship remind us that Christian liturgy is our original multi-media event. Building on this foundation stands the best chance of engaging all ages in a deep experience of worship.

*Brother Roger died in 2005, killed during worship by a mentally ill guest. For more information on The Taizé Community, visit: www.taize.fr.

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