

THE SPIRITUALITY OF TAIZE CHANTS

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IN THE INTRODUCTION to *Praying together in word and song*, a booklet on the use of the Taizé chant prayer, the author asks the following questions:

How can we pray together, yet leave each person free to 'Be still and know that I am God'? How can our prayer together, by its simple beauty, be expressive of the mystery of God? How can our prayer gather people of all ages . . . and thus help us to sense the universality of our communion together?¹

There are a number of ways in which these and other questions about the spirituality of Taizé chants could be addressed. One is the approach of the professional musician, analyzing the technical qualities of the chant, its relation to Gregorian chant, Lutheran and Orthodox canons and its place in the unfolding of both classical and modern traditions in liturgical music. There is also the approach of the historian of spirituality, a mapping out of the growth and development of Taizé as a movement in the Christian Church through its potent and far-reaching expression—the international and ecumenical chant. As it happens, I intend to adopt neither approach, since I am not a professional musician, nor do I have sufficient experience of the history and development of Taizé as a spiritual force within the post-war Christian community. My own encounter with the spirituality of Taizé has come out of the purely utilitarian experience of using the chants as a form of prayer with a wide variety of groups, many of whom, like myself, have a love of music without having a high level of technical skill, and a desire for corporate prayer that is both contemplative and communitarian.

Any liturgist, faced with the need to animate prayer in common while at the same time giving room for the individual to encounter the mystery of God, will search primarily for something that works, before analyzing how exactly it does. The very multiplicity of Taizé chants is deceptive. They can be and are used in a variety of ways,

and both musically and spiritually they appear at first sight to be very simple. Indeed at one level they are, but worked and prayed through the dynamics of a group they can become remarkably sophisticated in the musical sense and profoundly effective at the spiritual level. A form of prayer that emphasizes togetherness while respecting the freedom of the individual, that combines simplicity with mystery, universality with a strong sense of valued diversity is hard to find, but that, essentially, is what we are dealing with when praying through the chants of Taizé.

Nor is it appropriate to write of Taizé chants as if they were a single entity, experienced in only one way. There are in fact four basic subdivisions of the chants and their use in prayer, and each brings out a different aspect of participation. First of all there is the sung melody, usually in four parts, often in canon or with cantor verse and refrain. For the singer, the idea that a person who sings prays twice is made especially significant through the long, sustained chanting of a short phrase or prayer, similar to the mantra of Eastern tradition. Then there is the instrumental accompaniment which can range from the simplest of guitar chords to full orchestral strength, with a variety and sophistication dependent only on the availability and versatility of the musicians present. There is also the whole question of lyrics, and the variety of languages used, often within the same chant. Perhaps in no other form of Christian prayer are unity and diversity so finely balanced and so deeply experienced as in the singing in common of chants that are ecumenical, international and from a common treasure-house of biblical and traditional sources. Finally there is the prayer itself which finds both its origin and its expression in the chant—a prayer which is both corporate and individual and which reaches beyond the emotions roused by the music or the faith contained in the lyrics.

Music that is intended to travel widely and to be used in the broadest possible sense has to be available to musicians whose capabilities range from the brilliant to the indifferent. Where much of the liturgical folk music of the primitive era following the Vatican Council mistook banality for simplicity, the melodies of the Taizé chants are easily learned and absorbed without ever straying into facile jingles. There is a sonorous solemnity in some, an exuberance and liveliness in others that covers the whole spectrum of liturgical and seasonal variations. It is almost a commonplace of those who use the chants in prayer to say that they appear to take on a

life and impetus of their own. The sound rises and falls, an accompaniment changes, prayers, descants or verses may be sung against it, but the basic phrase gathers its own momentum, and the force of the corporate prayer becomes greater than the sum of the contributions made by the individuals involved in it. To many who come new to Taizé chants, the length can initially be a daunting barrier. Especially in England, where many people have developed a stop-watch mentality with regard to the length of hymns, it can be a hard challenge to persevere through nine minutes' worth of 'Stay with me'. Nevertheless, the continuous persistence in watching and waiting through the chant is a lesson in itself, and has its roots in the contemplative patience of the monastic tradition. *Praying together in word and song* points out that

In leading the prayer in this way there is an element of daring: to continue singing until the chant becomes a prayer for oneself, and at the same time an invitation to others to pray.²

Jesus's own stories of the importunate friend and the insistent widow, as told in Luke's Gospel, stress the importance of persistence in prayer. While there is nothing new in this at an individual level, since such 'mantra-type' prayers as the Jesus prayer also operate out of the gradual building up of a contemplative force through repetition, there is a particular exercise of perseverance here in a prayer in common where the efforts of the individual build up the strength of the whole praying body, so that the chant becomes a stream in and out of which the individual can move at will, but which continues through and around those involved. It can certainly be demanding and testing, but it can also be sustaining and supportive of the weakness of one through the unity of many. English congregations, however, continue in many instances to find this prayer of perseverance a challenge, and that may be through a misunderstanding of the function of the chant in prayer rather than from a national desire for the liturgy to get a move on. In a great many cases, particularly during a sacramental celebration, liturgical music is seen as a form of entertainment whose function is to cover awkward pauses or keep the troops happy while the celebrant gets on with something technical. Certainly chants are used to help create an atmosphere of prayer as people gather in Taizé, but the idea there is to begin setting the scene for a more intense form of worship rather than to provide

incidental holy music. There is a considerable difference between the disciplined freedom of a Taizé chant used to build a sense of unity and contemplation and the monotony of a chant whose function is seen as the same as the muzak of the supermarket. To those accustomed to the use of the rosary, the Jesus Prayer or the mantras of Eastern spirituality, this repetitiveness will not present a challenge, but the fact that it is musical as well as lyrical makes the cumulative effect more intense. The techniques of rhythmical breathing are strongly reinforced by the beat of the music, and the distinctive characteristics of the chants and their accompaniment give maximum scope for variation within the central theme.

The intercessory function of the chants should not be forgotten here. While in many instances the chants are seen as building up a force for worship and contemplation, they can also be used in the more specific prayer for all humanity which is an essential part of the spirituality of Taizé. Most often the *Kyrie eleison* is used as the response to intercessions in the form of litanies, but longer refrains such as 'O Lord, hear my prayer' can form the background to a strong, corporate prayer for the needs of the world. While emphasizing the contemplative aspect of Taizé's spirituality, it is perhaps important to observe that it is not a contemplation that seeks flight from the world and its problems in the disembodied sweetness of music and prayerful chanting. The context of Taizé, which is present in the chants even to those who use them in situations far removed from their monastic home, is that of travellers coming together from every nation, every age and every preoccupation to pray for reconciliation. The chants are therefore seen not as an attempt to escape from the pain of the world, but as a reinsertion, at a more profound and genuine level, into the mystery of suffering. My experience of using 'Stay with me' in even quite small groups emphasizes this. Uniting ourselves with Christ in Gethsemane in a chant that has a particularly haunting, insistent quality, we are called into an understanding of and sharing in the mystery of Christ's own response to the suffering of the world he was to redeem by his Passion. It is perhaps at the level of intercession that the corporate dimension of prayer using Taizé chants becomes most important. In a very real sense at gatherings that are widely international or ecumenical the chant becomes an echo of the cry of the world to God for help, and the individual becomes aware of being part of a huge need for God, but also of a force for change and conversion through the prayer of so many

gathered together in worship for that purpose. In a world where solidarity is becoming of ever greater importance for achieving the political and social aspirations of people hitherto isolated in their need, the experience of being part of a disparate group united in intercession for its own needs and those of the wider human family can promote a faith and an endurance that are weakened by a sense of being alone.

One thing that is noticed, both at Taizé itself and in other gatherings where the chant is used, is how often a particular chant will stay in the mind, and can be heard sung almost unconsciously outside the context of worship out in the streets, in queues for food—even in the bath! The prayer has moved out of the church into the world from which it came for focus and into which it must return for expression.

For instrumentalists, the playing of an accompaniment to liturgical music can too often be seen as a performance rather than a participation. The spectrum of sophistication in the musical accompaniment of Taizé chants is very broad, but like the melody itself, the instrumental accompaniment is cyclical and the mantra technique can work as much for player as for singer. Unity in diversity is one of the most important aspects of Taizé and it finds its most vigorous expression in the enormous variety open to musicians praying the chants through their instruments. The sense of solidarity, of being part of a whole which is greater than merely the sum of individuals involved is always strong in an orchestra, but participation in Taizé chants through instruments can be a particularly vivid experience of human harmony and corporate strength. The solo instrument can play a part similar to that of the cantor of verses, while the repetition of basic chord or phrase variations brings the instrumentalist back into the mainstream, unified movement of the prayer. For the harassed liturgist it is also a blessing that because of its particular musical structure, it is possible to make a Taizé chant sound full and varied with a remarkably small group who can often offer only a minimal repertoire of musical skills. Prayer is about helping people to feel empowered, and just as the strength of the intercessory prayer of Taizé encourages those who pray to go out into the world renewed in faith and hope to face its problems, so the simplicity of the accompaniment tends to convince musicians that they can do more than they think! 'Playing before the Lord' has good credentials in the Old Testament, but receives its full significance in a liturgy

where the playing of instruments is seen as an integral and valid part of the prayer as a whole. The performance of the chants draws out the skills of each, and the combined sound of the group can cover a multitude of weaknesses. While this gives satisfaction both to performers and to listeners, it also has a more spiritual dimension that should not be overlooked in the desire for a sound musical interpretation. All music is a form of self-expression, and all self-expression emerges from the desire we have to communicate something of ourselves to God and to each other. If the person who sings prays twice, the person who also plays an instrument is in for three times.

A form of prayer that finds expression in the harmony of the human voice and in instruments played in conjunction highlights the central theme of Taizé, which is the bringing together of differences to create a unity where each distinct part is respected in its uniqueness but seen as most valuable in union with the others. The validity of contemplation in a group has already been discussed within the context of contemplative prayer as a force for change. This constant flow of prayer from the interior to the exterior is the hallmark of Taizé. While such contemplation opens the eyes of the heart to see more clearly the truth of God's revelation of himself, it nevertheless has a movement of its own that draws the one who prays towards fellow human beings and their needs. In *This day belongs to God*, Frère Roger writes:

One thing is certain. All contact with God leads to one's neighbour. The sign of all genuine, inner life, that is to say of all contact with Jesus Christ, is discovery of one's neighbour. And if our neighbour disappears from our relations with Christ, then our love of God is directed to a mythical deity out of touch with our human condition and not to the Christ of the Gospels.³

The melody rises and falls, the accompaniment weaves itself in and out of the main pattern, and the prayer flows not only from one chant to another but often from one language to another. The whole question of language in the spirituality of Taizé chants merits an article in itself. One of the principal factors in the founding of Taizé was the need that Frère Roger saw for reconciliation among nations in the aftermath of the Second World War. The ecumenical dimension, so fundamental to the life and work of Taizé, is based on this perceived need for Christians to transcend the barriers

erected by nationalist fears and to learn to communicate between themselves in order to communicate as one to the world. The use of Latin in the chant brings up a number of points. It is certainly welcome in some Roman Catholic circles, as a sign that all contact with the ancient language of the liturgy of the universal Church has not been lost with the triumph of the vernacular. On the other hand it can raise problems in circles where Latin is either suspect or so alien that the chant is rendered meaningless without translation. Having said that, there is a great deal to be gained from the experience of singing the same phrase in a number of different languages, even if those languages are unfamiliar. The virtue of welcoming the stranger is made much of in the Old Testament, and it gains a touching value here as people from different lands learn to pray in each other's tongues. It has the advantage of ensuring that all those present feel themselves welcome participants in a prayer that has both private and public dimensions. It also emphasizes the role of the larger community to accept and appreciate the contribution that can be made by other national groups. Praying in another person's language fulfils the same function as walking in another's shoes. Through the chant in many languages, praying in tongues gains new meaning, and the experience of unity recreates the sense of communion in a gathering where there is no longer Gentile or Jew, slave or free, woman or man but only voices of those made one in Christ.

While the use of Latin can be particularly effective in emphasizing the universality of Taizé's spirituality, it can also be a little ambiguous in a country still struggling to reconcile liberal and *intégriste* factions. The use of a multiplicity of languages in the liturgy is a powerful sign of unity in diversity, not of the absence of differences. While cultural gaps are thus being bridged, we are also reminded through the chant of the very real suffering, struggle and achievement in the field of ecumenism that Taizé itself symbolizes. At every level the use of the chants stands as a reminder to Christians of the radical call to reconciliation and of the need to find our common Father through contemplation, adoration and intercession together. The chants do not operate as an opium to distract our minds from the very real problems posed by doctrinal, cultural and historical differences, but they do remind us of where, ultimately, our focus should be directed. It is here, in the heart of Christian ecumenism, that the prayers of Martin Luther and Teresa of Avila rub shoulders in their respective languages, and the heirs

of a variety of spiritual traditions learn to pray and share ideas and hopes in a way that transcends the exclusivity of language. This present article focuses on the spirituality of Taizé chants, but it is perhaps worth reflecting here on the relationship between the chants and the Taizé meeting as a whole. The prayer is not a separate or isolated part of the proceedings, but an essential component of the larger encounter of different nationalities and faiths before God. As such it both gives expression to and draws out of those present the aspirations which brought them together in the first place. The aim of Taizé is to enable people of widely divergent backgrounds to feel at ease with one another. The international aspect of the chants facilitates this and fulfils St Paul's concept of a prayer whose meaning goes deeper than the words and whose driving force is the Spirit living in each individual.

In an article on the spirituality of Taizé chants it hardly seems appropriate to discuss silence, yet the role that silence plays alongside the chants is of primary importance. If the function of the chants is to give voice to the desire for communication between God and humanity, then it is also to prepare those who sing and pray to hear the voice of the one who speaks in silence. *Praying together in word and song* points to the unavoidable fact that 'Words are often so inadequate to express our prayer and the prayer of Christ within us'.⁴

The chants of Taizé are a spirited attempt to harness words into a valid form for contemplation, and are second to none in their use of language as a vehicle for unity, but like Eliot we may find in the end that

Words strain,

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden.⁵

In that curious momentum that they gather, the chants can at times fall into a quiet, wordless music as the prayer of words leads into the prayer of harmony and that into the prayer of silence. Again this is nothing new or amazingly innovative in Christian spirituality, but it is a reinforcing of the traditions of many teachers of prayer who see the function of verbal prayer as clarifying the thoughts and aspirations of the one who prays before leading on to a deeper communication that reaches beyond words. Neither the silence itself nor the prayer of contemplation through the chants is seen as an escape from reality. For many who hear it 'from the outside', the use of Taizé chants can often be seen as incidental, a musical interlude within a service whose focus is elsewhere. In

practice the chants lead not to some Enchanted Forest where bears and boys play and the problems of the world dissolve in a swell of abstraction through music, but directly back to the heart of the world from which they come. Frère Roger never ceases to emphasize the importance of a focus on reality and the urgency of the present situation. For him, prayer provides the balance, the seeing eye that contemplates all reality in God in order to deal with it more effectively.

Prayer leads us to converse with God, to see situations in their correct proportions, bringing them into the sphere of human understanding to present them to God . . . Because it involves the whole being of man, contemplation of the God of Jesus Christ cannot end in quietism. On the contrary, it involves bold action.⁶

In an obvious sense, the use of the chants in the prayer of intercession brings us close to the needs of the world, and those needs close to the hearts of those who pray, but also through the silence, the adoration of God in communion with those who make the varied, pluralistic world seems so near, the strength drawn from contemplation gives us the power to take action in the name of Christ. In musical terms, those without technical knowledge are set free from their limitations to produce a sound whose result is beyond the competence of the individual. In terms of Christian living, the gifts of each one are drawn out in such a way that, here as well, people alone become part of an impetus forward, fuelled by the power of prayer, where all play a part and are given a strength beyond their capacity as single entities.

This article began with an admission that my own experience of Taizé chants was chiefly culled from their use within fairly everyday liturgies, but the reflection has concentrated chiefly on the spirituality of the chants as used in Taizé-style gatherings. Is there in fact any room for their incorporation into other liturgical settings? Here again I can only call upon my own experience of their use in Eucharistic liturgies or services of Reconciliation. For many liturgists the style and content of Taizé chants bridges the gap between the traditional and the modern. Both the lyrical and the musical content of religious folk music have improved beyond measure in recent years, and there is much emerging both in Europe and in America that is firmly rooted in scripture, musically worthy of its lyrical content and conducive to prayer and worship. It has to be

said, however, that one hears all too often sung in congregational liturgies music that is only remarkable for its banality of melody and vapidness of words. It is not surprising, therefore, that those who still look back with nostalgia to Gregorian chant find little satisfaction in either the aesthetic or the spiritual sense in such music. The use of Taizé chants can be an effective way of encouraging the liturgical renewal desired by the Second Vatican Council while at the same time keeping within the tradition of dignity and prayerfulness which Gregorian chant embodied for so many. Particularly in congregations where changes in the liturgy have brought about hurt and bitterness, Taizé once more plays a reconciling role. The solemnity of Latin and Greek, the sonorous, monastic quality of a music steeped in contemplation translates remarkably well into congregational worship as long as it is introduced with sensitivity and performed with the liveliness and vivacity that are so much part of the *répétition de chant* at Taizé itself. The complete loss of contact with the language of the ancient Church would be a severe impoverishment with the young in our parishes, and the massive response of young people to the call of Taizé must contradict any theories that such music is somehow too esoteric for today's generation.

In *Unanimité dans le pluralisme*, Frère Roger speaks to and on behalf of the Taizé community.

Ils sont forts les temps de prière commune auxquels nous nous sommes engagés devant Dieu. Cette prière ne nous appartient pas.⁷

There is power in the times of common prayer to which we have committed ourselves before God. This prayer does not belong to us.

By their gift of the chants used at Taizé to the wider Church, the community has opened to the widest possible number the riches of their spirituality. In sharing their way to God through music they have also shared their unique vision of a Church where peace and reconciliation are both the goal and the means of unity in diversity.

NOTES

¹ Taizé: *Praying together in word and song*, (Oxford 1988), p 3.

² *Ibid.*, p 4.

- ³ Schutz, Roger: *This day belongs to God*, (London 1966), p 32.
⁴ Taizé: *Praying together in word and song*, (Oxford 1988), p 19.
⁵ Eliot, T.S.: *Burnt Norton*, v.
⁶ Schutz, Roger: *This day belongs to God*, (London 1966), p 33.
⁷ Schutz, Roger: *Unanimité dans le pluralisme*, (Taizé 1966), p 66.