

**Congress of Benedictine abbots
St Anselm, Rome, September 9, 2016**

Monastic Life Today - Communion Enlightened by the Word of God

Brother Alois, Prior of Taizé

Dear Father Abbot Primate, dear abbots,

Thank you from my heart for inviting me to participate in your congress. But I must say that I look upon my presence here with a little humor. Brother Roger wrote that Taizé was a simple bud grafted onto the great tree of the monastic life, without which it could not live. What can a small bud give to the large branches of the tree that for centuries has been firmly rising up towards the sky? My place would rather be to remain in silence to listen and let myself be nourished by the sap placed in you.

But since I am here to speak, the best thing would be for me simply to express how we try to live the monastic life at Taizé. And then your theme becomes very accessible for me because the search for communion, enlightened by the Word of God, is at the heart of our vocation. The source is communion with God; that will be my first chapter. The goal: a fraternal life lived in deep communion with one another; that will be the second part. The consequence, communion becoming missionary; that will be my third part.

As for the light given by God's Word, I keep in my ear something I heard at the Synod in 2008 devoted to the Bible and its place in our lives. A bishop from Latvia told us that in his country, during the communist regime, a priest named Victor was arrested because he had a Bible. The agents of the regime threw the Bible on the floor and ordered the priest to trample on it. But he knelt and kissed the book. Then he was sentenced to ten years of hard labor. When we hear such a testimony, we understand how much the Bible has been loved and has transformed people's lives. We would like this to be the case for us too, and the many martyrs and witnesses today are for us a very clear reflection of the living Word of God.

Personal Communion with God

I start with the source of all monastic life—communion with God. As an enlightenment provided by the Word of God, I will take the account of the transfiguration.

Our village of Taizé is located ten kilometers from Cluny. Five years ago, the eleventh centenary of the foundation of the great abbey was celebrated. Dear Father General, you yourself were present on that occasion. Our community was invited to celebrate a prayer in what remains of the old church of Cluny and I expressed everything we owed to this closeness. Our community did not attempt to imitate Cluny but it was inspired by the long experience of the monks. We share with them the focus on the beauty of the liturgy, of the prayer space, and the singing, which opens the heart to a personal communion with God.

Eastern Christians were the first to celebrate the Transfiguration of Christ and it is no coincidence that this feast was introduced in the West in the twelfth century by the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable. Already in the early years of our community, Brother Roger also gave a central place to this feast. Why is the transfiguration so important?

The Gospel narrative shows Jesus on the mountain in prayer, in great intimacy with God. A voice is heard: "This is my beloved Son." The mystery of Jesus appears before the eyes of the disciples; his life consists in this relationship of love with God his Father.

When we look at the light of the transfigured Christ in prayer, it gradually becomes an inner presence. Each of us is also the beloved child of God. Like Jesus, we can surrender ourselves to God. And in return God transfigures our being—body, mind and spirit.

Even our frailties and imperfections become a door through which God enters our personal and community life. The thorns which hinder our common journey fuel a fire that lights the way. Our contradictions, our fears may perhaps remain. But by the Holy Spirit, Christ penetrates what worries us about ourselves and others, to the point that the darkness is illuminated. Our humanity, our differences are not abolished, but God assumes them and can give them a fulfillment. Our eyes focused on the transfigured Christ enable heaven and earth to come together in our lives.

Persevering in the monastic life means persevering in contemplative waiting. Being present simply, with no ulterior motives. If we are not always able to express this inner desire in words, keeping silence is already an expression of openness to God.

The Virgin Mary is the image of silent but ardent waiting upon God. She was loved by God from all eternity and prepared for what he would ask of her. Yet none of her neighbors who rubbed elbows with her could guess the mystery that Mary of Nazareth was bearing within her. Do not the greatest mysteries take place in a profound silence?

The contemplative life cannot flourish without asceticism. An asceticism which is not aimed primarily at personal perfection, but to make us more suitable for communion with others. When Christian de Chergé, the prior of Tibhirine, reflected on martyrdom, he was not thinking so much about violent death, but about the "martyrdom of love" performed in daily life. He writes, "We have given our hearts 'wholesale' to God, and it costs us that he takes it from us by 'retail'!"

What new forms of asceticism are asked of us in an increasingly technological society and one which is changing at breakneck speed? It cannot be a question of falling into a kind of anti-modernism, because modern developments open up valuable opportunities to be informed and to communicate in depth. But we see the need for places where time is given for the maturing which is indispensable and where listening to others is encouraged. This involves a conversion of the search for efficiency towards which our societies impel us. At Taizé we are surprised that after a stay of one week young people—and these are quite normal young people, living in the modern world—often say that the most important thing was the silence.

One form of asceticism is celibacy and it is impossible to talk about this without speaking of praise. We sing for example Psalm 91, "Who lives in the shelter of the Most High can trust in him," and our yes to God is already renewed. We must dare even a poor praise, a stammering. This praise should ascend from our depths, and sometimes from the depths of our misery. In this praise, it is not a matter of wanting to present something perfect to God, but to present our being. We enter the Kingdom of God as people who are lame.

The free renunciation of celibacy involves renunciations in other areas. For example we may be tempted to seek compensations of a material order. But we cannot really live out our celibacy while wanting to have unlimited material possibilities.

Similarly, there may be the temptation to see our work as a field that is our own and becomes like a small personal kingdom.

To live our celibacy well, I sometimes tell my brothers that it is important not to neglect the sensitivity to beauty. Without free moments of gratuitousness, of beauty, an imbalance sets in that does not help us to go forward.

As followers of Jesus, we learn that this is not the fulfillment of our dreams that will occur, but something much greater, encompassing joys and sorrows. Our way forward leads us to an ever greater divesting of our own will, of our attachment to material goods, and maybe even of our spirituality. In this we follow Jesus Christ, who tells us: "Blessed are the poor."

To abandon ourselves completely to the love of God, our commitment for life is fundamental. A lifetime commitment in marriage or to celibacy is increasingly called into question. People live longer, and psychology sometimes reveals later on the immaturity that was there at the time a decision was made, and there can certainly be situations when it is necessary to leave the path of a vocation. But I would like to insist forcefully on the need to take greater care of this pillar which is a definitive commitment. In this, in Taizé we are looking for ways of intensifying the time of preparation, the novitiate, and how to renew our lifetime commitment at certain key moments of our existence.

In a life of communion with God, we go from one beginning to another. In reading the Bible we see that God never tires of setting out again with us. We can never tire us, either, of always having to start over.

Fraternal Communion

In this incessant new beginning, everyone is invited to ask themselves: what steps forward are being asked of me now? This does not necessarily mean doing more. What we are called to do is to love more. And this brings me to the second point I want to address: the monastic life stimulates us to live ever more deeply in communion with one another, to a life as brothers or sisters based on mutual love. This is a priority. Without it, a community could accomplish great works, but the sign of God would remain veiled.

To let the Word of God enlighten this communion, a look at the Gospels helps us. In speaking of love, the synoptics and John express themselves in slightly different ways.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls us to mutual love: *I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you* (Jn 13:34). Jesus has just washed his disciples' feet. Their reciprocal love will require the gift of themselves as a way of following him.

Brotherly love creates a space that is like the beginning of the Reign of God, where laws other than those of the world are in force. The Kingdom of God is a new world, destined to become present everywhere, but there are places and times when it begins to manifest itself. Wherever brothers and sisters love one another in truth, God already reigns.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke speak a little differently. It is not only a matter of loving one's closest neighbor. Jesus calls for a love that crosses all boundaries: loving even one's enemies.

This love is very real. Luke keeps the memory of the demand for justice proclaimed by John the Baptist: *He who has two shirts must give one to the person who has none, and whoever has food must share it* (Lk 3:11). At other times, Jesus goes even further. When someone who has two shirts gives one to the person who has none, we can say that this is fair. Jesus even goes so far as to ask for what is unfair: *If someone takes away your coat, let him take your shirt too. Give to everyone who asks you for something, and if someone takes what is yours, do not ask for it back* (Lk 6:29-30). Jesus calls his disciples to venture into the dynamics of the Reign of God.

A law defines a duty, while mercy is a demand without limits. It never says: *Enough, I have done my duty*. To love is to forget about reciprocity: *If you love those who love you, why do you expect any special recognition? Even sinners love those who love them!* (Lk 6:32-34). What radicalism there is in this love completely without any ulterior motives!

If, for John, love seems to be reduced to mutual brotherly love, would that be a step backwards compared to the Synoptics? No, because mutual love can be just as demanding as free love. It is sometimes even more difficult patiently to build mutual fellowship with our brothers than to give generously to those who are poorer than us.

It is in the reality of our lives that fraternity must first be lived out; it is in our daily life together that it sometimes encounters formidable resistances. In a community, as in a family, we do not choose our brothers or sisters. Community is a place where we must work to go beyond our resistances. If the resistances to fraternity cannot be overcome in a community, how will they be overcome on a larger scale?

The holy year invites us to consent to the radical nature of mercy and to enter into it more deeply. Can the renewal of the Church as well as of monastic life come from anywhere else than from there?

To drink from the source of love according to the Gospel, we must go even deeper. In the mutual love of the disciples, the mutual love of the Trinity is present on earth. However poor our life may be, it is important to see it in that light.

Our brotherly love finds nourishment in the mutual love of the Trinity that we try to contemplate in prayer. Then we can understand that freedom and communion do not contradict but support one another. The Holy Spirit both gives us personal autonomy and makes us able to surrender to what does not come from us and goes beyond us.

The Holy Spirit is both the one who defends the dignity of every human being, who strengthens our own individual being, and the one who unites us to each other. At the same time, the Spirit supports our ability to say "I," to be ever more a free person who takes personal decisions, and at the same time develops our ability to go beyond our own will to abandon ourselves to God by fully entering into the dynamics of community life. One can even say that it is through life together, with the limitations that it necessarily includes, that the personality of each individual finds a maturity that it would not have acquired without the constraints of community.

In our time, individualism has become a great value. We should not only deplore this phenomenon. It contains a positive aspiration, that of personally assuming one's major decisions. For Christians the days are gone when it was enough to follow traditions more or less consciously. We are called to a personal faith-commitment.

One of my brothers told me recently: before giving my life in a common vocation, I must possess it. He's right; this is true, and even very important. We must know ourselves, be faithful to what is inscribed in the depths of our being, be free of determinisms from elsewhere. Our vocation is not something added from the outside; the path of lifelong commitment should correspond to the deepest desire inscribed in our being.

But then it must also be said that we remain a mystery for ourselves. Psychology illuminates only part of this mystery; we cannot be aware of everything that determines our decisions. We discover progressively what lies within our depths. The "I will" of our profession must also include the grey areas of our being, all that is still waiting to reach maturity. In the course of our journey, there will be the acceptance of the lacks and obstacles that can arise and force us to repeat the "I will." Autonomy does not mean being free of all determinism; that would be impossible. Rather, it means assuming over time all that has shaped our being.

Surrendering ourselves to something that does not come from us is only possible with a view to a greater love, when we sense that there is a hidden treasure for which we are on fire to give everything.

Look at how Christ himself lived. In total freedom, he said "I" and at the same time he said: I do not do my own will, but the Father's. The more or less serious crises that every life-commitment experiences lead to a readjustment of our journey between these two poles, autonomy and surrender. The Holy Spirit supports us in this beautiful tension that can stimulate our creativity.

Parable of Communion

At Taizé, we find that young people are sensitive to this search I have mentioned. Even more than at people taken individually, they look at the testimony of the community. For them community life is a sign of the Gospel. And so I come to my third point, communion becoming missionary.

Here, the text I would like to highlight is the prayer of Jesus before his passion: *That all may be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me* (John 17:21).

At the beginning of World War II, Brother Roger, our founder, considered that, in a war-torn Europe, a fraternal community life would be a sign of peace and reconciliation. The vocation he proposed to the brothers who were going to join him was to form what he called a "parable of communion," a "parable of community."

A parable is a simple and accessible narrative, but one that refers to a reality of another order. The meaning of a parable is inexhaustible; a parable does not say things once and for all, but continues to challenge those who listen to it over and over again.

All life consecrated to God and at the service of others can become a parable. In a world where many live as if God did not exist, the fact that men and women are committed to follow Christ for life raises questions. If Christ were not risen and present in them, these men and women would not live in this way.

This parable does not impose anything, does not want to prove anything; it opens up a world closed in on itself; it opens a window to a beyond, a breakthrough to infinity. Those who live it have dropped their anchor in Christ, to hold firm even during storms.

The specific parable that we, the brothers of Taizé, want to bear is that of communion. Communion, reconciliation, trust are our keywords. We want to show that a community can be a laboratory of fraternity.

We are grateful that this parable has also been lived out for the last fifty years close to us by some sisters, the Ignatian Sisters of St. Andrew, who with us take care of welcoming young people and with whom a beautiful complementarity is possible. To help us there are also, though they have not been with us as long, Polish Ursuline Sisters and Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

I want first to indicate two areas where our search for communion and fraternity requires a lot of our energies: the reconciliation of Christians and interculturalism.

By bringing together Protestant and Catholic brothers, our community is trying to anticipate the unity to come. This involves going to one Eucharistic table. Since 1973, a door has been open: we all receive the communion of the Catholic Church. And, with no canonical status, we are committed to having as reference the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome, the pope.

Those of us who grew up in Protestant families assume this without any denial of their origins, but rather as an extension of their faith. The brothers who come from Catholic families find an enrichment in being open to the gifts of the Churches of the Reformation, such as the centrality of Scripture, a Christ-centered faith, the emphasis on freedom of conscience, the beauty of choral singing.... This ecumenical life has become very natural for us. It can involve limitations and renunciations. But there is no reconciliation without renunciations.

With the Orthodox Churches, among the signs of proximity that we can accomplish there is that of sometimes hosting an Orthodox monk from one country or another, who comes to share our life for a while.

The history of Taizé can be read as an attempt to come and to remain under the same roof. From thirty different countries, we live under the roof of one house. And when we gather for common prayer three times a day, we place ourselves under the single roof of the Church of Reconciliation.

This prayer also brings together young people from around the world—Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox—and they take part in the same parable. We are amazed that they feel deeply united without lowering their faith to the least common denominator. In common prayer, a harmony is established between people who belong to different denominations and cultures and even to peoples who may be in strong opposition.

Since I am here among you, can I then ask: for the unity of Christians, could not men and women religious create more links between the different Churches? Is not the search for communion and unity inscribed in various ways in their vocation? Has the time not come to create more links with the monasticism of the Orthodox Churches? In some Protestant denominations there is also a tradition and a growing interest in community life.

I want to emphasize a second aspect of this research for fraternity, that of multiculturalism. This is a question that you too are acquainted with. We come from all parts of Europe, Africa, Asia, the Americas. Today, such a plurality is more and more present everywhere. But globalization is sometimes perceived as a threat. The huge wave of refugees that is sweeping across Europe, and that is certainly far from dropping, has revealed great generosity in Europeans, but also fears. So we would like the harmony of monastic life also to be a sign of communion between different faces of the human family.

You know, as we do, that this is a difficult path. And I do not hide it: despite having a common faith, it can happen that we are unable to prevent lasting separations. There are differences of temperament, obviously. We can be awkward and even make mistakes—that is also obvious. But there may be something deeper, which does not entirely depend on us: too great a distance between the diverse faces of humanity we wear, a distance sometimes accentuated by the wounds of history between our countries and continents.

What can we do with the sadness which can then invade us? Not let ourselves remain paralyzed. Not stop there. Despite everything, live out the search for unity and reconciliation. This brings us to Christ: he alone can truly unite everything. In this we would like to follow him. We are willing to suffer for this. Not being afraid of the other, not judging, not feeling judged, not interpreting things negatively, talking together when there is a question. And above all, never refusing our fellowship.

What I have just said may seem grave. But it is, paradoxically, the source of a deep joy as well, that of going to the very end of the Gospel's call.

I would like to mention another point concerning the parable of communion. For a parable truly to speak, so that the Word of God that it transmits may awaken those who listen, it needs to be simple. And for us, the call to simplicity contained in the *Rule of Taizé* (you know that Brother Roger wrote a rule for our community) is fundamental.

Pope Francis says the same thing in other words in *Evangelii Gaudium*, when he invites Christians to focus the proclamation of the Gospel on the essential kerygma. It is not a matter of reducing faith, but of constantly returning to what lies at its heart.

What is at the center of the Bible is love of God and love of neighbor. The Bible tells the story of this love. It begins with the freshness of a first love, then there are the obstacles, and even infidelities. But God does not get tired of loving. The Bible is the story of God's faithfulness. That is the simplicity of this message of love of which we want to be bearers by our life together.

Simplicity of course has to do with the material dimensions of life. We want to be attentive to their continual simplification. But it concerns other aspects. Notably liturgical prayer.

At Taizé, we do not claim to have found the right way to pray, but one of Brother Roger's intuitions was to have seen that prayer was a place of welcome and to have had the

audacity to simplify the ways in which it is expressed. Liturgical prayer is a kind of preaching, a catechesis, an initiation.

As we welcome so many young people, it is as if we had to take them by the hand to allow them to enter prayer, not in theory but in practice. We have had to change many things to make the heart of the Gospel more transparent and to lead the young people to a personal encounter with God. I will mention some elements:

We have tried to make the place of prayer welcoming with simple means. Stained-glass windows, candles, colored fabrics invite to adoration. Icons open to a communion with God, for they are penetrated with the Bible, as we learn from the Eastern Churches.

In common prayer, we read short and accessible Bible texts, keeping the more difficult texts for a catechesis which takes place every day outside of the common prayer.

We have discovered how important it is to have a long time of silence after the reading: eight to ten minutes. This may be surprising but, as I said, the young people enter it willingly. This silence allows us to be alone with God, even in a large congregation. In the silence, a few words from the Bible can grow in us. In long silences when apparently nothing is happening, God is at work, without our knowing how.

The so-called "Taizé songs" help support a contemplative life. Singing one phrase from Scripture or tradition for a few minutes favors internalization. A sung phrase can be easily learned by heart and can accompany us during the day. And singing together helps to create unity among the participants.

After the celebration of common prayer each evening some of the brothers, some of the sisters I mentioned, and also priests are available, while the singing continues, for confession or to listen to young people who wish to express something of themselves. We cannot stress enough the importance of listening. Brother Roger often reminded us that we are not spiritual masters, but men of listening. This is true whether we lead a pastoral life or whether another type of work is required of us.

In the liturgy, we try not to multiply the symbols but to highlight a few, keeping their simplicity: for example, on Friday night we place the icon of the cross on the ground. All can come and place their forehead on the cross, expressing by this gesture that they entrust to Christ their personal burdens and the suffering of the world. On Saturday evening, the whole church is illuminated by small candles that each person holds in his or her hand, as a sign of resurrection. In this way every weekend recalls the paschal mystery.

Conclusion

I will conclude. Communion or, to use a more accessible word, brotherhood, is at the heart of the Word of God. So must not we Christians be first in line to try and realize the brotherhood inaugurated by Christ, and help give a more fraternal face to the societies of tomorrow? The language of brotherhood speaks to believers and non-believers.

Without wishing to impose themselves, Christians can promote the globalization of solidarity that excludes no people, no person. Perhaps all we can do is to create, by our communities, seeds of fraternity, sowing tiny seeds of trust and peace.

I think again of our closeness to Cluny. The monks of Cluny had the ability to cross the borders of Europe. There were monasteries everywhere. Abbot Mayeul went from one monastery to another, from one country to another. He also received people from everywhere, turning Cluny into a crossroads. This example encourages us to search with young people from all continents the inner sources which allow us to live as one human family, despite cultural differences.

The monks of Cluny remain witnesses that in history, a small number of people have sometimes been enough to tip the scales towards peace. God could be revealed because a few people—think of Abraham and Mary—believed that nothing was impossible for him. What changes the world it is not so much spectacular actions, but daily persistence in prayer, in peace of heart and in human goodness.