

Prayer at Taizé Singing and silence: Singing and silence

by [Jean-Marie](#) in the [March 21, 2001](#) issue

We call prayer at Taizé “common prayer,” not the “office,” which suggests a work obligation: “We do our office,” “We do what we ought to do.” That doesn’t correspond to the way we experience prayer in our lives. To say prayer is “common” is to say that it brings us together. Of course, each member of the community tries to find time for personal prayer. But prayer in the church brings us all together.

A lot of people say, “Well, God is close to you anywhere.” Of course, a Christian prays on his own. But prayer brings us together. And a certain attention given to God will have an effect on the way we are with others. If God really is communion—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—then that same communion will have some bearing on the life we live with others.

Prayer in a Christian sense is an attentiveness to God that also makes us attentive to others. It’s not just a question of a personal discipline. Sometimes you hear people say, “I’ve got to find more quiet time in my life. Every morning I’m going to take half an hour for silence.” I’m not against that and would not discourage it. But it’s important to come together to pray and for prayer to have an effect on our lives.

We can’t help but try to look at prayer from the perspective of our visitors. It’s a bit of a plunge for most people to come here and spend seven days praying three times a day. It might seem pretentious to say we live plunged in prayer. But after a while, praying three times a day becomes something natural.

Not that it’s always so incredibly meaningful. As with anything you do every day, you have your own high or low moments. But we would like to help people find that there’s something natural in prayer, something a little bit like breathing, like eating. Not that prayer is a need the way eating is a need. But we all need to find some way that God becomes—and faith becomes—a natural element of life.

People come to Taizé from different backgrounds and speak different languages. With all that diversity, prayer has to be simple in the sense of being whole, not made up of lots of details. But also simple in the sense that everybody finds something to take away and chew on. We talk about that a lot. There's a constant quest for prayer, a constant need to ask ourselves, "What really helps us?" whether in the choice of music or in the choice of readings.

For example, on Saturdays for a while we were using candles to celebrate the resurrection. Then one Saturday things got a little bit out of control. There was a group that started waving the candles—the music we were singing was very joyous—and then the whole church started moving the candles around. It was very emotional, but it was also dangerous. We took this into account on the next Saturday. When it was time to light the candles, we used music that was a little bit calmer and saved the songs that were more openly joyful for later, once people got used to the candles.

Besides needing to address the issue of safety, we didn't want to push the service to a religious high. That's one of the things we want to avoid, given that there are four or five thousand young people here for an intense week. We want to be sure that their experience is close to the ground and is something that will not just be put in the category of an unrealistic dream. We don't want them to say, "At Taizé we could pray, but when we go back home we can't."

So we constantly need to be thinking about what can be changed and what little details have to be taken into account. These are questions for us in the community too. Day after day, week after week, year after year, we need new elements, new songs, things that renew our prayer.

There's really very little of a "Taizé model" for prayer. There are elements that we feel are very important. Prayer is meditative. It's scriptural. It's christocentric. It's prayer in the Spirit. It's trinitarian. It's God-centered. But the form of prayer needs to change in response to the needs of the people.

At the same time, it can be a big help for people to see that there is a structure to prayer: the Psalms at the beginning, scriptures, prayer intentions, the Lord's Prayer, a blessing. It is a traditional structure, based on the ancient Christian prayer of the hours.

And we've found over the years that singing and silence are two fundamentals of prayer. It's not that spoken prayer is unimportant. But the spoken word can be a little bit cerebral. There's a fullness to sung prayer, an element of wholeness.

It's impossible to imagine a time of prayer at Taizé without that long moment of silence in the middle. It's a time of listening, a time to leave things before God, a time to be before God, to have one's soul open for God.

Sometimes we hear people say that in the silence they feel a freedom with God. That's an important element. A lot of people don't experience the freedom God gives, and a lot of adolescents don't experience going to church as an act of freedom.

I don't want to sound as though we've gotten everyone's opinion, but the overwhelming majority seem to say that they get something from our practice of prayer. When you ask people at the end of a week what they most appreciated, what's been most important for them, they usually say it's prayer.

How that gets translated and transmitted is another question. We are very interested in the connection people make between their experience here and their local church. In what way can their Taizé experience benefit people back home?

For some people it's obvious: They're in a position to take the songs or the practice of silence—or just the fact that a congregation and not just a choir can sing—back to their churches either for Sundays or special services. But for a lot of other people that connection is hard. We sense a lack of preparation. Church is a foreign land for many people. And many people who come to Taizé are brought by friends, and they don't always know how much or what they believe.

When people come into the church for the first time at the beginning of the week, there's a lot of noise and commotion. Things quiet down as the week goes on. For a lot of people just the simple step of entering a church, crossing the threshold, is enormous.

We encounter all kinds of concerns. Even for believing Christians, God can become one shelf on a vast wall covered with shelves, one compartment within a life made up of many things. The ability to stop is important, to let things rest before God.