

The whole world singing: A journey to Iona and Taizé Living in the sound of praise

by [Belden C. Lane](#) in the [March 22, 2000](#) issue

I've often wondered what sort of conversation Protestant Reformer John Calvin and Catholic Bishop Francis de Sales would have had if they had met. These humanist scholars were both trained in law, were both afire with the love of God, and both ended up in Geneva, Switzerland, though separated by a generation.

Both Calvin and de Sales delighted in the role played by all created beings in singing the glory of God. Calvin, in his commentaries on the Psalms, and de Sales, in his *Treatise on the the Love of God*, emphasized a rich theology of divine providence and saw God as intimately involved in loving and sustaining the natural world. Calvin spoke of the world as a theater of God's glory; de Sales spoke of beauty as God's way of attracting the affection of all creation.

How can their common joy in singing the glory of God stir theological dialogue today? This was the question I took with me when I visited two contemporary religious communities where the two traditions are intimately joined.

A little over two hours by high speed train from Geneva is the Taizé Community, known around the world for the beauty of its chanted worship. This monastic community of a hundred Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox monks was founded in the early 1940s by Brother Roger Schutz, a Swiss Reformed pastor. Having launched a communal experiment among students at the University of Lausanne, Brother Roger sought a site for a more permanent community in eastern France. He chose the village of Taizé, not far from the border of the Nazi-occupied zone. There, in the midst of rural poverty, his community stirred controversy with its clandestine efforts to help Jewish refugees escape into Switzerland, its organization of a milk co-op among local farmers and its use of the vacant Roman Catholic village church for daily prayer.

Seven hundred miles to the northwest along the rugged isles of Scotland's western coast, a restored Benedictine abbey is home to the Iona Community. It was founded by George MacLeod, a Church of Scotland pastor who organized out-of-work stonemasons and carpenters to rebuild the abbey in the 1930s. Here, members bear witness to the concerns of liturgical renewal, social justice and ecumenical sharing. Here, too, the praise of God resounds in a daily pattern of prayer that echoes Columba's first journey to the remote island in the mid-sixth century.

Like Brother Roger, MacLeod sought to renew the church with a liturgically focused common life that embraced poverty. As a pastor he had responded to the plight of workers in the shipbuilding yards of Glasgow during the depression. The community he founded on Iona became controversial for its strange mix of radical politics, a Catholic sense of the church and sacraments, and a call for reconciliation among Christians. Its members were accused of being "crypto-Roman Catholics in Presbyterian guise."

Both communities are based on a rule and a common life of prayer that joins work and worship in a Benedictine pattern. Morning prayer at Iona never concludes with a benediction; evening prayer never begins with a call to worship. Instead, the whole day becomes a continuation of the prayer that frames it at either end. Similarly, the three daily periods of prayer at Taizé lack any formal conclusion. Soft chanting persists as people gradually leave to attend to other activities. In each place, praise gives continuity to each day.

Iona and Taizé are located at remote sites, places on the edge, where a concern for marginalized peoples expresses itself naturally. Both are determined to cross ethnic, economic and ecclesial boundaries. Both reach out to the world while also reaching back to an earlier local tradition—Celtic in one case, Cluniac (or Cistercian) in the other.

But the places are also extremely different. Taizé is a celibate, monastic community of men living under a common rule with Brother Roger as prior. It has smaller fraternities of brothers living among the poorest of the poor in Bangladesh, Calcutta and Brazil, but the center of the community is Taizé. By contrast, the Iona community consists of 220 members spread all over the world, including lay and clergy, women and men, Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox. They too follow a rule that requires a daily practice of prayer and Bible study, the tithing of their money in support of common peace and justice concerns, and regular meetings

with fellow members. But although a small contingent of members remains on Iona to help run programs and welcome guests, the community in general follows the Celtic pattern of wandering missionaries launched on pilgrimage around the world.

Taizé appeals to the ear. People who return from Taizé invariably speak of the beauty of the chanted songs that constitute its worship. Iona appeals more easily to the eye. Those coming back from Iona tell of its Wednesday pilgrimage and images of holy sites seen on the walking tour of the island. The difference ultimately is more a matter of emphasis than of substance. Iona too is celebrated for its creative music (with John Bell, for example) and Taizé is surrounded by the beautiful vineyard-covered hills of Burgundy. Perhaps the two emphases simply point to a common desire—a wish that the whole of creation break into song in awe of God's glory.

I have two dominant impressions from my own recent visit to these communities. One is an astounding sense that the adoration of God is still very much alive at the dawn of the 21st century. The other is a sense of the breadth and diversity of the immense company engaged in this work of adoration.

The wind howled as I sat alone one afternoon in the great silence of the South Isle Chapel of the Abbey Church on Iona. My wife and I had made our way by two ferries and a bus from the distant harbor town of Oban. The wind beat on the wooden door nearby, rattling its iron latch, demanding entrance. From high above the nave a finger of wind located a cracked window and whistled through it from time to time in a high soft scream. The wind was soon singing in multiple registers, like the voices of Tibetan monks chanting. I was aware of something going on in that place wholly apart from me—something I can only call praise.

Then two blackbirds entered the church, seeking shelter from the coming storm, and their songs echoed from the wooden ceiling and stone walls like a descant to the urgent melody of the wind. Suddenly, one of the birds walked up to me, only three feet away, then turned to enter one of the choir stalls—as if to attend more properly to its singing. All this seemed natural in that place, as if nothing were more ordinary than a choir of blackbirds managing the psalms with exquisite beauty at the afternoon office.

Dare we imagine that the company of praise does not include all the rest of creation? I asked that question again as I sat beside the small, open window of the abbey library and looked out across the sound toward the Isle of Mull. Sitting there is

like being aboard a ship. The curved wood ceiling, shuttered wooden windows and rough planked floors lend it a seaworthy air. My wife and I watched the sun rise from that window early one morning and listened to waves lapping on black rocks along the shore. The scene, framed by oak and foregrounded by walls of books, suggested John Scotus Erigena's notion of the two sandals of Christ—scripture and nature.

From within, we looked out with eyes formed by the word—Gaelic Bibles, works on Celtic spirituality, histories of the church in Scotland. We gazed out at a “thin place,” as MacLeod described it, a natural world as stark and simple as it is beautiful, hinting perhaps of other worlds beyond. In that one fragile moment at dawn we took our parts in a single community of praise—green grass lit by the rising sun, a gull's cry coming from across the water, two humans looking on with awe.

The journey to Taizé brought other experiences. From Geneva, my wife and I made our way by train and bus to the welcome center at the Taizé Community, and then to the little room assigned us in an old farmhouse. Sitting later that evening on the hard concrete floor of the Church of Reconciliation, I chanted songs alongside hundreds of others, and watched candles flicker against the bright red-orange hangings stretched above the altar. Built on a hill beside the village of Taizé, this church is an unassuming building that can expand to shelter thousands of young people who come speaking dozens of languages. One would imagine the chasm between these individuals to be impossible to bridge.

Yet something happens in the repetition of simple phrases put to song. The words and music, in French, Spanish, Polish, German and Latin, are echoed over and over like a mantra. Sound and meaning are gradually internalized until repeating the words no longer requires conscious effort. People of many cultures find themselves praying in one language, with one heart.

The phrases tell of adoration and human longing, of God's tenderness and Teresa of Ávila's consolation that “nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten.” *Notre Dieu est tendresse. Nada te turbe, nada te espante.* Other chants exult in unrestrained joy: *Christus resurrexit.* Another melody celebrates the unity it extols. “Praise the Lord, all nations. Sing Allelulia.” And not only all nations, but *omnia genera*—all species too. From the red maples outside the church door to the yellow leaves of distant vineyards. Even to the nettles in nearby fields, once used by poor farmers to make soup. Everything is finally absorbed in praise.

We gathered in a circus tent for our daily meals (often just a bowl of soup and some bread) and for Bible study. Amidst the Babel-like diversity, Brother Wolfgang spoke alternately in German and in English, while others translated into Latvian, French, Italian and Dutch. He laughed at one point about our confusion over a particular idiom, reflecting that “despite all the difficulties, the problems of translation in our little European world are good. They require that we make sure nothing is forgotten, that no one is missed.” He noted that in places like the U.S., where everyone speaks a common language, it’s easy to assume that everyone understands (and is understood), when that may not be the case. Carefully listening to each other’s languages is prerequisite to any community or common worship.

Out of my experiences at Taizé and Iona, I began to think about the theological insights that emerge from their particular ways of living out the truth.

The first is that the Calvinists, along with the various Benedictine traditions to which these two communities are indebted, have always emphasized *sola dei gloriam*, the praise of God’s glory, as the chief end of creation. Catholic historian Louis Bouyer praised Calvin for extolling God’s glory more than any of his contemporaries (even Ignatius Loyola). Bouyer regarded the Reformed tradition as “the most lucid and courageous attempt” among the original Protestants to recover a sense of God’s grandeur without minimizing the intimacy God longs to maintain with all of creation.

If we are transfixed by a common vision of God’s astounding beauty, then every aspect of our ecclesial, theological and liturgical life should flow from this center—from the praise of God’s glory revealed most tellingly in the cross of Christ. Theological reflection should begin and end with doxology. Leaders should aim at setting people free to glorify God with all the gifts they possess. Action for social justice should be the form that praise assumes in the marketplace and other corridors of power. If these energies don’t flow naturally from the exercise of wonder, they have no life. If the church lacks clarity about its first love, then it has little to offer (from therapy to charity) that can’t be better provided by others.

Moreover, churches will not draw young people to their doors if they shy away from any mention of adoration as a matter of embarrassment. Thousands of young people come to Taizé *because* of a deep longing for contemplation, a desire to worship. I was stunned by their attentiveness to prayer. The whole earth wants to shout glory, as George MacLeod insisted.

A second theme arising from the two communities is *sacramentum mundi*, the reminder that praise is always local, growing out of the full history and ecology of the world in which it's given. To rightly celebrate God's glory is to recognize the earth as a sacrament of God's presence. Bouyer warned of the Calvinist tendency to diminish the creature in the process of exalting God. Iona and Taizé, by contrast, would insist that God's glory is far from diminished by entering into intimate union with all that God has made.

When St. Columba chanted "the three-fifties" (all 150 psalms) down by the sea each morning before dawn, he did so with an awareness that the whole world joined him in benediction. He knew that praise was natural to every created being. This sense of the whole world as celebrant of God's glory ought to underlie every demand for ecological justice. The quest for a sustainable future is a theological extension of worship.

A final theme drawn from the lives of these two communities is *peregrinatio perpetua*, which has to do with the radically open-ended character of pilgrimage in the Celtic tradition. In its original form, this involved saints like Columba taking to his coracle (that bobbing teacup of a leather boat, without rudder or oars), trusting the waves to carry him wherever they might.

Such a spirit demands a readiness to "travel light," a practice of living simply. It also nourishes sensitivity to the poor, an awareness of the tenuous life that involuntary pilgrims face, and an eagerness to learn the languages that facilitate the crossing of borders. Taizé expresses all of these characteristics in its stark simplicity of lifestyle and its extraordinary practice of hospitality. This is a community that not only helped Jewish refugees at the beginning of the war but also fed German prisoners in a prison camp nearby. Compassion, as they knew it, is a wide land without partition.

This theme of ongoing pilgrimage may even challenge the church of the Reformation to examine its role as a separate body in the church of Jesus Christ. Was the energizing spirit of the 16th-century Reformation meant to persist forever in structures distinct from Roman Catholicism? Brother Roger tells of meeting with Marc Boegner, a Reformed pastor and president of the Federation of Protestant Churches of France. In the early days of Taizé, Boegner had been critical of Roger's efforts to advocate reconciliation with Pope Pius XII. But near the end of his life, he wondered if Reformed Christians might best witness to reformation from within a universal church, rather than outside of it. He asked Roger, "Should we now, after

the Vatican Council, say that the brackets should be closed on Protestantism?"

Roger's answer was startling: "Of course you should say so, because all the reforms sought after the 16th century have been achieved and more!"

I'm not suggesting that a simple "return to Rome" is the goal of Reformed and Roman Catholic dialogue. Actually, the longer I teach at a Roman Catholic university, the more fully reformed I become (and the more fully catholic as well). To envision in the new millennium a pilgrimage that takes us to an undivided church is not to declare winners and losers or to reach for simple solutions. The way forward to reconciliation is never simply back. Reformed and Roman Catholic Christians have to journey together, as Karl Rahner said, to "a home where none of us has ever been."

On the eve of October 31, 1999, my wife and I attended a service in the old Roman Catholic church down in the village of Taizé, celebrating the signing of the agreement between Roman Catholics and Lutherans on justification by faith the following day in Augsburg. In that small stone church where the community had originally begun, a Lutheran brother from Taizé celebrated a special Eucharist for a group of German Christians to which we were joined. We sang the chants of Taizé together and prayed for unity in the Church of Jesus Christ.

It was a foretaste of a community that John Calvin and Francis de Sales have already realized, a community that embraces Orthodox, Reformed and Roman Catholic Christians in celebrating the differences they bring to a common family identity. As Calvin and de Sales would remind us, it's a community that includes the rest of creation as well. "It is evident that all creatures," said Calvin, "from those in the heavens to those under the earth, are able to act as witnesses and messengers of God's glory."

That's what makes Iona and Taizé so compelling. Open to all the sundry languages of the human and more-than-human world, they embrace all of creation in their praise. One of the petitions in the communion liturgy at Iona asks of God, "May we know that, in touching all bread, all matter, it is you that we touch." This liturgy exclaims in the end, "Therefore with the whole realm of nature around us, with earth, sea and sky, we sing to you." That's a song that all of us who are on pilgrimage can sing together.