

"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!" (Isaiah 55.1)

Jesus said ..." whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4 vs 13-14)

Recently, prompted by Clare's service on All Saints Day, we're looking at the lives of those we call saints, not necessarily from the distant past, but people like us, ordinary people who did extraordinary things.

We all influence each other either for good or for ill; saints influence others in a good way. Their words, actions and very lives glow with the love of God, point towards Jesus and show the Holy Spirit working in the world. The modern-day saint I'm reflecting on was one of those. His name was Roger Schutz – better known as Brother Roger of Taizé.

Taizé, as many of you will know, is a village in the Burgundy region of France, famous for the monastic community founded there by Brother Roger during World War Two and which continues to welcome visitors from all over the world today. It is an ecumenical community where faith traditions which do not normally get along are able to worship together, literally side by side; Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants of every name, all worshipping God in the warehouse-like Church of Reconciliation. In the summer months of an ordinary year, the community welcomes roughly 5,000 people per week, the majority of whom are under 30 years of age. Most stay for just one week. Only student volunteers are able to stay longer and therefore there's a vast turnover of people arriving and departing every Sunday, all managed with the efficiency and precision of a Swiss watch.

Which is appropriate, because Brother Roger himself was Swiss, born to a Lutheran family in 1915. His grandmother, his father, who was a pastor, and his music-loving French mother were important influences in his life. Roger found himself wishing for a life of prayer and community when he was a university student, and gradually, the idea grew. In 1940, he made the decision to go to Nazi-occupied France and to live among the poor. After much searching he found a house in Taizé, and he and a few friends started their new life, alternating regular prayer with milking their cow and growing vegetables.

The early years were dangerous. They assisted Jewish refugees to safety over the Swiss border, which could have had them all executed. They struggled for funds, and were once robbed of what they had. Some of the locals were unfriendly. They were even forbidden to worship in the local church – as a Catholic Church, it could not be used for Protestant services. Nevertheless the little community persisted. And after the war, they turned to help German prisoners of war who had been held locally, though again, this made them unpopular with some of the locals. But from the beginning, their emphasis was on reconciliation and hospitality.

It is important to realise that Brother Roger did not want Taizé to become a new church. From the start he wanted the community to be a "parable of communion and reconciliation" which embraced the unity of all Christians. When he was interviewed later in his life, Brother Roger seemed embarrassed about being regarded as anyone special and was reluctant to speak about himself and his life. He said:

TFTD: Modern-Day Saints (Brother Roger of Taizé)

“We never create alone. It is always God who precedes us through the events that occur. God opens the way. It is a human tradition ... to seek founders. Yet it is God who founds. Thus the radiance comes from God and not from me¹.”

In time, the community built its own church; a small structure which had to be enlarged several times to cope with the numbers of people who came, all wanting to join in the thrice-daily services of prayer, song and worship that have become so essentially Taizé. And it was in that church during evening prayer that Brother Roger was stabbed to death by a mentally ill young woman on 16 August 2005. His biographer writes this: -

“At Taizé, messages of sympathy and solidarity poured in from far and near. More than ever it was realised, the community’s calling to forgiveness, peace, reconciliation and trust was being put to the test. Brother Roger himself had put his trust in the mystery of the transfiguration, that process by which God penetrates those places within us that are hardened, incredulous or disquieting, with the life of the Holy Spirit and so transforms them. In the days that followed his death, it became apparent to the brothers that the dismay and horror at what had happened was itself becoming transfigured through the prayers and solidarity with people all over the world².”

Saints are holy people, holy because they love God and are loved by God, who point the way for others to follow. The focus is never on the personality but on what they point to. The Community of Taizé has become a place of spiritual refreshment for those who visit it, allowing visitors to come, be renewed and then return to the world, hopefully having learned during a week of hospitality and community, something of the hospitality and community and indeed the prodigal generosity of God whose offer of that which gives life was announced by the prophet Isaiah and repeated by Jesus himself in the verses at the start of this reflection.

May Brother Roger’s legacy live on in the world, a legacy of peace, and reconciliation, a legacy of faith and of love. In the words of one of his prayers:

Jesus our peace, if our lips keep silence, our heart listens to you and also speaks to you. And You say to each one of us: surrender yourself in all simplicity to the life of the Holy Spirit; for this, the little bit of faith you have is enough.

I invite you to meditate on the theme of hospitality, on what you have received from God or wish to still receive from God, or on whatever else you have drawn from this in the course of the song – Let all who are thirsty, come.

Song (Taizé Community): Let all who are thirsty, come

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ElpNZVhSnQ>

Let all who are thirsty, come

Let all who wish, receive

the water of life

freely

Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

¹ Quoted from “A Universal Heart” – The Life and Vision of Brother Roger of Taizé by Kathryn Spink

² Ibid