

The Spirit in Contemporary Culture

TAIZÉ, CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

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Please wood, let Grandpa Georgi make you into a violin for God Do you hear me? Wood?

The wood was soft and warm in my fingers ... like living flesh. I didn't dare open my eyes. It seemed to me that a low, melodic sound filled the room, coming from below my fingers. And some kind of fragrance rose from there. The wood was singing. (Victor Paskov, *A Ballad for Georg Henig*)¹

THE MUSIC OF TAIZÉ is of a kind that invites its listeners to stillness. Religious services that employ this type of music activate the senses in a way that may be unparalleled in our modern, technologically inundated society. Through the Spirit, they summon us to meet the Divine, one person at a time, whenever and wherever we are, and yet they do so collectively. It is something wonderful.

Taizé is actually a small village in France where an ecumenical community of monks came together just after the Second World War. The movement and the community were started by Brother Roger Schutz, a Protestant, who was convinced of the importance of Christian unity. He envisioned that reconciliation and unity could be built among all the factions that existed after the Second World War by bringing together men who were committed to living in such a spirit. Paying special attention to the Holy Spirit, they chanted prayers, often psalms, three times a day, interspersed with silent periods of meditation.

¹ Victor Paskov, *A Ballad for Georg Henig*, translated by Robert Sturm (London: Peter Owen, 1990), 87–88. This is a Bulgarian novella about an old violin-maker who decides that his last work will be to make a violin for God that only God can hear.

Soon, people came to visit and pray with them. In an effort to include visitors who were arriving from many different countries and faiths, the monks began to reframe their chants as short pieces of music, often sung in French or Latin, and superimposed cantor lines over them in the languages of the people who were visiting. Young people began to flock to Taizé in tens of thousands—and still do. At the time, Brother Roger was not sure what to do with all these young people, but the monks relied on the Holy Spirit to guide them. They welcomed the young visitors to the village and not only prayed with them but began to listen to them, one-to-one, to answer their searching questions about faith. The monks also began to offer bible classes and teach their simple chants. Today, those chants are recognised worldwide simply as ‘Taizé music’, and over a hundred monks, from thirty different countries and various Christian denominations, continue to live together, pray together and welcome people from all over the world to this small village.

An Experiment

Taizé services began at my own parish, St John Neumann in East Freetown, Massachusetts, USA, about two years ago, after a conversation between the pastor, Father Gregory Mathias, and myself. We had been talking about contemplative prayer, and he asked if I had ever heard of Taizé. He explained it a bit and said he had always thought that this form of prayer might be the perfect remedy for the sorts of lives people live in the United States today. He also said that faith is fed by contemplation and prayer, but modern life often compels us to move too fast for either of them.

St John Neumann has a great choir and it sounded as though they could introduce this prayer form effectively. After we had explored the ways in which such services were organized in Taizé itself, and also at Boston College, where I teach, a committee was formed to prepare the environment. Long panels of red and orange fabric were hung to symbolize the presence of the Holy Spirit; icons were displayed; and lots of candles were ordered.

The church offered its first candlelit Taizé service on Palm Sunday, 2014. The service included scripture readings, chanting and periods of silence. While Father Greg welcomed people at the beginning of the service, and different people read the scriptures, the choir functioned as leader, even though they sang sitting down and off to the side. No one was to draw attention to him- or herself. After the initial welcome, the service simply unfolded according to the printed programme that

participants were given when they arrived. Taizé is ecumenical, so the congregation came from various other local churches as well.

The parish offered its second Taizé on Pentecost the same year and even more people attended. They seemed to be hungry for this type of prayer. That first year, the services were held monthly, and more and more parishioners became involved in setting up and taking down the environment, in publicity and in fellowship afterwards. Even the Boy Scouts helped take down the fabric sails after services. The choir was learning the music and people seemed mesmerized by the silence, the candles and the repetitive chanting.

By the second year, wonderful new ecumenical ties had been created and many parishioners were involved. Different local pastors began to offer the readings. At the heart of Brother Roger's ideas about unity and reconciliation was the activity of the Holy Spirit. People began to pray directly to the Holy Spirit, especially the choir members, even apart from the service itself, and they began to incorporate silent prayer into their practice at home between services. They wanted to know more about silence as a part of their prayer.

From a small village in France to a small town in the United States, it seemed that the Spirit had begun to direct events. Choir members remarked again and again how the Spirit seemed to be in control. People who attended the services said they could palpably feel the Holy Spirit's presence when they came, and many spoke about being changed by the



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Decorations for the Advent Taizé service at St John Neumann

service. Something powerful seemed to be going on. One Protestant pastor said what was going on at this Catholic parish was 'pure gospel'.

A Project

As Taizé unfolded at St John Neumann, a research project began as well. People attending the services seemed to be becoming more comfortable with silence and contemplative prayer. Perhaps Taizé could be used to teach contemplative prayer and an appreciation for silence not only to parishioners but to Boston College students as well. This might afford them new and deeper understandings of the Holy Spirit. Father Mathias gave me permission to use the parish, which is in the countryside about fifty miles from Boston College, as a subject for research, and this project owes a great debt of gratitude to him for his graciousness. The research departments at Boston College were also extremely supportive.

The project began at the start of 2015, and proposed interviewing parishioners who had attended Taizé at St John Neumann to see if it had changed their prayer life, and then bringing some Boston College students to the services and asking them to reflect and write about their experiences. Parishioners would be asked questions about their prayer patterns, what they called God, and if they prayed to the Holy Spirit in particular or to the Trinity in particular. Did they have any images of God? Did the Spirit speak to them? Did God move or stand still in their experiences? Had they any explicit experiences of the Holy Spirit, and what impact had the silence, candlelight and chanting music of Taizé had on their prayer, if any?

By this second year, the schedule had been cut back and Taizé services were only being offered five or six times a year. The choir, like most choirs, was made up of volunteers with limited hours for rehearsals, and there were other liturgies and seasons to prepare. But new reflections on the value of silence had begun to fill the gaps. A three-part BBC television series entitled *The Big Silence* was shown, about five men and women who sought to learn how to incorporate more silence into their everyday lives through a retreat at St Beuno's spirituality centre in north Wales.² After viewing this series, parishioners wanted to try a day of silence themselves, so the parish began to offer one-day silent retreats.

² *The Big Silence*, produced by Dollan Cannell (London: BBC/Tiger Aspect, 2010). DVDs of the series are available from The Way Ignatian Book Service; please contact the editorial office.

Three Taizé brothers came to visit Boston College from France that spring, and one of them, Brother Emmanuel, came to the parish on the day it celebrated the Sacrament of Confirmation. He attended all the liturgies of the day and then gave an informal talk on contemplative prayer that evening at a pot-luck supper, completely captivating his audience. The week before, the first class of Boston College students had come to St John Neumann for a Taizé service—they attended their second the next week at St Ignatius Church on campus. The day after that service, Brother Emmanuel came to their class and answered any questions they had.

In the autumn of 2015, two more classes from Boston College came to experience the service. The young people from all three classes were absolutely overwhelmed by the silence, the mesmerizing effect of the chanting, the candlelight and, above all, the freedom to explore silence and prayer as they wished and at their own pace. Like many university classes today, each contained a mixture of students from around the world, with different religious traditions in their history, and many without a religious tradition at all. To make the experience more meaningful for them, prayer petitions were written for the Year of Mercy, taken from Pope Francis' papal bull on mercy, *Misericordiae vultus*, and paired with prayers of mercy from other Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu sources.

The freedom to explore silence and prayer as they wished

The students not only went away enriched, but surprised that Taizé had touched them in the way it had. The two autumn classes did not have Brother Emmanuel to answer their questions when they returned to campus but, technology being what it is, the IT team at Boston College set up a video conference with Brother Emile, one of the other two brothers who had visited with Brother Emmanuel earlier in the year, and he responded to them from the monastery in Taizé. These students posed new questions, having become so accustomed to the interfaith dimensions of the world. They wanted to know how Taizé planned to incorporate non-Christian religions. Brother Emile replied that this was indeed one of the current challenges, since they were now hosting some Muslim immigrants within their community, and other religious traditions were coming. Once more they were going to rely on the Holy Spirit to guide them through this development.

Insights from Parishioners

The parishioners who agreed to the interviews were extremely open; one felt one should remove one's shoes as the ground was indeed holy. Beyond the basic questions, participants were grouped only by gender

and age group; they were about half men and half women, with a range of ages from the twenties to the seventies.

People were first asked what names they used for God in prayer and while the usual ones—Lord, God, Jesus, Father, Holy Spirit and Brother—surfaced, a few unusual salutations were also put forward: Daddy, Papa God, the Great I AM, and even ‘Pépère’, a French word for ‘grandfather’. One man prayed to God as Spouse since he saw himself, as a member of the Church, as the bride of Christ. A few prayed to the Trinity, but for most, this was not a common practice.

The majority of participants said that they did pray directly to the Holy Spirit; some had started only after coming to Taizé, but others did so before. Some had had experience with Cursillo retreats, ‘Life in the Spirit’ seminars, or the charismatic movement of the 1980s, and credited their heightened awareness of the Spirit to those experiences.³ Participants reported that they had been profoundly touched by the Holy Spirit, or were newly recognising that touch. Many prayed to the Spirit for guidance or begged the Spirit to pray through them. They felt that the Spirit was telling them something and that they received answers that guided them in making decisions. Some felt the Spirit communicating more profoundly in groups, or speaking through the voices of others, though most talked about individual communications. One man described the Spirit’s intensity almost as if it were a different type of consciousness.

In addition to the interviewees, other parishioners began to come forward and relate how they felt healed after attending, especially those who had lost loved ones. People were coming back to the church who had not been in a church in years. Others reported becoming calmer, their anxieties just melting away as soon as they entered the church. Many cited the silence as their favourite part of the service.

For most, God was on the move; God did not sit still. God is an active God. Some equated the experience of the active God with grace; and if it was grace, then it was the Holy Spirit. One felt that God was coming closer, like a sparkling light; others felt that there were times when they needed to move towards God, and God was standing still, waiting, ready to welcome them. Most associated movement with the Spirit rather

³ ‘Cursillo’ retreats, from the Spanish for ‘short course’, originated in Majorca in the 1940s as a form of Roman Catholic spiritual development and leadership training over three days. They have since become popular in the United States and among other Christian denominations. ‘Life in the Spirit’ seminars are associated with the charismatic renewal within the Catholic Church and seek to help participants realise and experience the gifts of the Spirit over a number of weekly sessions.

than other persons of the Trinity. One felt that sometimes God moved softly and at other times like a hurricane; another felt that God enveloped her or wrapped her, over and over again. Almost all the interviewees felt that when the Spirit moved over them, something powerful was going on.

When asked about silence and sound, and other sense experiences, almost all the participants thought the best part of the service was the silence, closely followed by the music and chanting. The chanting brought them to a deeper place where they could touch God. If biblical words were used they provided a grounding for the experience; most liked shorter chants. Many preferred the violin, flute and keyboard to trumpets or louder percussion instruments, and most preferred the slower chants to uplifting music or praise. One said that music ‘opened the heart’; another particularly loved singing psalms. The sense of smell triggered memories, especially incense to indicate prayers rising to God and spring flowers, which brought joyous memories of Easter.

Two of the interviewees were actually college seniors who had been involved with Taizé for all of their four years at Boston College. One had travelled to Taizé itself and intended to go back there; she found that sometimes a simple memory of a chant was now enough to bring her to prayer. The young man said that at first he saw Taizé as monastic, but the prayer form had changed his life over four years, and it was now a practice of prayer that he would always have with him. He has since been trained as a mindfulness instructor, and intends to help others find what he has found. Overall, the parishioners interviewed loved Taizé; one said that she cannot stay away whenever she hears it is being offered. They have particularly valued the opportunity for stillness.

Insights from Students

The students involved in the project also loved the service, and many cited the silence and the chanting as their favourite parts. One said he was touched by the silence in a way that he had never thought possible; a young woman said she encountered an inner peace she had never felt before. Students felt welcomed and part of the community as soon as they walked into the church; some commented on the sense of community while people around them were singing, and a feeling of solidarity with total strangers.

No one had a dominant role during the service—there was no preaching—and students appreciated that as well. It left them the freedom to explore on their own terms what silence, or the possibility of prayer, might be all about. Several students thought back to their families, whom

they had not seen in months after leaving for college, and were overcome with gratitude as they began to reflect on how they had got to the places where they were that evening. Some found the silence helped them to understand their emotions, and to step back and think things through. For others it fostered an interior monologue that left them with a type of clear-headedness, but also with a sense of community. More than one student walked away saying, 'I learnt something about myself this evening'.

Many felt calm, renewed and at ease after the service—often something they did not expect. Several commented on the calming effect of the chants and music, and one spoke of a powerful connection that was new to him—he felt all the negative energy leave him. Some focused on the candlelight, one thinking about how during most of human history the only light we had was from the sun or from candles, and how this candlelight recalled the past in a comforting way. Another wrote: 'I stopped thinking of all the daily stresses of my addictive technology. It motivated me to find out more about my own [Jewish] religious tradition.' The inclusivity of the service was appreciated: all religious and non-religious backgrounds were welcome. Race, age and gender no longer seemed to matter. It was equal opportunity meditation.

One student commented that the music was lovely, and because he could not see the choir, he was able to concentrate more on the sound and the candlelight, which had an almost hypnotic effect on him. A young woman who was raised as an atheist began 'people-watching', and marvelled at how dedicated those who attended must be—probably coming to worship every week of their lives, from childhood to old age. This made her begin to think about what had given her support in her own life, and whether that was simply faith in herself or whether she did indeed have faith in a higher being. A young man wrote that he felt the presence of something so much larger than himself, in a way he did not think he would ever forget. He felt drawn in, accepted, thanked and loved by people he had never met before.

There were several separate periods of silence during the service after readings, and many commented on how that allowed them to pick up on one word or phrase and really give it some thought, by contrast with the way other church services move on immediately from each reading to the next part of the ritual. One student thought of silence as generally 'cold', but not at Taizé: it was in community with others, and when he looked around and saw so many different people all worshipping in silence in a single ceremony, he felt humbled. Another, who had no religious



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affiliation, wrote that he was really touched by the experience of everyone, with all their different beliefs, coming together without a single word to place their candles at the end of the service. Yet another affirmed 'I never thought I would be interested in a topic based on silence, but I was completely wrong'. A young man spoke of how the silence helped him to face things that he usually tried to keep out of his head, and showed him new ways to think; another felt that the room was breathing as if it were a single person and he could almost hear its breath, which left him feeling connected to everyone present. Another wrote: 'At no other time in recent memory have I felt so in touch with my inner self'.

Taizé and Contemplative Prayer

In the BBC television series *The Big Silence*, Father Christopher Jamison states, 'Silence is the gateway to the soul, and the soul is the gateway to God'. He argues throughout the series that if we lose silence, we may be in danger of losing connection with our own souls and ultimately with God. Since society has become so inundated with noise, all kinds of people are beginning to reexamine the value of silence. Even schools are adding short periods of silence to the day, and find that test scores go up and discipline problems go down.⁴ Businesses increasingly encourage

⁴ Cynthia McFadden, Tim Sandler and Elisha Fieldstadt, 'San Francisco Schools Transformed by the Power of Meditation', *NBC News* (1 January 2015), at <http://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/san-francisco-schools-transformed-power-meditation-n276301>.

silent meditation among employees, and texts are emerging about its benefits in the secular world.⁵ Groups are forming everywhere to teach meditation and contemplation.⁶ Christian meditation, along with yoga, tai chi and Buddhist mindfulness training, is often seen as a place to start.

Contemplation can be defined simply as reflective or profound thought about something, or a way in which one can develop the mind to improve focus and attention, reduce stress, enhance creativity, explore meaning and develop empathy. In the context of Christianity, contemplation is often viewed as a type of meditation; but it can differ from meditation in that meditation often focuses on images or stories, for example from the Bible, whereas contemplation tends to be a self-emptying form of prayer, devoid of images and leading to union with the Divine. 'Infused' contemplation differs from 'acquired' contemplation in that the latter is an effort under some rational control, but the former is grace-laden and more in control of the Divine. But these definitions may be mixed and quite fluid for the average Christian or Taizé participant.

Instructions on how to begin to meditate often include sitting straight in a quiet place and breathing evenly so as to calm the body. Sometimes meditation pillows are used or short kneelers in which it is possible to kneel and still sit back with a straight posture. St John Neumann is a semi-circular church with curved benches, and there are floor cushions provided for those who wish to use them. Once participants are sitting quietly they can concentrate on listening, to words or music—or even to the most minute sounds, such as birds chirping, or a leaf falling, or a room breathing in unison, or to silence.

Taizé is a powerful sense experience. Everyone who attends services will tell you that. You enter the church in darkness apart from the candles, so the sense of sight is immediately stimulated in a unique way. Icons are frequently displayed, allowing the eyes to be captivated by a particular image in the candlelight. At St John Neumann, candles are distributed in small votive glasses and held, imparting a warmth and contact to the hand throughout the whole service. Hearing, however, is the sense that is affected most powerfully during Taizé, from the hypnotic, calming effect of the chanting, and the melodies of voices and instruments that impart a feeling of solidarity in worshipping together, to the silences with no sound at all.

⁵ See, for example, *Spirituality in Business: Theory, Practice, and Future Directions*, edited by Jerry Biberman and Len Tischler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁶ See *The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society*, <http://www.contemplativemind.org/> and *The World Community for Christian Meditation*, <http://wccm.org/content/john-main>, accessed 4 November 2016.

Taizé is rooted in the classical Christian spirituality and theology of the Spirit found in the scriptures, the patristic tradition and the saints, but these services appear to be a new and fresh exploration of an ancient practice: experiencing God as Spirit, and experiencing that Spirit within a community. It can open a window or a gateway from the ordinary sense experiences and perceptions of individuals participating in the services to the 'mystical' or 'spiritual senses' that mystics have been describing for centuries. The idea that the Spirit can transform our ordinary senses and make them more spiritual as a way to access the Divine has long been recognised, especially in the Eastern tradition. Taizé may be a good example of how the Spirit actually does this: the sense experiences of people at Taizé become spiritual sense experiences. Taizé opens a gateway to the immanent world of being: to the Trinity itself. When we reach the other side, we are invited into contemplative prayer.

The Mystics and the Indwelling Spirit

There are multiple definitions of what a mystic is, but the Carmelite Vilma Seelaus gives us a straightforward one: 'mysticism is simply living in a constant consciousness of God'.⁷ This constant consciousness



A gateway ... at St Beuno's Ignatian Spirituality Centre, in north Wales

⁷ Vilma Seelaus, personal communication during several conversations before she went home to God in January 2012. This is also a definition of mysticism in Sufi Islam.

acknowledges that there is an indwelling in the soul—that God is found there (John 14:17; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20; Titus 3:5; 2 Peter 1:4; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:27; 1 John 4:15), and that we may meet God’s presence there and enjoy union with God. Mystics are found in every religious tradition; they are the ones who experience union with the Holy One and are often responsible for letting others know what that experience looks like.

The theologian Origen (AD 185/186–c.254) was one such mystic. He experienced contemplation as ‘both knowing God and being known by God; it is union with God, a union that is never ending By contemplation, one becomes divinized’ The idea of divinisation—becoming divine at God’s invitation—is familiar, especially in the Eastern Church and has often been understood through the ‘mystical senses’. For Origen,

Mystical senses represent the richness and variety of the soul’s experiences in contemplation of the Spirit, the Incarnate Word and the Father. Christ and the Triune God can be spiritually seen, heard, tasted, touched and smelled, as attested to in Scripture.⁸

Didymus the Blind (AD 313–398), a well-known theologian who in part followed in Origen’s footsteps, was also a mystic and wrote his own theology of the Spirit.⁹ He lost his sight at the age of four, and all his learning was amassed through the sense of hearing—by listening to others read to him and instruct him; his writings had to be dictated to someone else. For Didymus, sound must have been very important. One can only imagine the profundity of his prayer of union as he was consoled by the Comforter and how he accessed the Divine through the mystical sense of hearing.

Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth-century monk, expressed his prayer and mysticism in terms of the Divine ‘kiss’, or through the sense of touch. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, he wrote that one encounters the Divine in three stages: first by kissing the feet of Christ, then by kissing the hands of Christ, and then through the kiss or very ‘breath’ of the Spirit.¹⁰ Bernard also turned to the Spirit as Comforter, relating

⁸ Harvey D. Egan, *Soundings in the Mystical Tradition* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2010), 16.

⁹ See Athanasius the Great and Didymus the Blind, *Works of the Spirit* (Yonkers: St Vladimir’s Seminary, 2011).

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Dreyer, ‘An Advent of the Spirit: Medieval Mystics and Saints’, *Advents of the Spirit*, edited by Bradford Heinz and Lyle Dabney (Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 2001) 123–162; Harvey D. Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991) 353–364.

how the sweet inner voice of the Comforter brings joy and gladness to the ears, and this sweetness is not recognised until one ‘tastes’ it: ‘Taste and see that the Lord is good’ (Psalm 33:8). Touch, sound and taste are all included in his prayer.

The Contemporary Need for Contemplative Prayer

The British systematic theologian Sarah Coakley argues that what is called for today is a return to serious contemplative prayer: prayer that comes out of stillness and meditation, that is disciplined and purified and has the potential for bearing much good fruit. In her book *God, Sexuality and the Self*, she describes a ‘contemporary trinitarian *ontology of desire*—a vision of God’s trinitarian nature as both the source and goal of human desires’. Freud, she maintains, must be tipped on his head: for it is not physical sex that is basic and God ephemeral, but the other way around. God is basic and the desire for God is an ontological category belonging primarily to God and only secondarily to humans, since humans are made in God’s image.

Through contemplative prayer, the Church Fathers utilised their mystical senses and encountered those Pauline readings that are full of charismatic passion and *eros*, and came away with what Coakley characterizes as an ontological eroticism: an incredibly powerful force drawing each of them to God through the mystical senses. Like Christians today, the Fathers were dealing with Church issues, political issues and gender issues, and they were at the cusp of developing doctrine. Yet through the force of their incredible desire in contemplative prayer, the Spirit helped shape their theologies for them.

The attractiveness of Taizé may arise from its functioning, like the ‘mystical senses’, as a sense experience that touches the ontological. It is teaching contemplative prayer by tapping into people’s senses. They are being drawn through the stillness into an overwhelming desire for God. The Spirit has been called upon directly in Taizé and the Spirit does not disappoint. *Veni Sancte Spiritus!*

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