

Taizé: The Healing Sound of Reconciliation

By Rob Grant, *Special to the SF Catholic*

A world in a state of chaos.

The taste, sounds and smell of war everywhere

Refugees fleeing and seeking shelter.

Cynicism and disillusionment in the air.

Religious factions at each other's throats.

Sound familiar?

This was the world into which Roger Louis Schutz, recently slain founder of the Taizé community and its international ecumenical ministry, was born in Switzerland, in 1915.

Raised as a child through the ravages of World War I, and well aware as a young man of the early unfolding atrocities of yet another World War, at the age of 25, Roger awakened to a desire, a calling, to somehow bring healing to the chaotic and deeply wounded world.

The first step in this mission of healing was his decision to follow in his father's footsteps and become a Lutheran Pastor—but he knew his calling was not to the comfort of a country church in the safety of Switzerland.

With a handful of like-minded young men, and his sister, Genevieve, he established an unofficial religious community, an abbey of sorts, in an abandoned farm house in Taizé, near Cluny, in the Burgundy hills dividing what was in 1940 unoccupied and occupied France. There the community set up a shelter for children orphaned by the war. The house soon became known as a refuge, a safe place not only for abandoned

children, but for Jews and Gypsies fleeing the Gestapo. Although the house was eventually discovered by the Nazis, Brother Roger's life was fortuitously spared, and, when the occupation ended, he and his community resumed their work of reconciliation.

It was during this post-war period that the Taizé community, aware of the healing and restorative power of music and ritual, began to develop a unique type of public religious service based neither on the low-Lutheran nor high-Roman liturgical styles, but, rather, drawn from an eclectic mix of Eastern Orthodox worship, Buddhist/Hindu meditation, and ancient monastic traditions of chanting and centered prayer.

Key elements of the "Taizé experience" are its physical atmosphere and its sounds, both, unique to this form of prayer.

The atmosphere is as monastic as one can imagine: a darkened church, with only candlelight gently illuminating the altar area, where, as the center of attention, is the Taizé Cross, an iconic representation of Jesus with arms outstretched in surrender, in embrace, in welcoming to all who gaze on it and approach it.

The Taizé style of chant reflects both the simplicity of life of the abbey, and the community's commitment to an all-embracing, ecumenical approach to ritual and prayer. The chants are exceptionally simple melodies, nearly archetypal in their directness and power, barely accompanied, and repeated in a mantric manner that allows for the words (in many languages) to become less intellectual concepts, and more a flowing, soothing pattern that allows their healing, generative power to take effect.

The service moves gently, ebbing and flowing through its succession of elemental mantric chants, silent reflection, and the reading of scripture. Silence is key to the service, allowing

the participants to be not only active in the voicing of their prayer, but contemplative in their openness to hear and experience the compassionate, forgiving Christ, whose image they see beckoning peace and reconciliation.

Many participants find the highpoint of the experience to be the invitation to approach the cross, kneel before it, and place one's head upon it, resting there for as long as one cares to, allowing the calming, strengthening, reconciling, forgiving, redeeming power of the cross to work its way into the soul.

What began in the village of Taizé 65 years ago is now an international phenomenon, with weekly services held in over 100 countries across the world. At the original Taizé site, the Friday evening service typically draws between 2,500 and 3,000 people each week.

Taizé Prayer Around the Cross is celebrated in San Francisco every Tuesday evening in the beautiful and intimate worship space of Notre Dame Des Victoires Church, 566 Bush Street (corner of Stockton) at 6:30 PM. Archdiocesan Cantor and classical guitarist Rob Grant leads the music at the service.

