

Proper 16 Year A

August 24, 2008

I want to talk with you this morning about a great Christian hero of mine...and not just mine, but millions of Christians and spiritual seekers from all around the world.

He died a violent death three years ago this month at the age of 90. He was murdered as he gathered with thousands of young pilgrims who come every summer to pray and reflect and to try to find spiritual meaning for their lives. I am speaking, as you may have guessed about Brother Roger, the founder of the Ecumenical order of Brothers in Taize, France.

Our world is blessed in every generation by certain individuals who in their lives answer the question: "Who is Jesus?" with such clarity and beauty that their lives bring others closer to Jesus as well. Brother Roger was one of them. He had a quiet, reflective way with the young people who came to be at Taize. He did not tell them what was the right way to believe, which is so popular with some. 'Here is the truth, Here is what you should believe, just follow it,' many of them say. But that is not Brother Roger's way. Here is a more typical way he would speak to young people about reading the Gospels:

When we open the Gospel, each of us can say, 'These words of Jesus are rather like a very ancient letter written in an unknown language. But since it is written to me by someone who loves me, I am going to try to understand its meaning, and to put into practice right away the little I have grasped.'

In 1940, the then 25 year old Roger left his native Switzerland and came to Taize in eastern France, where he was able to hide refugees, and in 1949 formed the Community of Brothers. It was to be “a community where kindness of heart would be a matter of practical experience, and where love would be at the heart of all things.

From the 1950’s right up today, Taize became a place of pilgrimage for people from all over the world; as many as 5000 at a time come to pray and sing and be silent and to share their deepest spiritual longings. They come for a few days or for a week or more.

The Brothers, now number over a hundred, are Catholic and Anglican and all kind of Protestant. They gather for evening worship and their way of praying and singing has powerfully transformed the spiritual lives of so many and their music is sung all over the world.

Young people flock to Taize because they are searching for meaning in their lives. They talk with other seekers after God, they talk with the Brothers of the Community, they have questions, deep spiritual questions that are not satisfied by giving a pat answer that has been handed down as the one and only true way a believer must think.

Last week, at one of the evening services, Brother Alois, who is the current Prior of the Community, spoke to the few thousand who gathered as they do each night for Night Prayer. I want to share with you a part of what he said to those young people, because it speaks to me of questions and faith.

“This week we remember our Brother Roger. Three years ago, on August 16, 2005, he died right here, in this church. Brother Roger loved the times of prayer in this place. In the evenings, he stayed a long time to listen to those who came to him.

You may not know that when he was young, Brother Roger questioned the reality of God’s love. Because of that, his whole life long he understood from within those who were undergoing doubts.

An intuition made it possible for him to find a way out of that difficult period. That intuition was this: without even being able to understand everything about God and the Gospel, it is possible to put into practice only the little bit we have understood. Putting into practice the little we have grasped of the Gospel: that meant for him living the peace of Christ, moving towards reconciliation, beginning first of all with just a few people, in community.

For Brother Roger, welcoming meant in particular listening. If brothers remain now every evening to listen to you personally, that is because he accorded such great attention to listening. It is true that we all need to be understood by someone else. How could we believe in a God of love without that human understanding from another person?

Listening in that way naturally led Brother Roger to put his trust in the young. So many things were made possible in Taizé, so many problems found their solutions, by his ability to entrust responsibilities to young people.”

So, concluded Brother Alois,

“And if this evening I can communicate something about him to you, it would be this:

Have the trust that God will give you, at every stage in your life, what you need to go forward, and even to pass through trials. God wants happiness for us. His call leads us to give our life for others. Let us begin humbly. Let us put into practice the little we have understood of the Gospel.”

That is a wonderful thought to me...put into practice the little we have understood of the Gospel.

Brother Roger once said to pilgrims who came to Taize with so many questions, searching for God: “Let us never forget that this simple desire for God is already the beginning of faith.”