

1969

In the journal entries for 1969 and the beginning of 1970, which were published in 1971 in a volume entitled Ta fête soit sans fin (Festival without End), Brother Roger recounts the genesis of the project which was to transform significantly the life of the Taizé Community and its relationship with the young: the launching of a “Council of Youth.” Two concerns of his, reflected in these pages, converged to inspire this undertaking. The first was the crisis in the Catholic Church in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, notably the many priests and religious who were abandoning their ministry. Related to this was the failure of the movement for Christian unity to achieve the results that many had hoped for after the council. At the same time, the numbers of young adults coming to Taizé and searching for a renewed society and church continued to increase, a search that ran the risk of turning into cynicism and despair if no way was found to take their aspirations seriously and orient these in a positive direction. These two themes slowly came together in the mind of the prior of Taizé, and gave rise to an ever more urgent need to take a clear and concrete step forward. This inner deliberation runs through the entries for this year, together with the ever-present reflections on nature and the community’s vocation, as well as short accounts of trips to Paris, northern Italy, Switzerland, and Rome.

February 20, 1969

When I chose the village of Taizé in 1940, I was alone. The silence of the deserts strengthens the encounter with God. Alone with ourselves, we are aware of a presence within us.

It is not consonant with our human nature to dwell in the desert. All our attention is needed if we are to come to grips with a silence that is fully alive with a presence.

For a long time our existence was characterized, not by isolation, but by an accepted solitude. And yet, from the very first day our life at Taizé has been interwoven with encounters with others. After twenty years of life together we were thrown, so to speak, into the public arena. It has taken seven years, from 1962 to 1969, for us to realize what was happening to us.¹

While welcoming large numbers of visitors, we have always found ways of establishing zones of peace on our hill. I suspect that these simple values—silence, and also love for things, for domestic animals—strengthen a creative capacity within us.

And now, during these days, young people from forty-two countries are gathered here, quite unexpectedly, in the depth of winter. We are searching together. Forty-two countries: we are experiencing a kind of little council of youth.²

These young people often have a great degree of selflessness. It comes from Christ. They shun privileges for themselves, and equally they cannot stand any caste mentality. With them the church will go far.

1. For years only the religious press spoke periodically about the community. But in 1960 Brother Roger organized at Taizé a conference of Catholic bishops and Protestant pastors, the first meeting of this kind since the Reformation. That led to articles in *Le Monde* and *Paris-Match*, then a prime-time television program. In 1962, the Church of Reconciliation was inaugurated at Taizé, and Pope John XXIII invited two brothers to take part in the Second Vatican Council, two events that increased the community's visibility.

2. This gathering of representatives of different nations called to mind Brother Roger the memory of the Second Vatican Council, which had ended four years previously, bringing together bishops from the entire world. He took part as an observer.

February 22, 1969

Television teams in the church. The cameramen arrived without warning. What can one say? Their directors have sent them from a thousand kilometers away, one group from Rome, another from Germany. They are mostly family men. It would be inhuman simply to send them away.

I stress the need for total discretion. With high-sensitivity film they can avoid using floodlights. But I know they cannot do the impossible.

So, before the start of the common prayer, I am obliged to take the microphone and to explain once again to those present: “Today during our prayer, cameras will be on us for a few minutes. Some of us, because we take prayer so seriously, will find this intrusion hard to accept. There are others, just as serious, who are glad of the possibility of communicating with large numbers of people.”

February 23, 1969

A long talk with a brother. He questions me about the prayer I improvise each day in the church at midday. He asks why, in it, I allude so often to darkness, to inner poverty, to night. Because I do not base my life on illusions. I am aware of the combat being waged within the Body of Christ, the church. Certainly the church will emerge from this combat: she does not die. Continually in a state of being born, she is created ever anew.

As for our own dark nights and poverty, I can talk with God about them all the more readily since, at present, so many Christians are aware of their limits. Personally, I have no need to conceal my poverty. There, I contradict those who suppose that our vocation confers some kind of privilege. Like them, with them, I set out daily on the same road, out of my night towards a light—or even from doubt towards believing.

February 24, 1969

Do not confuse being emotional with being sensitive. I refuse to be emotional (not the same thing as having rare, deep emotions): I have better use to make of my energies—they are already none too great. I refuse to be emotional since my progress—like that of our community, of the church or of whole societies—does not at all depend on that. Whereas sensitivity remains alive in many grave situations.

February 26, 1969

Robert Kennedy tells somewhere how difficult it was for those who met his brother, the president, to be themselves. Each visitor tended to enter into what he sensed of the president's line of thinking. One day, going with a friend to see his brother, he was astonished to hear his friend expressing the opposite of what he had determined to insist on. How can highly placed statesmen be kept informed?

And it is the same in the life of the church. More than once I have been known to ask my brothers, before some conversation, to pray for me to remain myself and to keep my courage.

February 27, 1969

In the next world we shall be astonished to meet those who, unacquainted with Christ, have lived by him without realizing it.

March 1, 1969

Several times in recent years, I have heard Protestants (some of them pastors with personal positions of authority) repeat: "Since the Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has replied to the questions posed by the Reformation to such an extent that Protestantism has lost its reasons for existing apart; all its best aspirations are

henceforth embodied in the Catholic Church. Are we now going to act in consequence, or are we going to invent new reasons to justify being separated?"

And today the question arises: is protest not taking over now within the Catholic Church itself? I should never have thought so, even a few years ago. The Reformation of the sixteenth century sought to protest against abuses and to that, answer has been given. Today, within the Catholic Church, protesting does not necessarily have abuses as its target—at times it becomes an end in itself. Almost everything is called into question. We are far from the point at which ecumenism began. A great storm has blown and, at moments of calm, we look around wide-eyed to see what has held firm.

March 2, 1969

Little Bruno baptized in the village church at Taizé. His parents are not involved in the life of the parish and so the priest had asked them to put off the baptism until later. But when he saw their stupefaction and their real desire to understand, he finally agreed.

And what a festival! Obvious astonishment on the part of the family. The grandfather is unable to recognize anything from previous occasions. He finds everything easy to grasp, accessible. "It's because of the Council," I explain. And a few days later he is heard to say, "Everything has totally changed; it's because of the consul."³

Back from the baptism, a brother tells me that a local man, the young father of a family, has just died. I remain silent in my room. I was almost unacquainted with that man, who spent all his holidays in his family home near Taizé. His family held in conscience that no contact between us was possible for doctrinal reasons. Four years ago, on the morning marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of my first arrival in Taizé, I went to a Mass celebrated by a priest

3. *Translators' note:* The grandfather's misapprehension is not so unnatural in French, since the word *concile*, used for the ecumenical councils of the Church, is a rarity, quite distinct from *conseil*, the word for a council in the everyday sense.

of the same family—a true patriarch in the midst of his people. I had let it be known that I would be there. The Mass over, everyone left and I remained alone, waiting for the priest to come out of the sacristy. Not seeing him come, I ventured to go and greet him. His welcome was, “The church is intransigent.” “True,” I replied, “yet everywhere openings are being prepared.” And I attempted to explain all that we are involved in with Catholics—those of Latin America, for example.

March 4, 1969

This morning a letter from the widow arrived. Replying to a message I had sent, she writes, “The assurance of the prayers of your community reached me at the very moment that the Lord called my husband to Himself. . . . And since I have the opportunity today, I want to tell you how, although we never had the joy of talking with you, your thoughts have often been the source of our reflections as a couple—perhaps particularly *Living Today for God*, which we frequently read and meditated on together.”

Already, beyond the divisions, there had been a contact. I am overwhelmed.

March 5, 1969

Among Christians and atheists alike, too much vital energy is used up in constructing abstract, ideal forms of society; at the end of it all lots of ideas, but nothing is really achieved for humanity. Protest itself is now becoming another ideology, instead of being creative criticism.

I can see nothing more appalling than to live as an ideologist. Seek to free myself from ideologies—refuse the luxury of wasting the energies so vital if the earth is to be made a place fit to live in.

1969

March 6, 1969

Alternation, the provisional—two values I believe in profoundly! But I know too that for some people they serve to disguise a basic dissatisfaction. As though change can have magical results. True, a change of scene can give a person a momentary sense of peace which distracts them to such an extent that they may believe they have already been transformed. But time goes by, and the day comes when they find themselves once more confronted with themselves. Inwardly, in spite of the uprooting, nothing is really different. And there they are, insatiable once again. Let's make a change—so I can stay as I am. Let's make a change, then I shall not have to pay the price of a personal transformation. And the cycle begins anew.

March 7, 1969

Who can seize all that a look conveys? I listen to a brother. One word painstakingly follows another. If there were only the words, I should be unable to understand completely. But in his eyes there shines a struggle—the refusal to serve himself at another's expense.

March 8, 1969

What can Christians do to promote development? Above all, help make people—and especially Christians—more aware of the injustice and inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Generation after generation, in season and out of season, reawaken the hardened conscience of our societies.

We know that what we do remains symbolic. Only nations have sufficient means to change the situation. If at present they are shunning their responsibilities, it is up to us to make up for them temporarily.

March 9, 1969

Dryness in the personal encounter with Christ. Nothing seems to be happening. The days go by; time runs on. Even the value of the searching only appears later. It is certainly not to be more at ease in oneself that one perseveres in this faithfulness. What is at stake lies elsewhere and is far greater.

Community prayer too has its deserts to cross. But it is lived out with many others. We see faces and it overflows into a celebration of friendship.

March 16, 1969

Sunday morning in Paris with my mother, my sisters, and their children who have come to visit us. A brother celebrated the Eucharist. The day's reading was the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.⁴ Ever since my early childhood I have experienced the reality of this text. My mother used to assure me that we would always have enough to fill us, and much, much more. As a tiny child, I used to long for there to be an organ in the parish church. To which she would reply, "One day you will have one."

After the Eucharist, I am reluctant to go out to Mass. I should be sure to meet many friends there. I should want to invite them, and I have very few days of holiday with my mother and sisters.

Now my sisters have gone out, to Mass or to Sunday worship. Everything breathes peace. Peace resting in the light that every now and then floods the white pages I am covering with the thick strokes that compose my writing.

Hanging on the wall of my room is a Catalan Christ, with the four evangelists at his right hand. His outstretched hand blesses us by night and by day. Green golds predominate. The artist can have had nothing but gold and pale green on his palette.

All the doors have been left open. In every room someone is writing. At the far end, my mother is installed. At eighty-nine, she still works every morning on her correspondence. In the room

4. John 6:1–15.

next to hers is the oldest of all my nieces. In the dining room a brother has taken a seat at the big table, also to write. I go to the record player to play Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* once again.

March 17, 1969

Went shopping in the department store in the Rue de Rennes. Going down to the toy counter, I ask what inexpensive items they have for children. Timidly the salesgirl tells me, "Father, last Sunday I heard you speak on the midday news, talking about Latin America. And I told my husband, 'I know him; Father comes to my counter.'" She sells me eighteen dolls, reduced in price, and eagerly runs off to look for other toys in the stock.

Not content with that, she asks her colleagues to look and see if they have other things that do not cost very much.

Opposite the toys is the jewelry counter. The salesgirl there, a colored girl, tells me, "Keep my counter for me for a moment, while I go and see one of my co-workers who's bound to have something for you."

March 23, 1969

Back in Taizé, I learn of the death of a Portuguese immigrant at Cormatin.⁵ He leaves behind eight children, some still infants. This afternoon at their house, the oldest son told me of his father's last hours. Struck down by a hemorrhage, he insists on seeing the priest to confess, be anointed, and receive communion. Then, for the last three days, he comforts his family and reassures everyone coming to see him that they will all meet again, with Christ. He keeps a picture of the Virgin of Fatima before him.⁶ He keeps kiss-

5. A village four kilometers from Taizé in the direction of Chalon-sur-Saone.

6. In 1917, during World War I, three poor shepherd children in the town of Fatima, Portugal, reported six apparitions of the Virgin Mary. The reports were very controversial, partly for political reasons, but the location attracted many pilgrims, and the Catholic Church officially recognized the apparitions in 1930. Today Fatima is an important place of pilgrimage and has been visited by recent popes.

ing the image and saying, “The Virgin is here.” His last words are for her. Sometimes he weeps, but never when his wife is there.

This afternoon we told each other how this death can only bring us closer together. Before parting, we kneel down. First, the mother makes her children kiss the picture of the Virgin, then she prays in Portuguese. The two smallest ones do not know how to make the sign of the cross; she asks them to repeat the words of the prayer again, pronouncing them better.

At home, I tell my brothers of the visit. I ask: “In spite of the subsequent political uses made of it, why should not the mother of Christ have appeared to three children of Fatima to comfort the poor of a people who were to suffer so much. What does it matter if the image described by the children is not to our taste? Any apparition is always impossible to translate into pictures.”

April 2, 1969

Talk with five seminarians. They manifest a collective anxiety. I attempt to fix their minds on the essence of the church’s life; they listen attentively. They are eager for something, but what exactly? What will become of them? Will they have a share in building up Christ’s body, or in breaking it down?

Next, among others, is an old couple. Their mutual love is so genuine. She is silent, but her eyes convey a friendship with God.

Here, at the same spot, not long ago I received a young widower. And today I learn that he has taken his life. Why did I not realize then that it would come to that? When I saw him, he had just lost his wife and nothing could console him. . . . I tried to reassure him, but all I could see were two wide eyes flooded with tears. I insisted that he should not remain alone for the moment; he had children to live for. I was ready to take any steps to help him—to welcome them here for a while.