

ARE DIVISIONS IN THE CHURCH INEVITABLE?

The answer of Brother Roger and the Taizé community

G. Wakuraya Wanjohi

Introduction

The year 2017 is an important anniversary in the history of Christianity: the church remembers that on October 31st it will be 500 years since Martin Luther, a Catholic Augustinian monk, nailed 95 theses to the chapel door of the Wittenberg castle in Germany. This act was the beginning of what has come to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

This anniversary will be remembered – and celebrated – in many places in the world. For although the Protestant Reformation started a long history of violent division in the church in Europe, the final outcome of this single act by a German monk, has on the whole, led to greater tolerance for freedom of thought in the church and questioning of church structures. The fact that the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, was one of the chief attendants during a Commemoration of the Reformation in the Lutheran Lund Cathedral in Sweden on 31 October 2016 is clear evidence of this greater tolerance.

But – and this cannot be underestimated – divisions in the church continue to plague Christianity all over the world. It is acute in Kenya: physical fights among people representing different church factions are not isolated phenomena in our country.

Therefore, the publication last year of a book on Brother Roger of Taizé (France) and the community he founded in 1940 (*Brother Roger's contribution to theological thought: acts of the International Colloquium*, Taizé. August 31-September 5, 2015. Taizé: Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, c2016, 300 p.) could not have come at a more appropriate time for it describes a unique journey to Christian unity. The book is an excellent source for deepening one's knowledge about ecumenism. It reproduces the talks of more than twenty persons from many different countries. Among them are bishops, historians, pastors, philosophers, priests, professors and theologians of various churches: Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, United Protestant. The Archbishop Emeritus of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, Cardinal Walter Kasper, a former bishop in Germany and Edwin Arrison, an Anglican priest from South Africa are among them.

I have had the privilege of knowing some of the brothers of the Taizé community for several decades and the reading of the book cited above prompted me to write some reflections.

What is it that makes Brother Roger and the Taizé community light up as a beacon for everyone for whom the continued division in the church continues to be a scandal? As I see it, there are three things that stand out about Brother Roger and the Taizé community: 1) Brother Roger's own journey; 2) His answer to church division: the parable of community; 3) Taizé's attraction to young people.

Brother Roger's own journey. Brother Roger is not, like Pope Francis, a household name among Christians. He was not a well-known public speaker and he even said of himself that he "never liked theology." Yet, it is the opinion of Christians of many denominations and of various church leaders that this humble monk, together with the community that he started in France in 1940, has done more to further the unity of Christians than anyone else in living memory.

The participants at the Colloquium who spoke about Brother Roger are agreed on one thing: Brother Roger's journey cannot be understood apart from his very personal relationship to Jesus Christ. That relationship was intimate but it was not without 'thorns'. This is how one of the authors of the book, Karen Scott, a convert from atheism, describes it: "There is something about Brother Roger's vision that takes me to the center point of the faith, and then over the edge." (p. 121) What she means by this last phrase is that Brother Roger's faith journey to the crucified and risen Christ, inspiring as it is, also knew its periods of desolation. But she goes on to say: "Brother Roger's words encourage us to persevere in God's path despite the thorns: as he said, God will make a big bonfire out of those thorns, and we will become light." (p. 130)

The other point that is always stressed about Brother Roger is how he lived ecumenism. He said: "I have found my own Christian identity by reconciling within myself the faith of my origins [he was brought up in the Reformed Church] with the mystery of the Catholic faith, without breaking fellowship with anyone." (p. 292) Several speakers at the Colloquium have referred to this personal ecumenical journey of Brother Roger. Though they agree that it is unique to him, they also see it as a possible pointer to the future. Cardinal Kasper puts it this way: "It seems to me that Brother Roger's personal journey, guided by the Holy Spirit, is a discreet indication by the Holy Spirit for the future ecumenical path." (p. 294)

Space will not allow me to go into further detail about Brother Roger. (Readers wishing to know more about Brother Roger can consult the website of the Taizé community. (www.Taize.fr.)

Brother Roger's answer to church division: the parable of community

Compared to the vast influence it has exerted and continues to exert in and outside the church, the Taizé community is small. It consists of just over a hundred brothers from some thirty countries. Some of the brothers live among marginalized communities in different parts of the globe. A few of them lived in Mathare Valley, a slum in Nairobi for some seven years: 1978-1985. At the moment in Kenya the community is represented by five brothers, living in a place called Mji wa Furaha on Thika Road. They especially attract young people from turbulent environments who are looking for meaning in life. Most of the brothers, however, live in the village of Taizé in France. This community of brothers and the Church of Reconciliation adjacent to it yearly attract thousands of mostly young people from all corners of the world.

So, what is it that searchers find in Taizé and in other places where the brothers live and work? They encounter a community of brothers, working for their upkeep by the work of their own hands and following a simple lifestyle. Their life is centered on thrice-daily worship (consisting of prayer, the word of God, scripture-based chants – and silence). It is this 'parable of community', as Brother Roger liked to refer to the peaceful life of the brothers that impresses the visitor.

Taizé's attraction to young people. What specifically attracts the many young people who flock to Taizé in such large numbers? Brother Roger himself relates how a 'highly esteemed interlocutor' put this question to him: "Brother Roger, if you have the key for understanding the young, tell me what it is." "I would like to have that key," I answered, "but I do not have it and never shall. We have no method at Taizé to communicate the faith." (p. 205). The 'highly esteemed interlocutor' was Pope Paul VI who had invited Brother Roger to Rome for a meeting with him in 1972. From Brother Roger's answer it can be concluded that "the message is faith. The method is undefined; the key is non-existent." (p. 205). But even without key or method, there is no doubt that at Taizé the faith is communicated by word as well as song but above all by example.

What can those who long for the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer in John 17 learn from the Taizé community? I can think of no better answer than: "Go and see."

(http://www.taize.fr/en_rubrique2085.html)

G. Wakuraya Wanjohi is one of the founding members of the Nairobi Ecumenical Group (now the International Ecumenical Movement, Kenya Chapter – IEM-K). She blogs at Wajibu Forum. More information about IEM-K can be found at iemkenya.org