

Prayer Stronger than Hatred

by Brother Matthew, Prior of Taizé

I'd like to begin by quoting something Brother Roger, the founder of Taizé, said in his last letter to young people before his death in 2005, entitled "A Future of Peace":

"Prayer does not take us away from the concerns of the world. On the contrary, nothing is more responsible than praying: the more we live a simple and humble prayer, the more we are led to love and to express it by our lives."

And then the Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément wrote the following words in his book *Taizé, A Meaning to Life*:

"It is the link between a deep spiritual experience and a creative openness to the world that is at the heart of the meetings held in Taizé, which for many years have been based on the theme of 'inner life and human solidarity'. And that is this kind of Christianity we should be aiming for, because the more we become people of prayer, the more we become people of responsibility."

"Prayer does not free us from the tasks of this world: it makes us even more responsible. Nothing is more responsible than to pray. We really need to understand this and make young people understand it. Prayer is not entertainment; it is not a kind of Sunday drug, but it engages us in the mystery of the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit, around a Face that reveals every face to us, and ultimately makes us servants of every face."

I hesitate to develop this theme further in a theoretical way. There is a risk of falling into well-meant words that are far removed from the experience of people who find themselves in situations where they are threatened by hatred. The temptation is to propose facile solutions, the balm of a moment, but which in the long run risk increasing the feeling of being forgotten and abandoned, of having to fight alone against an enemy who invites hatred.

So I'd like to invite you to listen to some of the witnesses I've met in Taizé and elsewhere over the last few months. In the words of Olivier Clément, prayer "engages us in the mystery of the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit, around a Face that reveals every face to us, and ultimately makes us servants of every face." Let us try and discover these faces that the Face reveals to us.

During a visit to Ukraine in May with two of my brothers, the Major Archbishop of the Greek-Catholic Church, Msgr. Sviatoslav Chevtchouk, told us in the presence of his bishops' conference at the sanctuary of Zarvanytsia: "Prayer opens up a space that allows healing."

I was very struck by this remark. Coming from a man who is constantly confronted with the pain of his people, he sees that it is in the inner life that a wounded person rebuilds his- or herself. It's a process that doesn't necessarily produce immediate results, but which, perhaps accompanied by other means, opens the door to overcoming what has hurt us.

For people who cannot pray, simply knowing that there are others praying for them helps them to overcome the obstacles that war represents. A friend from Ukraine whom we also visited in May wrote: "I'm 32. A third of my life has been devoted to daily conversations, thoughts and prayers about the Russian-Ukrainian war. Ten years of my life. Sometimes I think my heart is the size of a planet: there is so much pain from the losses, but even more hope for a free Ukraine. Please pray for us. Pray for our freedom."

This summer in Taizé, a young woman from Myanmar shared the following words with us:

"Since the military coup in 2021, many conflicts have broken out in the country, particularly in the north-east of Myanmar. Thousands of houses have been burnt down and people killed. The number of displaced persons has risen considerably, as has the number of victims of land mines and other human rights violations. There are still many people who are defenceless and where humanitarian aid cannot reach them.

"I work at Caritas Myanmar to help these people. I visit them from time to time with members of my team and I listen to their stories. I (...) cannot meet all their needs. However, the fact of being with them and listening to them with my deepest heart comforts them, makes them feel safe and reassures them.

"I've never asked anyone for anything because God gave me everything I need in abundance before I asked. I had a good education, got a good job, and I help people who need help, and there are people who admire me and want to be like me. What do I have to complain about? I'm blessed! Yes, I am blessed.

"God has never abandoned his people and he always keeps his promises. He is always there for each of us when we need him.

"Please pray for Myanmar and my town where there is conflict going on at the moment and many people from the town have moved to other towns where they think they are safe, but my family are still in the town."

How is it that this young woman can have such a joyful heart and not sink into hatred? It's largely because the prayers of others and her own prayer carry her forward and open her up to her people, so that she can help them in a practical way in the current state of war.

Prayer enables us to stand firm in the face of the most complex situations. It is a way of stopping the waves of discouragement when everything seems obscure. A Palestinian mother who is currently in France but whose family is in Gaza wrote to us: "The love that carries the wounded, the fragile, gives new strength. It makes me think of the paralysed man, carried by his friends and their faith. Prayer is also a way of resisting, and that's important to me.

“But I'm human: after the news of the murder of two members of my family, anger overwhelmed me, I shouted, I cried... When I came to my senses, I knew that God is there with suffering and despair, and that he carries us. His love soothes this suffering that he works on in my prayer. I'm convinced of that. He is with them, all of them.”

This summer, while visiting Taizé, this Palestinian woman told us: “Every morning, I pray to find the strength to love rather than hate.” Her words are like a lamp on the road for us.

On March 7th this year, we made a 34 km walk for peace between Taizé and the town of Givry. The distance from Gaza to Rafah is 33 km. The 33 km also reminds us of the 33 years that Jesus lived on earth before giving his life for everyone, in order to become our peace and destroy the hatred that separated peoples (Ephesians 2:13-14), and we remembered that, in the Talmudic tradition, there are 36 righteous people in each generation who are hidden and who do not even know that they are among the righteous. The world depends on them. Our walk approached this number.

We also wanted to remind ourselves that Taizé was born during the war, that those early years shaped the community, with Brother Roger welcoming refugees, some of whom were Jewish, and with contact with prisoners of war after the liberation. Our walk crossed the demarcation line which, from 1940 to 1942, separated the free zone from the occupied zone in France.

Four stops to listen to testimonies and to pray enabled us to get close to those suffering in Gaza and the West Bank, to the Israeli hostages and their families, to the people of Myanmar, to the victims of the war in Sudan and to those in Ukraine fighting for its existence. An intercession also helped us to pray for those who, under authoritarian regimes, are actively working for justice and peace.

Each participant in the walk was given a pebble at the start of the walk with the name of a person living in a conflict zone. We were invited to carry this person with us during the walk and to pray for them. This commitment was also to continue after the walk.

The walk began with this prayer with which I would like to conclude:

“Faithful God, pilgrim God, you always go before us. Be present with all of us, throughout this day, as we set out on our journey by walking, praying or thinking. Wherever we are, on the road, in the churches, or in the places where we live, it is you who speak to us through the testimonies we hear. Open our hearts to hear the cry of the innocent who suffer from the war inflicted on them. Send your Holy Spirit to accompany us and remind us that it is your Son, Jesus Christ, who is our peace. Through him you always bless us. Make us pilgrims of peace.”