

## A Reading on Brother Roger

Brother Roger was the youngest child of a Swiss father and a French mother, who were both Reformed. He was born on May 12<sup>th</sup> 1915 in Switzerland, the tenth child of the family. His father was a pastor in the Jura and used to pray in a Catholic church every now and then, which was remarkable for a Swiss pastor at that time. Brother Roger's grandmother was a source of inspiration to him. She was convinced that reconciliation among Christians was needed to prevent a new war, and therefore, she started attending the Roman Catholic church. When brother Roger was thirteen years old, he spent the afternoons at the house of a poor Catholic family. The faith of this family inspired him, and the division between Christians became an obstacle for his faith.

Brother Roger from his youth onwards longed to start a community. He had written a book about community life; the editor however wanted him to revise the end, but brother Roger was not willing to do so. It was then that he decided to create unity among people by means of a community and not by writing. Brother Roger's goal with community life was not just reconciliation among Christians, but a means to restore unity among all people, and to bring about world peace. Before he was twenty years old, he became seriously ill due to tuberculosis. This forced him into a long period of solitude, quietness and reflection. It was then that he made long walks by himself, a habit, he never gave up. When he reached the age of twenty, brother Roger started studying theology at Lausanne and Strasbourg and became a pastor in Reformed theology.

In 1939, at the start of the Second World War, being a student in Switzerland, brother Roger started what was called: "*La Grande Communauté*": a group of about thirty students, studying issues of faith, gathering every month. They prayed, worked and ate together. They organized retreats that attracted many people. Brother Roger then moved to France to find a place where he could house his community, and found a suitable house in Taizé, a small village close to Cluny, where he stayed from 1940-1942. He chose to stay in Taizé because a poor widow of Taizé asked him to stay: Brother Roger felt Christ's call through the voice of this poor woman.

Taizé was situated on the border that ran through France at that time, and brother Roger helped refugees cross the border, especially Jews. He followed in the footsteps of his grandmother, who had helped refugees during the First World War. During those days he observed a devotional structuring of the day by praying three times a day, even today in Taizé, prayer remains at the heart of everything, the energy from which action flows. Because of some raids of the Gestapo, brother Roger was forced to leave France for Geneva in 1942, until the end of 1944. In Geneva brother Roger became president of the Association of Christian Students, and often discussed his ideas about unity among Christians. In 1944, six brothers set out for Taizé, including brother Roger. They took care of twenty orphans of war and looked after German war prisoners in the prison camp nearby. The prisoners were deeply hated by the villagers and the brothers tried to reconcile the German prisoners with the people of Taizé. The villagers were amazed to see that the brothers did not impose their religious convictions upon the children, but gave them the liberty to make their own choices.

As the group grew and time passed by, brother Roger wanted to change the non-committal character of their community. On Easter Day 1949, seven brothers took the vows of the community. During the winter of 1952-53, frère Roger wrote the Rule of Taizé, at request of his brothers. The community kept growing as more men felt called to become a brother there. Brother Roger lived most of the time within the community of Taizé, but just as some groups of brothers spread throughout the world to live among the poor, so did he.

A prayer by Brother Roger  
*O God the Father of all,  
you ask every one of us to spread love  
and reconciliation where people are divided  
You open this way for us,  
so that the wounded body of Jesus Christ,  
your church, may be leaven  
of communion for the poor of the earth  
and in the whole human family.*

## His Passion for Christian Unity

Towards the end of his life the Taizé Community was attracting international attention, welcoming thousands of young pilgrims every week, which it has continued to do after his death. Brother Roger knew that all by themselves no one could solve all the problems, theological and other, that split up the Body of Christ, the Church. At the same time, faced with the urgent need to communicate the Gospel, remaining passive was not an option for him. His conclusion: let us begin with ourselves, and widen our vision of the Church by opening ourselves to the gifts of faith, hope and love lived by Christians of other traditions.

Brother Roger's option implied a vision of the Church quite different from that which people usually have. We tend to imagine the Christian landscape as made up of different confessions or denominations existing side by side, each one claiming to be the true heir to Christ. But this human vision is deceptive. Seen with God's eyes, the Church can only be one. It is not a reality of competition but of communion. All those who live in communion with God through Christ are led by this to live in communion with one another: *"It is by the love that unites you that all will know that you are my disciples,"* Jesus tells us (John 13:35).

Born in a Protestant family, Brother Roger was led to go back behind the divisions of the sixteenth century and to rediscover the great Catholic Tradition. Very early, he was also attentive to the treasures of faith of the Eastern Church. In doing this, he never wished to break fellowship with anyone or be a symbol of repudiation for those who transmitted the faith to him. Any idea of a *"conversion,"* a change from one denomination to another, was utterly foreign to him. He was always captivated by the words of Jesus *"I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill"* (Matthew 5:17) and he tried to anticipate this fulfillment in his personal life as well as in the life of the community he founded.

Christian unity was certainly one of the deepest desires of brother Roger, just as the division between Christians was for him a true source of pain and regret. Brother Roger was a man of communion, who found it hard to tolerate any form of antagonism or rivalry between persons or communities. When he spoke of Christian unity and of his meetings with the representatives of different Christian traditions, his look and his voice enabled you to understand with what intensity of charity and hope he desired *"all to be one"*. The search for unity was for him a kind of guideline in even the most concrete decisions of each day: to welcome joyfully any action that could bring Christians of different traditions closer, to avoid every word or act that could slow down their reconciliation.