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TAIZE WORSHIP

1 In our local daily newspaper each Saturday, special events for the week ahead are almost always listed on the “religion” page, among them almost always, a “Taize Service” sponsored by one or another of our local Protestant congregations. I’ve never taken the time to attend any of these until last Tuesday, when I had the chance to see what such a service might be like.

2 Taize, for those of you who may not know, is an ecumenical monastic-style community of now some one hundred brothers – there are no sisters – located in central France. It’s noted in North America for its music tradition: brief but lovely and easily appropriated chant forms, sung over and over again in a kind of *ostinato*. There are no fewer than eleven Taize *ostinatos* in our *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. And Taize regularly sponsors a Youth Week at various locations around the world that have been life-changing experiences for many young people.

3 During my study leave in Europe in 1968-1969, a group of us from The Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches at Bossey, Switzerland, took a weekend pilgrimage to Taize. I can remember now almost nothing from that visit, so it was good to become reacquainted with its piety.

4 Here are my early impressions from two nights ago. First, a caveat: I hear you asking: Is it legitimate to critique Christian public worship? I’ve answered that question in a very early set of Essays in this space – see [Essays 11](#) and [12](#), Parts 1 and 2. I’ll stick with my answer there: Yes, it is legitimate. Christian worship is a public cultural event. It utilizes familiar cultural forms: this space, this music, these words, these gestures. (*Private* prayer is another thing altogether, and can not be legitimately judged or critiqued, in my view.) So, some reflections on Taize worship as I experienced it.

5 My overall impression is very positive. It was a moving experience. I have some misgivings about individual aspects of the event – see below – but I came away emotionally moved and intellectually stimulated.

6 The setting helped. Semi-darkness, candlelight at the climax of the rite, a white robed Taize brother making remarks in what I assumed was a kind of sermon or homily. (With my severe hearing loss, I can almost never hear spoken words – sermon, announcements, whatever – even in my own home parish.) And it did not help matters

that the speaker was soft-spoken to a fault. As for the microphone; see below.

7 The Taize music – the *ostinatos* – were marvellous: easily appropriated, melodic, rich harmonies, almost hypnotic in their effect. I got the feeling that the congregation – a good roomful, almost no empty seats – was made up largely of Taize junkies: people – old and young – who had read the print announcements of the event and knew what to expect, were familiar with the music and familiar too with the shape of the rite. Afterward I asked a fellow worshipper if this had been a typical Taize service. Her reply, “Yes, but maybe no sermon...” There were lengthy silences throughout the rite. Very welcome, in our noisy, electronically obsessed world.

8 The rite ended with an invitation for any who wished to come forward and kneel at the cross in prayer, while the people sang three more splendid Taize chants, over and over. It was very moving to watch these beautiful young people – and some beautiful old people! – come forward in candlelight, surrounded by the swelling sound of others’ sung prayer.

9 Finally, a not-unimportant positive reaction: The whole evening seemed to me to represent a fine introduction, for those worshippers from a more austere worship tradition, into the power of a fuller liturgical life. Some examples of what I mean by this:

10 One characteristic of Tuesday’s Taize worship was the engagement of almost all the senses in the total worship experience. We sang together, beautiful snippets of song in soul-feeding harmonies.

11 I was not even offended that we did not stand to sing, until the evening’s very last *ostinato*. There are certainly times when singing is best done in a seated posture. *Lutheran Book of Worship* stipulates remaining seated, for example, during the singing of the psalm, presumably to encourage meditation. Remaining seated for singing during worship is certainly an exception – See [Essay 7](#). But it’s an acceptable exception in this case.

12 We watched as those candles were being lit. We participated in their lighting. It’s worth remembering: Candles of any kind might have been regarded as a papist debauchery by earlier generations of Christians more comfortable with austere worship forms.

13 We got up from our seats – some of us – and walked forward to the cross. We were even given permission to kneel there by the example of others. Once again, committing the body to worship – walking forward, kneeling – might have been regarded with high suspicion by some Christian traditions.

14 The Taize brother who led the worship that evening was vested in a white alb. Any vestment at all might have been offensive to some Christian pieties. White would have been especially offensive. A black academic preaching robe is today the preferred vestment of worship leaders in many more austere Christian traditions. So the evening pushed some boundaries here as well. As I have argued before in this space, the simple white alb is gaining wider and wider ecumenical acceptance. It is fast becoming the

default vestment among worship leaders of many, many Christian traditions. But it's still exotic to some.

15 The semi-darkness, the singing, the candlelight, the permission to move about - to actually kneel! – during worship, the white alb: All of these represent major challenges to many Christian pieties. So Tuesday's Taize worship performed a noble ministry: Illustrating and enacting a richer and fuller liturgical option to many of those present. I heartily applaud that important ministry.

16 Those of us from more catholic traditions can hardly appreciate the ritual stretching that occurred among many on Tuesday night. And we can only smile with appreciation.

17 Now for my qualifications. Following my stubborn and impassioned fondness for lost causes, I found the microphones distracting at best and counter-productive at worst. Not only did the lector and preacher read before a mic, but I perceived that on occasion there were cantors singing verses on top of the congregation's *ostinato* (after the manner of Taize song) and they were electronically amplified as well. Big mistake. I repeat: There is almost no occasion in Christian public worship when a microphone actually contributes to the experience. I plead once again (See [Essays 10](#) and [66](#)) on behalf of the Naked Human Voice. Public speakers and singers must simply be taught to project. The space on Tuesday night is terrible for speaking, granted. But it's glorious for singing.

18 The worship planners for the evening had provided a small ensemble of stringed instruments to accompany the song. Another mistake, in my opinion. The Taize music cries out to be sung in harmony (SATB) *a cappella*, in my view. Perhaps a solo instrument might be enlisted to establish melody and tempo. But then instruments should drop out altogether and (once again) let the Naked Human Voice take over in all its splendour. Taize harmonies are so rich and deep and unexpectedly emotive that instruments only muddy the experience.

19 The decoration of the space itself was unfortunate, specifically the enormous white veil that cascaded from the East Wall mandala to drape over the Table and puddle on the floor below. I'll devote a subsequent Essay to the topic of decorating sacred spaces. For now, let me argue that the seasons of the church year are worth observing. (We were in the season of Lent on Tuesday night, and purple, not white, is its colour.) And even when the Table is not used, as it would be in Eucharist, the Table and access to it should not be compromised or impeded. That said, I loved the flickering votive lights that enlivened the wall around the mandala. I could have seen more of them!

20 I experienced Tuesday's Taize worship as a tantalizing taste of the riches and power of a more catholic liturgical tradition, spread out before a community perhaps unfamiliar with its glories. See [Essays 29](#) and [168](#). But there are even finer, fuller riches to be discovered in the pre-Reformation traditions of the universal ecumenical church.

21 My advice: Don't neglect them. You're catholic too!

