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RTN: I remember in the readings of Brother Roger that he was a very reluctant "leader," and didn't even like the term "prior." What does it mean to you that you are the "prior" there, and what does that look like on a daily basis?

BA: We are about 100 brothers – 70 living here in Taize, and the others living in very small groups in Brazil, Senegal, Kenya, Bangladesh, Korea. We hope to remain one body – that means concretely that I have to be in contact with the brothers, to speak with them, to accompany them, trying to find out what are their different gifts asking to be developed. At the same time, we have to care for our life – we have to earn our living by working in our workshops, ceramics, and other things that we do and sell. So, all of this has to be coordinated. For the practical things there are several other brothers who help, but for me, mainly it is to be close to the brothers – to listen to them. Listening to everyone is a great part of my ministry, like it is a great part of the ministry of all the brothers in the welcome of the young people who come to visit us – listening.

RTN: What is your vision for Taize, for France, and the world over?

BA: If our community could really be faithful to the three values Brother Roger wrote for us in our rule – joy, simplicity, and mercy. Simplicity in particular is so important today for Christians and for the Church. Also, material simplicity – not to put all our trust in material things, but to live a simple life. This we can only find and receive, if we are rooted in prayer.

Now, more and more we are aware of violence – violence in the Middle East, violence in Europe, in Ukraine – where we thought it had been overcome forever, and suddenly it is coming out again. This is a call for us Christians and us as a community for peace. But this peace has to start in our hearts – the peace of the gospel is not a program to put into practice, but must start in our hearts. This summer we started having just one half an hour of silence on Sunday afternoons as a prayer for peace and to welcome the peace of Christ in our hearts, and to put it into practice among us and all the people whom we meet.

We are very glad that we can contribute in some small areas for this peace concretely in Ukraine – in the summer we had quite a lot of people visit us from there and Russia. And they could meet here in Taize – and again, peace starts then by listening to each other – listening, trying to understand, the position of the 'other.'

So, it's for us also really a contribution that we hope to live for reconciliation and peace in the world. That's why we'll continue in the following years the

Pilgrimage of Trust, which is not an “organized movement,” but just meetings in Europe and the other continents in which we bring young people from different backgrounds together to pray and live a sign of reconciliation together.

I remember very strongly one of our Pilgrimages of Trust the United States, in South Dakota on the reserve of the Native Americans. They invited us to come and to have a meeting with the young people there of prayer and reconciliation. There were about 300 people from the different parts of the States and from Canada and we were very touched that they invited us. It was a step of trust and reconciliation. We continue these in Europe as well each year.

RTN: Here in the United States, so many times prayer is presented to us a sort of discursive meditation – it’s about sitting down and babbling at the mouth, asking God for all the things you want. Except in certain segments of certain denominations, there seems to be very little room for quiet and space and the process of being centered through communion with God. How do we learn to operate from a different starting point for prayer?

The words you mentioned are very important – ‘communion with God.’ First of all, God welcomes us! That is the beginning of prayer. God welcomes us, God is waiting for us. There is a desire in God to meet us.

That’s why here we have common prayer 3 times a day at the church. The whole year when young people visit us, sometimes 4 or 5,000 young people at once for an entire week, they do this as well. This consists mainly of praising God by singing, listening to his word, and silence. We always have this long moment of silence together, and that means everybody is in the presence of God just as he or she is now. We pray also with our body, being present there in silence. It is already an expression of our deep longing.

Many young people say what has been most important for them here is the silence. This is very astonishing! Today young people are running away from silence – always music, the computer, always filling up the empty time with some activity. But here, they say the silence is important.

This means that there is a deeper longing in each person that must first be revealed to the person! A longing for silence. There is a longing within me, and this longing itself can become my prayer. And if we can say words to God, that is beautiful also – we say the ‘Our Father’ together, we sing songs together – but prayer is also this longing for God that we can express by our presence in silence.

RTN: That reminds me one of the things that Brother Roger said that I was most touched by – the idea that ‘Christ prays within us’ – that there is already a prayer

being offered if we will just be silent and allow it to be offered on our behalf. Sometimes the 'work' of prayer is just the work of being silent and allowing that prayer to be offered.

BA: Yes, that's why for Brother Roger, perhaps the most important reality was 'trust' – trusting in God. Prayer is not a spiritual performance that I manage to do in a beautiful way. Sometimes our prayer is actually very poor, we don't even feel the presence of God. But we can trust. We can trust that Christ is our prayer and prays within us. And then, relationships with other persons can also change. We become more open, more patient, more brotherly.

RTN: What do you say to the person, to the rational mind, who says that this sounds like a bunch of nonsense and so much wishful thinking, based on the violence you mentioned, and the lack of trust based on our experience?

BA: [Sigh. Pause.] This is difficult. [Slowly] Because, in one way, they are expressing their disappointment, yes?

When we pray, prayer is not just a means to quickly change the situation, but also to express our hope that the ultimate reality is God and is peace, and not what we see, even if that is violence. But the ultimate reality is the Peace of God. We believe that our prayer for other people influences situations, but we can never measure the influence of prayer. It is actually very good that it is like this, otherwise prayer would become merchandise, to have a commercial relationship with God. But we trust. We entrust those who undergo violence and suffering.

RTN: What do we say to the person that says, not so much, 'I will not trust God,' but that they 'cannot' or are 'unable' to trust God?

BA: [Pause]

Mmm. We have quite a lot of young people who come here and express this – how difficult it is for them to trust God. With all of the science, explanations, and the complexities of the universe that we discover more and more, it becomes more difficult to believe that there is a God who cares for each human being and for the whole universe at the same time – this seems beyond our ability to understand and believe. This is true for more and more people. And there is also the suffering, which is too much for some people to believe in God.

I think we have to take these arguments seriously. And we must be close to these people who say 'I cannot believe.' We must try to help them find out what is their deepest longing – how do they express their longing for love and for an absolute love? It is this longing for an absolute love that is in each human being. In this is already hidden a longing for God.

RTN: So, even if they aren't in touch with the notion that it is God they are longing for, that nonetheless a longing for absolute love has hidden within it a longing for God?

BA: Yes. Yes. God is present already! So many parents believe, but wonder why their children don't follow the way of believing. We have to trust that God is present. God is present. God will find a way to speak to people, and there will be moments later in life, perhaps very late in life, when there will be suddenly an evidence of the love of God. But today, it is very difficult to teach this evidence. It must come through a certain 'experience.'

What helps very much here in Taize, welcoming so many young people, is the experience of 'communion' among young people – when they come together to pray, to work together, they discuss their weeks together, they read the Bible together. They wonder how it is possible that we form one community but we did not know each other! But the Holy Spirit is there! God is living, God brings us together! But it is this experience of communion, of friendship and faith, that opens the heart of people for believing in God.

RTN: I don't remember when I first tried to set up our phone call, but I live here in St. Louis, MO. Since I first set up our call, St. Louis has somewhat become an epicenter of social unrest and racial tension between black and white persons. Are you familiar with all that has transpired since the young man, named, Michael Brown, was shot by a police officer?

BA: Yes, yes. Someone else was shot recently as well.

RTN: Yes – this is an ongoing issue. I guess I wanted to ask, what words of life would you offer surrounding this issue? What are we to do, and what do we do with our discouragement at racial injustice and the seemingly slow pace with which people seem to wake up to it? What would you have to say surrounding all that has transpired to the level that you are familiar with it?

BA: [Pause] Oh. Oh. It is impossible to say something from 'outside.' [Pause]

I do admire the efforts that have been undertaken in the United States to overcome racial difficulties. So many people go beyond these.

But we have to be aware that within all of us – all of us – there can be experiences that we thought we had overcome already. Perhaps, we have to very humbly start in our surroundings, where we live, also here in Europe, to overcome these barriers, in a very concrete way, by starting to visit other people, by going to the other communities, by being close, by overcoming borders.

I remember in the nineties we had a Pilgrimage of Trust in Dayton, Ohio. I was there to prepare the meetings together with some other brothers. We had a regular prayer each week for several months during preparation, and we saw how important it was to have our meetings each week on the other side of the Great Miami River going through Dayton. Because on one side of the river was the white community and the other side was the black community, and I realized that the denominational borders were less strong than the river that divided the city in these two parts. I remember trying to bring people together, going from one side to the other, by inviting people from the different sides to come together in a prayer. To put ourselves together in the presence of God, and to ask him to take away from our heart all remaining mistrust, and racial response in our own hearts.

RTN: One of the points that is often lost in the discussions of racial injustices here in the United States is the notion that because they have existed for so long, they have now become manifest in our systems. Though an individual person may not think of him or herself as being party to racism, and there may be an extent to which that is true, now even in our laws and the ways our systems are set up, there is an institutionalized injustice. And so, sometimes when people suggest, as I think you are rightly doing, that it must begin in our own hearts and with the recognition that racism and other forms of racism still exist there, there are people who use this line of reasoning as a line of defense against any other forms of social action. In other words, they might say, 'Well, we don't need to work on laws or the system, we just need to work on individual hearts.' As much as we focus on the work of the heart, is there a counterpart, a place for the opposite of contemplation – action?

BA: No, of course, of course. It is as important that our laws and our social systems are reformed in order to be more just – that all traces of racial attitudes that could still be resident in our laws and rules be reformed. Of course! But the struggle must go together with this personal commitment in order to be credible.

RTN: So the connection, you would say, is that all of the work on the laws and the systems is for not if we're not also simultaneously working on our own hearts and spiritual conditions?

BA: Yes, yes. These two things go together. It cannot just be only a political commitment without any personal conviction and attitude. This shouldn't be missing in our politics – a personal commitment for human society. We need politicians who are credible because of their personal commitment. We need both.

RTN: How do we do that hard work of the heart, where it is such an affront to the ego to realize that the vestiges of so many forms of injustice and sin are still resident? It is offensive to the ego to make such a suggestion. How do we adapt a posture of humility that enables us to look in the interior? How does that happen?

BA: I wonder if, not only as individuals, but as Christians, couldn't we ask ourselves in our churches, "What signs can we live now in order to show that we are ready to go beyond these tensions, beyond the borders?" Even in our churches we meet separately too much. I see it here in Europe – the immigrants often meet in their own churches, and the people of the country have their own churches. We should move beyond these cultural borders in our own churches. We could do a lot, and there would be a lot of potential, maybe people who would be ready if there was an animation by those responsible in this direction.

RTN: This is a very broad question, but I wanted to ask you this pointed question – who is Jesus, and what is his Gospel?

BA: [Pause]

When I think of Jesus I am always very astonished. How is it possible that this person, living 2000 years ago, had such a radiance, and was such a light? The incredible way that people believed in his resurrection!

In Jesus I always see two images:

One image is the person who healed people – surely, he was healing people! The one who was risen from the dead, the one who breaks all the borders.

And on the other hand – a very poor person, a very simple person.

Bringing these two images together is the work of the Gospels. When we read the Gospels we see both – the poor Jesus and we see the strong Jesus.

He is the one who told us that 'God is love...' There is no violence in him. No violence against any person within him. God is love. He tells us that, and he tells us that this is not just an idea, but it's the strength in the Holy Spirit he sends us from God that continues to animate the love of God among us.

RTN: Would you say then, in a manner of speaking, that the Gospel is effectively the message that, 'God is love'?

BA: Yes. And this is the heart of the Gospel! God is love. This is the truth. Jesus was also speaking of the truth of God, but the truth is that God is love. In a way this message is very vulnerable, but it has to be vulnerable, because love is vulnerable. Love is not imposing something! And Jesus did not impose, he accepted. He took the violence onto him. He didn't impose his message, because the message that God is love cannot be imposed! But this is the heart of the Gospel.

This is why we are living together here, in our community, to live this message. Brother Roger used to repeat the words of a Christian from the 7th Century: “God can *only* give his love.”

RTN: Wow. So much of the Western emphasis on God and on the Scriptures has taken shape as a form of moralism. There is such a high emphasis on morality that is often unlivable – when you live with people in community, as I’m sure you’ve experienced, it’s an impossible standard. We fail at it daily both in our interpersonal lives inside our minds and hearts, but also in community with one another. So, sometimes it seems as though the emphasis on personal morality is, I don’t know, misplaced. What would you say to that? Is it misplaced? Is there another more primary emphasis?

BA: Yes, it is a misunderstanding that personal morality is most important according to the Gospel. The heart is the forgiveness that Christ brought. We are not perfect people! The thing is that we are on the way to perfection, but this is a perfection in love, which is a perfection in communion with others, in unity, in being open to others – a perfection in friendship. But that’s a long way from where we need to be, accompanied by the forgiveness of Christ.

Christ did not come to tell us what we have to do and what we should not do – the prophets did this already. But Christ came to *carry our faults*, to take them away from us. When we read the Gospel we see this so clearly – when Jesus met people, he was looking at them, he was going towards them, he was touching them. And they felt not judged, but liberated. Especially the people who had difficulties in their moral lives. Jesus was not severe with them – Jesus was more severe with the people who thought they were perfect and were judging others. Jesus was more severe with them than with the sinners, whom he went to and knew how to touch so that they would find hope for a new life, and coming out of their difficulties. That’s the Gospel! That’s the joyful message of the gospel.

RTN: Why is that so difficult for us? Why is it easier to focus on morality?

BA: Perhaps mainly because we want to count on ourselves – we want to know that ‘I am perfect.’ [Laughs] We are not ready to count on someone else, to say, ‘I need somebody. I cannot count on my own perfection. I need somebody to lead me on this way.’ This belonging to God is difficult for us, like we have difficulties in belonging to others. That’s what the Gospel wants to teach us, to be free to belong to God and to others, and not to make myself perfect.

RTN: Wow. It is interesting because there seems to be a paradox there. On one hand, there is a deep longing for absolute love, which, as you said, has hidden within it a longing for God. And yet, on the other hand there is a longing that seems to be not for God, for self-sufficiency. Paul talked about it in the New Testament – this war going on in ourselves.

BA: Yes. We all are Adam and Eve. There was this longing for them to be independent, and not to belong anymore. In the Gospel, Jesus came to put us back on this path of belonging. And he says, 'You can belong to me. And I am your prayer. I am your perfection. I will lead you. So let's abandon ourselves.' This is where we dare to belong.

RTN: Here in the United States there is such an emphasis on making our theology systematic, and on things doctrinal matters. Things like, "We need to believe that the Bible is always to be taken literally." Is this too, misplaced, our emphasis on doctrine and making things fit together in a nice package? It seems to lack some of the mystery and the mystical way of referring to things you're doing here.

BA: Of course it is necessary to formulate the doctrine of our faith. But perhaps there is too much emphasis on that, forgetting that first of all, it is a life - a new life. Our belief is first of all this putting into practice the little we have understood of the Gospel, and then we will understand more and more. And it's not the other way around, where first we have to understand everything and then we can say, "I believe and will live accordingly." Brother Roger used to tell this often to the young people - nobody can understand the totality of the Gospel, but let's put into practice the little we understand, and we will understand more and more about it.

RTN: That's kind of counterintuitive to the more scientific approach.

BA: Yes, but both are necessary. It must be aimed at new life, and not just the formulation of the doctrine itself. Doctrine is of course important, and important to discuss it among different currents and denominations, but we can already be on the way together to follow Christ, even if in doctrines we have different opinions.

RTN: Brother Roger often mentioned the 'vocation of listening' and the 'beauty of listening.' You've already mentioned its importance in what you do with the young people at Taizé. What is the role of listening in the Christian life?

BA: We have forgotten this - it doesn't play the role it should play in our churches. Belonging to God will remain abstract if we don't have anybody who listens to us. We can tell everything about our lives, our questions, our sufferings, our joys - it opens up our heart. It's not so much that when we listen to others we can give them all the answers they are looking for, but by listening to them we help them to find the answers within themselves.

I think there should be a ministry of listening in the church. In the Catholic and the Orthodox churches, there is the ministry of confession. But it should be wider even, a ministry of listening, that can be a ministry in all of our

different churches and denominations. And then the Catholic church could complete the ministry of confession.

RTN: That's a good segue to my final question. I know that Brother Roger enjoyed a good relationship with several popes. I'm curious to know what you think of Pope Francis. On one hand, it seems to be a breath of fresh air, and on the other hand, some people seem to be very threatened by it. What do you make of him, and that reality?

BA: Oh! I met him for a private audience, and we had a very good talk together. I was very astonished how much he encouraged me to accompany the young people, to welcome them, to walk with them. And the other encouragement he gave me was that we should continue in Taize as an ecumenical community. It is so important that we are ecumenical.

He is bringing a new style to the ministry of the pope. Of course, there is a continuity with the popes before him in content, but the new style is very important because it is creating more dialogue, more listening to the differences within the Catholic church. He is quite spontaneous, and is more open to other denominations. It is so beautiful that he went to an evangelical community and prayed with them.

It is like anticipating unity and opening ways through life, and not waiting for the doctrines to open the way, but the life - the life should open the way. I am very hopeful that he can bring new openings and bridges between denominations, and things that must change among all of us.