

Taizé Style Music and Contemplation

by

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“Dare to pray, dare to sing to Christ until you are joyful and serene. By the Holy Spirit Christ prays in you more than you imagine.”¹

Introduction

This research project comes out of my experience of the use of music in Taizé style contemplative worship and how this style of music has led me into contemplation.

This essay will begin by defining contemplation; I will then examine the history and place of contemplation in Christian Spirituality, some of the psychological aspects of contemplation, the place of music in Taizé style worship, and how this type of music may lead an individual more deeply into contemplation. I will conclude with how spiritual directors might suggest meditative singing as an aid to contemplation when offering directees an alternative way of prayer and deepening their relationship with God.

What is Contemplation?

The word contemplation comes from the Latin *con*, “with” and *templum*, “temple.” In the Roman world, the *templum* was the place where diviners read omens seen in the stars or in the insides of animals which had been ritually killed, or, to use a less macabre comparison, the temple is the place where we read God’s intentions. *“Etymologically, then, contemplation is the sacred space marked out for the consideration of ‘inside things.’”²*

The seventeenth century Carmelite friar, Brother Lawrence, called contemplation *“the pure, loving gaze that finds God everywhere.”³* A simple definition of contemplation is *“loving presence to what is.”* In a Christian context, contemplation means finding God in all things and all things in God,⁴ and to pray contemplatively is to attend to the ‘insides of reality;’⁵ thus being open to and responding to all that is around one in the world.⁶

¹ Brother Roger of Taizé quoted in *Praying with the Songs of Taizé – DVD*, 1996.

² Bonnie Thurston. *For God Alone: A Primer on Prayer*. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2009), 146.

³ “Quotations.” The Shalem Institute. Available from: <http://www.shalem.org/index.php/resources/quotations> [accessed 10 September 2012].

⁴ Carole Crumley et al. *What is Contemplative Spirituality?* The Shalem Institute, March 2004. Available from: <http://shalem.org/index.php/resources/publications/articles-written-by-shalem-staff/contemplative-spirituality> [accessed 26 July 2012].

⁵ Thomas Ryan. *Prayer of Heart and Body*. New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 43. As Quoted in Thurston, *For God Alone*, 146.

⁶ Crumley et al, *What is Contemplative Spirituality?*

The history and place of contemplation in Christian Spirituality

The use of contemplation in Christian spirituality can be traced back to Jesus, who, although we have no written evidence of his contemplative practice, is documented as withdrawing at the crucial moments of his life – the temptations in the wild places following his baptism by John, his withdrawal to the other side of Lake Galilee following the feeding of the multitudes, at his transfiguration and at his final anguish in the garden of Gethsemane. When he taught on prayer in Matthew 6:5-6 he emphasised that true prayer is offered “in secret.” (Matthew 6:6)⁷. This particular text has featured in the contemplative teaching of John Cassian in the fifth century right through to Thomas Keating in our own time.⁸

By the fourth century Christianity had moved from being a persecuted cult to being the religion of the empire and a significant and growing remnant of Christians found this sudden acceptance as a barrier to the authentic practice of their faith, so they moved out into the desert.⁹ From these groups came the teachings of those who have become known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers; these include St Antony of Egypt, John Cassian, Abba Macrius, Abba Poeman and St Macrina, sister of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa.

The teachings of these individuals, and in particular John Cassian, became the basis of the monastic traditions which grew out of the desert. One of the monastic traditions which continues to this day is the Benedictine tradition. It is from this tradition that we have the practice of praying the scripture using *lectio divina* and specifically the fourth stage of *lectio*, known as *contemplatio*, or contemplation.¹⁰

During the Middle Ages an anonymous author wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* which teaches a simple prayer method which takes one directly to God. This writing was all but unheard of until it was rediscovered in the nineteenth century and came to wider notice under the pioneering work of Evelyn Underhill.¹¹

Over the past 50 years this work has attracted the attention of writers and teachers of contemplative prayer practice; these include Thomas Merton, John Main, Laurence Freeman, Thomas Keating and Cynthia Bourgeault. These individuals have helped move the practice of contemplation out of the preserve of the monasteries and into a growing groundswell of lay participation in practices such as Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. A description of these practices is beyond the scope of this paper; however I draw the reader’s attention to the bibliography which lists several of the resources available to those interested in exploring these prayer practices.

⁷ References to Scripture are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁸ Cynthia Bourgeault. *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts:2004),59-60.

⁹ *Ibid*, 60-61.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 63-65.

¹¹ Graeme Watson. *Strike the Cloud: Understanding and Practising the Teaching of The Cloud of Unknowing*. (London: SPCK), Introduction – 2 of 4.

Some psychological aspects of contemplation

Contemplation is traditionally seen as immediate and grounded in the here-and-now. It is said that one's plans for the future and memories of the past can be present during contemplation; however they do not need take one's attention away from a desire for God, or the needs of one's immediate situation.¹²

During contemplation, awareness is open and not focussed on any one thing at the exclusion of others. Most of us have been taught to focus our attention on one thing at a time; however the contemplative experience shows that we function more loving, and can be more in touch with our desire for God's guidance, when we are open to what is going on.¹³

Many contemplative prayer practices involve an unlearning of one's habits of focusing attention on one thing at a time and in their place to nurture a simple willingness to be open to God's leading, movement and invitations in one's life.¹⁴

Thomas Keating, who, with his colleagues from the Cistercian Order in the Benedictine tradition, developed the contemplative prayer practice known as Centering Prayer, suggests that the psychological dynamic of contemplative prayer connects with the classical descriptions of the Dark Night of the Soul and Spirit.¹⁵

Cynthia Bourgeault, in exploring the psychological aspects of Keating's Centering Prayer, writes "*What really happens when one enters the cloud of unknowing, resting in God beyond thoughts, words and feelings, is a profound healing of the emotional wounds of a lifetime.*"¹⁶

She goes on to write: "*As these wounds are gradually surfaced and released in prayer, more and more the false self weakens and the true self emerges. For Keating, this is the real meaning of the term transforming union. As he states quite clearly in Intimacy with God: 'We can bring the false self to liturgy and the reception of the sacraments, but we cannot bring the false self to contemplative prayer because it is the nature of contemplative prayer to dissolve it.'*"¹⁷

Once the true self emerges, one's psyche is transformed and it is possible to see the outworking of both spiritual and psychological growth. In daily life one becomes increasingly free from having to protect one's self image and we can become more vulnerable in the presence of others and more compassionate to those we encounter

¹² Crumley et al, *What is Contemplative Spirituality?*

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sue Pickering, *Spiritual Direction: A Practical Introduction*. (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), 115.

¹⁶ Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 96, quoting Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 98.

¹⁷ Ibid, 98.

because we truly know who we are and are able to marvel at God's gracious love for all.¹⁸

The place of music in Taizé style worship

“*Whoever sings [to God, in worship], prays twice.*”¹⁹

This saying, attributed to Augustine of Hippo, is echoed in many of the books and DVDs that I read and watched about the worship at Taizé and about using the songs of Taizé, and other writers of meditative songs such as Margaret Rizza, in Taizé style worship in settings other than Taizé.

Singing is the most important aspect of Taizé style worship and the short chants which are sung in this style of worship are repeated again and again.²⁰ When these chants, whose words are drawn from the *Bible* or early Christian tradition, are repetitively sung this way they have been described by Brian Wren as Christian mantras.²¹

Wren goes on to write that this style of music is sung in the belief that devout repetition ‘can promote a kind of inner unity of the person allowing the spirit to be more open and more attentive to what is essential.’ The repetition of the chants links them with other traditions of Christian prayer, such as the Jesus Prayer of the early Greek Church and the rosary in the Western Church.²²

A Taizé style worship service usually begins with two or three songs of praise. These are usually followed by a psalm or portion of a psalm using the most accessible verses. The Brothers of the Taizé Community suggest in *Prayer for Each Day* that it is not necessary to read the entire psalm²³ and the psalms used in this book reflect this sentiment.

Following the psalm, another song or two can be sung before reading a portion of scripture or other sacred work. The scripture read may be selected either using the Lectionary if this is the tradition of the worshipping community that the service is taking place in, using the *Bible* reading or readings suggested in *Prayer for Each Day* if following the cycle suggested by the Taizé Community, or from a suitable piece of text from the Christian tradition. In my own context we often read from one of Joy Cowley's “Psalm” books as these are usually based around Biblical texts or the liturgical seasons of the Church.

¹⁸ Pickering, *Spiritual Direction*, 115-116.

¹⁹ Attributed to Augustine of Hippo, 354-430 C.E. Quoted in: Brian Wren. *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 1.

²⁰ The Taizé Community, France. *Prayer for Each Day*. (Chicago: Gia Publications, 1998), 8.

²¹ Wren, *Praying Twice*, 201.

²² Ibid, 201, quoting Brother Robert, “Foreword” and “Performance Notes” to Berthier. *Music from Taizé: Responses, Litanies, Canons*, pp. vii-viii, x.

²³ *Prayer for Each Day*, 2.

After the reading a period of prolonged silence usually takes place. It is in this silence that one can be led into contemplation and this will be expanded on in the next section.

Following the silence of 5 to 10 minutes another song may be sung before a period of spoken intercession or a litany of praise. A sung response may be used during this time of prayer; a short period of silence between petitions may also be used. In my own context, this is a time when those present may light a candle as a prayer gesture.

After the intercessions or litany of praise one of the versions of The Lord's Prayer, or Our Father, is prayed. This is followed by more songs and the singing can go on for as long as those present wish to stay.

One adaption to the use of the music of Taizé, and other chants, is to combine it with Centering Prayer in a service of worship. This has grown out of the Parish of St Matthew (an Episcopal parish) in Pacific Palisades, California where the Centering Prayer and music programmes "*conspired to radically adapt the conventional Taizé service to produce an introduction and celebration of the contemplative dimension of prayer.*"²⁴ This form of worship has spread from St Matthews Pacific Palisades to numerous other parishes.²⁵

How Taizé style music can lead one more deeply into contemplation

Ever since the dawn of civilisation music has played a role in the way humankind communicates with God. Music has always had a role in seeking to bring comfort, influence deities, celebrate, give thanks and attain communication with the Creator and many indigenous cultures share their traditional stories and visions through song. The *Bible* has mention of music or song in more than 1,100 verses, including in Genesis, where Jubal, a descendant of Cain, is credited as the father of all who play the harp and flute.²⁶

American writer Sue Monk Kidd uses the metaphor of music to describe the stages of contemplative awareness. In her schema, first, we can hear the words but not the music, in the next stage, we both hear and appreciate the words and music and in the final stage we become the music. "*Becoming the music is the height of beingness. It happens when we dwell in the now with such openness and wholeheartedness that we merge with the moment, with the Presence hidden within it.*"²⁷

²⁴ Thomas Neenan, David Walton Miller and Gustave Reiginger. "Taizé and Centering Prayer: An Innovative Collaboration" in *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry*. Gustave Reiginger Ed. (New York: Continuum, 1998), 59.

²⁵ More information about this adaption of Taizé worship and Centering Prayer can be found the above section of *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry* on pages 62-67.

²⁶ Liz Hill, "Singing Meditation: A Centering Practice of Renewal," *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction*, .Vol. 18 No2 (June 2012), 54.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 54, quoting Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heat Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 195.

This occurs, in my experience, when engaged in Taizé style worship where singing is one of the most essential elements and the short songs, repeated again and again, give it a meditative character. Using just a few words the songs express a basic reality of faith, and are quickly grasped by the mind.

As the words are sung over many times, this reality gradually penetrates one's whole being. In this context that meditative singing becomes a way of listening to God. It allows everyone to take part in a time of prayer together and to remain together in attentive waiting on God, without having to fix the length of time too exactly.²⁸

Father Joseph Gelinau, a French composer and Jesuit priest, on the DVD *Praying with the Songs of Taizé* says that *"the rediscovery of the more fluid style of music, which begins and ends who knows when, is of immense value. It opens up a space, a freedom, a void in which the spirit acts, especially when we pray using the same words because the mind is no longer engaged and we are no longer looking at our watches wondering how long the prayer will take. There is something very important which can help us gain an important dimension in prayer which is spending time before God without an agenda... without limits..."*²⁹

Others interviewed in the film express similar sentiments, for example Maura, a young woman from the USA, says: *"when you sing the words again and again it opens you up to God. Somehow I am not concentrating on the words... in fact the singing is a form of prayer for me."*³⁰

Wayne from Ireland says: *"The songs build you up to set you in the right mood for prayer so that when the silence comes... you're in the right mood, you're in the right atmosphere to think properly, to think very precisely... in the silence I've found really good things, that is what the chants have done."*³¹

The songs sung in Taizé style worship are also personal prayer. Through them, little by little, one's being finds an inner unity in God and the songs can continue in the silence of one's heart when at work, speaking with others or resting. In this way prayer and daily life are united. The songs allow us to keep on praying even when we are unaware of it, in the silence of our hearts.³²

It is when this happens that one has "become the music", to quote Sue Monk Kidd, and the fairly long period of silence utilised during a Taizé style service prepares one for a new opportunity to meet with God. In the silence God's word can reach the hidden corners of our hearts and the silence proves to be "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit" (Hebrews 4:12). It is in the silence that we

²⁸ *Prayer for Each Day*, 8.

²⁹ *Praying with the Songs of Taizé – DVD*, Chapter 8. As Translated in the commentary.

³⁰ *Ibid*, Chapter 9.

³¹ *Praying with the Songs of Taizé – DVD*, Chapter 21.

³² *Ibid*, 8.

stop hiding before God so that the light of Christ can reach and heal and transform even what we are ashamed of and the true self emerges.³³

Implications for Spiritual Direction

Individuals coming to spiritual direction often appreciate the value of contemplation and the importance of quiet time with God, but have yet to find a form of prayer that they are willing or able to follow consistently.³⁴

Spiritual directors who find directees in this situation might suggest that the meditative singing of, or listening to, the style of music which comes out of the Taizé community can help them to revive their ability to contemplate and deepen their relationship with God. While recognising that this practice is of benefit to me, it may not suit everyone as some individuals are not drawn to music and as a result would not find music-assisted prayer helpful in deepening their relationship with God.

Conclusion

The research I have undertaken in writing this paper leads me to conclude that the music used in Taizé style worship can lead individuals more deeply into contemplation, both during the period of silence during the service and following the service when the songs continue in the silence of one's heart when working, being with others or in time of rest.

³³ *The Value of Silence*. The Taizé Community, France, 2001. Available from : http://www.taize.fr/en_aricle12.html (Accessed 26 July 2012).

³⁴ Mary Terry Rankin. "Audio Divina: Introducing an Musical Aid for Spiritual Direction," *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction*, Vol.15 No.2 (June 2009), 38.

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