

## Letter 2024

### *Journeying Together*

During the past 18 months, our Taizé Community has been on an adventure of faith. We were preparing a "Gathering of the People of God" called "Together"<sup>1</sup> with partners from movements, communities and organisations from many Christian Churches. An intuition expressed by Brother Alois<sup>2</sup> at the opening of the Synod on Synodality in the Catholic Church, the preparation of "Together" led us to intensify our listening to others, seeking the gifts present in different Church groups, as well as among people of goodwill in society.

Taking place in St Peter's Square, Rome, the ecumenical prayer vigil gathered over 20 leaders from various Churches invited by Pope Francis, as well as all the participants in the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Assembly of Bishops of the Catholic Church and 18,000 people of all ages from throughout the world, including 4,000 young adults who came for a weekend programme and were hosted by the parishes of Rome. At the same time, people met in 222 different places across the planet to pray in communion with this vigil.

Looking back, how can we understand this experience? How does it open up a future of journeying together among Christians? "You have one teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters" (Matthew 23:8), Jesus said. Are not all Christians sisters and brothers, united in a communion that is still imperfect but nevertheless real? Is it not Christ who calls us and opens a way for us to go forward with him as fellow travellers, together with those who live on the margins of our societies? On this journey, in a dialogue that reconciles, we want to remember that we need each other, not so as to impose our opinions, but as a contribution to peace in the human family.<sup>3</sup>

In gratitude for this growing sense of communion, we can find the momentum needed to meet today's challenges such as the cry of the earth and the polarisations that fracture the human family. In encounter and mutual listening, let us journey together as the people of God.

What does it mean for us to rediscover listening to other people? Are we ready to understand the fears that might be expressed rather than dismissing them?

On my way from Rome to Taizé, I stopped in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, venue of Taizé's 46<sup>th</sup> European Meeting of Young Adults<sup>4</sup>, to meet with the international preparation team of young volunteers, Taizé brothers, Sisters of St Andrew and Slovenian friends. The following reflection, on the theme of "Journeying Together", is largely a fruit of our conversations those days.

With thanks to my brothers, the people who have contributed to the preparation of this message and all who will share this journey,

My very best wishes to all of you,

*Brother Matthew*

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<sup>1</sup> This vigil took place on 30 September, 2023. See [together2023.net](https://together2023.net) for further information.

<sup>2</sup> Brother Alois, prior of Taizé from the death of Brother Roger on 16 August, 2005, until 2 December, 2023. How can we express our gratitude to him for these 18 years as the Servant of Communion in our community, his constant ecumenical endeavours and desire always to seek paths of solidarity with people in need?

<sup>3</sup> What is the call that God is addressing us faced with the suffering brought about by the conflicts in Ukraine, Palestine and Israël, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Pakistan, Haiti, Nicaragua, Sudan and so many other places in the world today?

<sup>4</sup> From 28 December 2023 to 1 January 2024.

In Ljubljana, I heard someone say: "Today, homelessness in society is not just a question of a material home. For many people it is an inner reality. But the search for inner security can sometimes result in thought processes which only isolate further." Someone else asked: "If we journey together, how much agreement do we need in order to set out? There is a danger of empty phrases hiding the fact that we simply tolerate the other. But when we open ourselves to dialogue, we take a risk." Where do these questions lead us?

## Listening

At the heart of every dialogue is listening. Moses said to the People of God: "Shema Yisrael" – "Hear, O my people" – (Deuteronomy 6:4) and these words gave the name to their daily prayer. Centuries later, the rule of Saint Benedict of Nursia<sup>5</sup> begins "Listen carefully".

Listening is an act of love. Listening is at the heart of any relationship of trust. Without listening, little can grow or develop. No relationship can function without it. When we listen to the other selflessly, we give them the space to be. We enable them to express what they need to express, sometimes even what cannot be said through words.

And at the heart of listening is silence<sup>6</sup>. The Bible offers us many examples of this. Elijah meets God in the gentle breeze of silence, rather than in the earthquake, wind and fire (1 Kings 19:11-13). Mary, the sister of Martha, sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to him (Luke 10:39)<sup>7</sup>. "You have opened my ear", says an old biblical prayer (Psalm 40:6).

Today we often have the impression that whoever shouts loudest succeeds. Violence seems to be on the increase in so many places that we no longer know where to turn. But God is never the author of violence<sup>8</sup> and never imposes. "Let me hear what the Lord will speak, for God will speak peace to his people" (Psalm 85:8).

Is not the way forward to try to listen and to understand the other? Far from making us docile or stopping us from speaking out in the face of injustice, a "listening heart" (1 Kings 3:9) enables us to make courageous and creative decisions, rooted in the depths of our inner convictions, where God is closer to us than we dare to hope...

## Journeying

When we journey through life, are we tourists or are we pilgrims? Do we just travel in order to observe from outside or is there an inner thirst deep within that draws us forward? The pilgrim, even without seeing the end point, seeks meaning in each step of the journey, intuitively sensing the direction. But a path without a goal can become aimless wandering around<sup>9</sup>.

When this happens, will we remember how Jesus said, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6)? Journeying with him means holding these three realities together. Jesus in person is the path we follow, we can trust what he says and he leads us into a fullness we never imagined.

Jesus excluded no-one from his journey. Rooted in a communion with God, he shared his life with whoever came to him, with righteous and unrighteous people. He recognized God's presence in those on the margins of the society, in sinners and outcasts, and even in those who were not from his own people. Jesus gave what he had, and he also received from those he met. His life was challenged by them, and often enriched.

<sup>5</sup> St Benedict of Nursia, (c. 480 - c. 547CE) was the father of Western monasticism. The rule he wrote was adopted throughout Europe as monasteries developed and influenced many later monastic rules.

<sup>6</sup> During the Together vigil, Pope Francis spoke about silence: "This evening, we Christians have been silent before the San Damiano Cross, as disciples listening before the cross, the Master's throne. Ours was not an empty silence, but a moment filled with faith, expectation and readiness. In a world full of noise, we are no longer accustomed to silence; indeed sometimes we struggle with it, because silence forces us to face God and ourselves. Yet it lies at the foundation of the word and of life (...) Silence, in the ecclesial community, makes fraternal communication possible."

<sup>7</sup> In many cultures, sitting at the feet of someone or touching their feet is a way of honouring them. What could it mean for us to sit at the feet of Jesus?

<sup>8</sup> Jesus' death on the Cross shows us that God is with those who suffer and never on the side of the authors of suffering. Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus; and his resurrection shows us that death and suffering will never have the last word.

<sup>9</sup> Sometimes we experience such times in our life where we cannot see any goal, for a variety of reasons, There are moments where we have to accept to be in a no-man's land.

<sup>10</sup> See Matthew 11.30. When our heart becomes more gentle, is that not a sign that we are walking with Jesus? The opposite to love is not anger, or even hatred, but hardness of heart.

<sup>11</sup> Humility has nothing to do with submission or humiliation. On the contrary, it requires great inner strength and never crushes the gifts or qualities of a person.

<sup>12</sup> "The only way to get to know our stories is to get to know the people and then they might tell you the story. (...) Stories, and especially songs, help us remember. That's why I tell stories and sing in my Adnyamathanha language, because it helps me remember who I am. It helps me remember that I am made in the image of God and that God as Creator has made all things. And I remember that." Aunty Denise Chapman, Adnyamathanha elder and Uniting Church Pastor in South Australia. From the book "Yarta Wandatha" © 2014 Denise Chapman.

Does not Jesus, gentle and humble of heart<sup>10</sup>, invite us on this same path? Are we ready to seek the generosity of humility<sup>11</sup> to welcome what others can give on this journey?

Journeying together is the life of Church and society. But nevertheless each person needs space so that their own creativity and ideas can be expressed. But these are given in order to be shared, to build up our life together in the Church, in the human family. The strings of a guitar lie side by side but it is when they are played together that they make a beautiful sound...

<sup>13</sup> See Pastor Anne-Laure Danet: "Divisions are not the same as diversity. It is not the diversity of the Churches that is in question. This is normal, even necessary, because it takes account of our respective identities: cultural, historical, social, ethnic, sexual, etc. If these identities are secondary because in Christ "there is no longer Jew or non-Jew, slave or free, male or female" (Gal 3.28), they do exist and it is in them that the existence of believers is embodied. From the moment they remain secondary, they become riches by allowing for a certain porosity. (...) Far from smoothing away identities, they strengthen and refine them without separating them, (...) but, on the contrary, recognising in the other the gifts and action of the Holy Spirit. They thus make it possible to forge a shared identity. This is a further step in the ecumenical movement, which has moved from unity in diversity (rejecting all forms of uniformity) to unity in reconciled diversity. (Translated from "La diversité en Église, de la division à l'enrichissement mutuel" in Contacts, Revue Française de l'Orthodoxie No. 282 April-June 2023)

<sup>14</sup> See St Maximus the Confessor; "Let us show sympathy for one another and by humility heal one another." (The Ascetic Life, 41; trans: Polycarp Sherwood osb, Newman Press 1953)

<sup>15</sup> During the Together ecumenical prayer vigil, we invoked the Holy Spirit using the ancient prayer "Adsumus Sancte Spiritus (We stand before you Holy Spirit)" which was prayed before the Ecumenical Councils since the earliest times to ask the Holy Spirit to show the way. See <https://tinyurl.com/Adsumus>

<sup>16</sup> "The 'Reign of God' is not the object of an ideal vision but is rooted in 'reality'. ... A vision that is not rooted in the reality of this world is an illusion. An illusion is created by the inability or refusal to face up to life's problems. It is an escape into the realm of the unreal, out of the world of reality." Choan-Seng Song, Taiwanese theologian, in *Jesus and the Reign of God*, Fortress Press, 1993, p. 77

<sup>17</sup> In her Revelations, the 14th Century English anchoress Dame Julian of Norwich wrote: (God) wishes us to know that not only does he take heed of noble things and the greatest, but he also attends to little and small, to low and simple, as much to one as to the other. This is his meaning when he said, "All manner of things shall be well"; for he wants us to know that the least thing will not be forgotten...

<sup>18</sup> "Our sense of the presence of God will be distorted if we fail to see God's reality in terms of our neighbor's reality. And our sense of our neighbor's reality will be disfigured unless seen in terms of God's reality." Kosuke Koyama, Japanese theologian, in *Water Buffalo Theology*, Orbis Books, 1974, p. 91

## Being with others

It is not always easy to be together with others. Each one of us carries wounds. We have sometimes wounded each other.

To be with people is to listen to them. To give them time and space so that they can tell us their story<sup>12</sup>. Listening means accepting them in their difference. We may not agree or we may even hold another world-view. But the astonishing thing is that when we do listen, when we let them tell their story, more often than not, we discover our common humanity. The differences are not so great as we imagined. Unity in diversity is indeed possible<sup>13</sup>. And perhaps those of us who long to be followers of Jesus will be astounded to discover that a unity exists already in God and in Christ (John 17:21-23) that is beyond our expectations.

But when others tell us how they are wounded, or even how we have wounded them, will we dare to take their word to heart? We can so easily fall into mechanisms of self-defence. And we stop listening, we try to protect ourselves or our point of view. Does not compassion of heart mean being ready to take the suffering of the other seriously? Perhaps at times to suffer together can open up a path where we can be together, even if we are not able to leave that suffering behind<sup>14</sup>.

Sometimes we need to accept to take a backward step. In these moments, we can entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit and ask the Spirit to teach us what we need to know<sup>15</sup>. It means being humble enough not to want to impose our own ideals but to welcome what the other person brings before us<sup>16</sup>.

And we need never abandon hope<sup>17</sup>. The Apostle Paul, overwhelmed by the Risen Jesus' infinite love after having fiercely opposed him, assures us that God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us (Romans 5:5). We can rely on this gentle presence even when we do not feel it. Will not trust then be reborn within us, fragile though it may be, giving just enough light so that we can take that next step together with God and with the people entrusted to us?

## Remaining with God, remaining with others

The journey takes time – even a lifetime – just as listening takes time so that relationships can grow. Perhaps this is where patient endurance and remaining faithful come into play.

Journeying with others, journeying with God. For many of us, these realities are inseparable. We need both<sup>18</sup>.

Like the branches that grow from the vine, Jesus invites us to remain in him as he remains in us (see John 15). Remaining implies something that lasts in time. What is asked of us is not just a commitment of a moment, but to remain in him for our whole life long. Only through remaining can we continue to grow and bear fruit.

What is this fruit? Jesus will go on to say "Love one another as I have loved you. No-one has greater love than to give their life for those they love". Walking on this path means taking the risk of giving everything to follow Jesus, so that, in all freedom, we can love right to the end. Gospel love is not simply affection, but the gift of our self to others. This is the journey of our life through which we move from being servants to friends of Christ.

Fruit is borne through lives lived fully. It grows naturally when we remain in Christ and live by his life as branches receive life from the vine. There is a fullness of joy to discover when we embrace the challenge of the Gospel. Are we ready for that?

## *Journeying together in today's world*

Faced with today's challenges and our own frailty, as we said earlier, some people feel homeless at times. We see God's wounded Creation of which our wounded human family is a part. Suffering can be passed on through generations in peoples who have been exploited and humiliated. We know families who are torn apart by conflict and war. We recognise also that lives have been damaged by people who profess the name of Christ in the Church and in our Taizé community as well<sup>19</sup>.

Yet is there not a call to confront these challenges together? An African saying goes: "What makes a long journey seem short is when we walk together." In the "Great Migration" of wildlife between Serengeti and Masai Mara, the younger calves have to rely on the strength of the adults to cross the river and scale the bank. And for us as well, there are times when we need to be carried. Or learn to accept to be carried...

And when we face such challenges together, there can be experiences of beauty, of transcendence, which help us discover the spark that makes us set out with new vitality<sup>20</sup>.

On the day of the resurrection of Jesus, two of his friends turned their backs on Jerusalem, where he had been killed (Luke 24:13-35). But as they were walking, a stranger joined them. When later he sat at table with them, they understood that what they were experiencing was Jesus. Strangers can help us discern the presence of Christ and once more grasp that he remains with us always.

"Do not be afraid", he whispers in our heart, "I am with you, every day until the end of time" (Matthew 28:20). Will we listen to this promise?

Like the yeast mixed into the flour (Matthew 13:33), though poor in means and perhaps feeling small, will we dare to set out again not alone but with others, mutually enriched, as we journey together?

<sup>19</sup> See "Ascertaining the Truth" at [taize.fr/en\\_article26170.html](http://taize.fr/en_article26170.html). We accept that this is an ongoing learning process through which we listen to those have been hurt, acknowledge their suffering and do everything we can to ensure a safe environment for all.

<sup>20</sup> St Augustine of Hippo: "Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. (...) You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain your peace" (Confessions 10.27.38)

### **Volunteering in Taizé**

The meetings in Taizé are made possible thanks to a group of young volunteers: young women and men aged between 18 and 29. They are welcomed for longer periods in Taizé, from a few weeks to a year. We want to share with them what is most essential in the life of our community:

#### **Together... praying**

Nothing that happens at Taizé would be possible without the three common prayers, and it is also through prayer that the volunteers help us to welcome together all those who come.

#### **Together... living in community**

Together, building a small temporary community with young people from every continent, from different Churches, in the shared richness of our diversity.

#### **Together... serving other people**

Make it possible, by being available, to welcome young people in Taizé. If you want to know more, see [www.taize.fr/volunteering](http://www.taize.fr/volunteering)

### **Continuing our journey together in 2024**

#### **The following meetings are planned in 2024:**

- International meetings in Taizé throughout the year for young adults aged 18 to 35 (for other ages, see on the Taizé website when you can come)
- Holy Week and Easter in Taizé from 24 March to 7 April 2024
- Meeting of Friendship between young Muslims and Christians from 7 to 12 July 2024
- Sharing and witnessing Orthodox faith from 4 to 11 August 2024
- Week of reflection devoted to young adults aged 18 to 35 from 25 August to 1 September 2024
- European Meeting of Young Adults from 28 December 2024 to 1 January 2025. The host city for this 47<sup>th</sup> European meeting will be announced in Ljubljana.

[www.taize.fr/dates](http://www.taize.fr/dates)