Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Spirituality



(Provided photo)



by Jean Evans

Contributor

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This was the Mercy Chapel on a first Friday night in 1992. It was an evening prayer around the cross in the style of Taizé, the village in France where brothers from the ecumenical community welcome young people for a week of Bible study, common prayer and community living. Ten years earlier, three of us visited the Taizé community in France's Burgundy region. The Taizé Community sits on a hill above the village, less than 10 miles from the famed monastery of Cluny.

It was early on a summer's afternoon when we stepped off the bus. No one in sight, we wondered, "What did Judy talk us into?" The place was hot and dusty, not at all welcoming. But as we got nearer to the massive concrete church, I heard the most beautiful four-part harmony. It was singing practice!

Nothing could have prepared me for that beautiful music. Regardless of the dust and heat, at that moment I knew there was a reason why I had come to Taizé, even if it were only to sit in on the choir practice.

God's plans evolved quickly and within a week of our arrival back in Burlingame, California, the Sisters of Mercy had contacted the Rev. Braxton Combs and his wife, Marge, who would be going to Taizé the week following our two-day visit. What is more, we learned that Braxton and Marge lived in nearby Millbrae, California, where Braxton was the pastor at the Millbrae United Methodist Community Church.

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Within days, we met and began planning for the brothers from Taizé to lead a weekend of prayer and discovery for young adults at our own Mercy Center in Burlingame in January 1983.

Not long after meeting Braxton and Marge, we were invited to join them and their parishioners on Friday mornings to serve breakfast to homeless persons at Martin de Porres Hospitality Kitchen in San Francisco's Mission District. In this picture, Braxton and Marge are joined by Gary and Don from their church and Sisters of Mercy: Patricia, Judy, Jean and Diane.



(Provided photo)

Faithfully, every first Friday at 8 p.m., Sr. Marguerite Buchanan and Sr. Suzanne Toolan prepared for the evening prayer. From August 1982 until April 2020, the sisters, singers and musicians accompanied people who came to Taizé prayer to find peace, solace and God's presence in the chants and atmosphere at the convent chapel.

One priest came to the evening prayer while he was on sabbatical in Berkeley in the '90s. It was "life-changing," he said. The music, the silence, the time of adoration. All of this engaged him in a way he has never forgotten. Groups of students, young adults from all denominations, parents, families and elders have found the prayer a source of peace and transformation. For this, we give thanks to Mercy Srs. Suzanne Toolan and Marguerite Buchanan.



(Provided photo)

For a few months after the COVID-19 lockdown we weren't sure what to do. We couldn't welcome people to our chapel anymore and we couldn't have the musicians and singers together safely. So we waited, thinking all the while of our 38 years of first Fridays.

Formerly, people spoke their prayer requests during the time of intercessions. However, often these prayers were not loud or clear enough for everyone to hear. Before COVID-19, visitors or students who prayed in the Chapel, could write their prayer requests on Post-it notes, affixing them to the area around the crucifix, but now with the chapel closed to the public that avenue was blocked.

It was in late July that our new director, Mary DuQuaine, suggested we try an online format for the evening prayer of Taizé. She included a special section at the end of the evening prayer for prayer requests to be sent to the sisters.

This keeps us in touch and in tune with the needs of friends, former pupils, families, employees, anyone who has participated in the prayer of Taizé online. Somehow, COVID-19 has transformed and enhanced our prayer — making it more universal and accessible. (We've even had requests for prayer from New Zealand.)

Can we thank God for the gifts that have come to us through COVID-19? Maybe not yet. But we can admit to ourselves and to our God that we have been pleasantly surprised at what we do see and what we can do together. As we pray evening prayer together, let us take comfort in the truth that we can be at home in God's house even online.



(Provided photo)

[Jean Evans is a Sister of Mercy from California who ministered for 28 years in South Africa, where she worked in Johannesburg with victims of the apartheid regime. Back in the U.S., she is currently doing substitute teaching, spiritual direction and grant writing.]

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