

Taize prayer nourished Asian bishops' meet

By Santosh Digal

COLOMBO: Taize prayer, an ecumenical form of worship, has become an integral part of the plenary assemblies of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC) for past 16 years.

It started after Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil, who was the then chairperson of the FABC Office of Evangelization, visited the Taize community in Taizé, Saône-et-Loire, Burgundy, France

The Salesian prelate from India was touched by the spirituality of Taize community, an ecumenical monastic order.

Archbishop Menamparampil shared his experience with late Archbishop Henry D'Souza of Calcutta, who was the then FABC secretary general and requested him to invite Taize Brothers to be part of FABC plenary assemblies. Menamparampil asserted the "communion of praying together" promoted by the Taize community would help bishops working in Asia to spiritually address various issues confronting their region.

Archbishop D'Souza requested the founder of the Taize community, Brother Roger, to bring the "pilgrimage of trust on earth" to the Asian soil.

Brother Ghislain Mazure, 74, physician by profession, attended the fifth FABC plenary assembly, Bandung, Indonesia, 1990, and introduced Taize to the bishops in Asia.

"And it continues ever since," said Brother Mazure, who is better known as Brother Ghislain. He said his community has been invited to facilitate prayers during FABC assemblies or Commissions seminars. Br. Ghislain is the brother who is now in the FABC Plenary Assembly.

Brother Ghislain said he was grateful to attend the eleventh FABC plenary assembly currently underway in Negombo, some 40 kilometers north of the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo and to animate 4 evening prayers .

More than 140 cardinals, archbishops and bishops along with priests, lay people, including representatives from Funding Partners engaged in helping the Asian Church in its mission are attending the plenary. They have come at least 40 countries in five continents.

The Nov 28-Dec 4 conference addresses the theme "The Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy."

"Our main task is to hold Taize prayers in the evenings after day-long deliberations. The bishops bring all their discussions and issues to God in prayer," said Brother Ghislain.

He also said the prayer helps the bishop to show their “deep desire to serve and care people. It is a beautiful sign of communion.”

During these days, Brother Ghislain animates the prayer with Stephen G. Borja, a Filipino who works with the Secretariat of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines-Episcopal Commission on Youth, which has links with the Taize Community since the mid-1980's.

The uninterrupted collaboration between Taize brother and FABC has cemented this communion, added Brother Ghislain.

This relation is further enhanced by the Brothers visiting different local churches in Asia—having common prayer with them with the songs of Taize, offering retreats and recollections. “All these are the expressions of solidarity with the peoples of Asia,” the brother said.

A special highlight of this pilgrimage is the holding of the pilgrimage of trust on earth: four in India (1985, 1988, 2006 and 2013) and two in the Philippines (1991 and 2009).

In 2014, the Brothers along with the Youth Desk of the FABC Office of Laity and Family held a retreat for youth leaders from the Southeast Asia 1 region of Cambodia-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand-Vietnam. This was held in the Pastoral Center of Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Every year since 1988, the Taize community sends an invitation for selected young people from several Asian countries to come to Taize for a three month stay, sharing about the life of their local churches with the pilgrims there, and also experiencing the universality of the Church.

Another highlight of the Community's solidarity with the Church in Asia is the invitation to and participation in the plenary assemblies of the FABC, a collegial body of Catholic bishops' conferences in East, Southeast, South and Central Asia.

In 2016, in the 11th plenary assembly in Sri Lanka, Br. Ghislain, along with some young people and consecrated women from the host-country, animated the Eucharistic adoration with the songs of Taize for four evenings.

The Taize Community comprises members from different Christian traditions who profess to live in great simplicity, embracing celibacy and the common life. As an international community from around 30 nations, the brothers strive to become a “parable of communion” that serves as a sign of reconciliation for peoples.

Br. Ghislain, who expressed trust as the community's desire for young people, accompanying and enabling them to move forward in life, the Community is widely known for its way of praying which uses silence and chants—short songs expressing Gospel truths or a faith statement, sung repeatedly, and sung “until joy becomes serene.”

The Taizé Community is composed of more than one hundred brothers, from Catholic and Protestant traditions, who originate from about 30 countries across the world.

It was founded in 1940 by Brother Roger. Guidelines for the community's life are contained in The Rule of Taizé written by Brother Roger and first published in French in 1954.

The "brothers" of Taizé have taken a vow of celibacy and are committed to a lifetime of simplicity, service, and community. There is an ecumenical emphasis at Taizé, as expressed in their official website, which says the community "wants its life to be a sign of reconciliation between divided Christians and between separated peoples." Brother Roger was especially eager to bring Catholics and Protestants together.

The contemplative worship practices of the Taizé community are promoted at an annual international conference. Taizé worship is being incorporated in a wide variety of churches, Protestant and Catholic, and its pattern of devotion is emulated in other monastic communities around the world.

A Taizé worship service involves sung and chanted prayers, meditation, a period of silence, liturgical readings, and icons. There is no preaching.

The prayers consist of "short chants, repeated again and again," according to an introduction in a Taizé songbook. "The words are sung over many times."

The community has become one of the world's most important sites of Christian pilgrimage. More than 100,000 young people from around the world make pilgrimages to Taizé each year for prayer, Bible study, sharing, and communal work. Through the community's ecumenical outlook, they are encouraged to live in the spirit of kindness, simplicity and reconciliation.

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[Santosh Digal of Matters India (www.mattersindia.com) prepared this report for FABC Office of Social Communication.]