

Taizé Service: Candlelight, Peace, and Silence with God

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On April 2, at 7:30 p.m., Shepherd of the Hills will celebrate a Taizé prayer service. Dr. Earle Pratt, assisted by the leaders of the Saturday music ministry team, will lead us in prayer and contemplation of our Lord.

What is a Taizé (pronounced: tay-zay) prayer service?

Imagine if you will this scene at Shepherd of the Hills that night. All is quiet. All is calm. The church lights are set low. On the altar and around the sanctuary are flickering candles.

In the congregation — silent, save for the occasional cough — sit worshippers holding their own candles. The first is lit and the flame is passed from candle to candle until the church is alive with candle light. The worshippers chant together, slowly repeating a single prayer over and over as they rise and carry candles to the altar, adding their own flames to the ones already burning.

Returning to their seats, worshippers then sit in silence before the altar, lit like a starburst against the shadowy darkness. There is no other light. There is no other sound. Nothing moves, save for the flickering light from the candles.

This is a Taizé prayer service.

“It is a time to rest in God, to let the words listened to and sung penetrate one’s being,” explains Brother John, one of the leaders of the ecumenical prayer movement. There is no preaching, no teaching, no service of Holy Communion in a Taizé prayer service. There is just this elegantly simple service: short chants repeated over and over in the dark. Music, plus some short Scripture readings or psalms. And silence, at least 8 or 10 minutes, sometimes more. In 45 minutes, it’s over. Taizé prayer is the creation of a monastic community in Taizé, France, founded in the 1940s by a Swiss man known as Brother Roger. The brothers there are celibates who emphasize service and ecumenicalism, particularly reconciliation between divided peoples and divided Christians. Brother Roger was especially interested in bringing Catholics and Protestants together. Every year over 100,000 pilgrims visit the community to join the brothers in worship and work.

“The simplicity of life seems to offer a refreshing change to young people who come from societies that are drowning in excess, where nothing ever stops, where there is no time to just be, and be together,” says Brother John.

I participated in a Taizé service when I was in seminary. I found it to be a calming, quieting, welcome respite from the craziness of the world. On a spiritual level, it was transporting, almost mystical.

“One passes through Taizé as one passes close to a spring of water,” Pope John Paul II said in 1986 after he worshipped at the community. “The traveler stops, quenches his thirst, and continues on his way. The brothers of the community, you know, do not want to keep you. They want, in prayer and silence, to enable you to drink the living water promised by Christ, to know his joy, to discern his presence, to respond to his call, then to set out again to witness to his love and to serve your brothers and sisters,” he told young pilgrims gathered at the service.

In a letter to Anglican pilgrims traveling to Taizé, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams wrote in 2005: “I think one of the toughest and one of the most exciting aspects of being at Taizé is learning to slow down, learning to let that glow surround you — the glow of words and pictures and candles; the glow in other people’s faces. Learning to be quiet with God, learning to let God say to you what he wants to say to you. Learning that you don’t have to be busy all the time to make an impression — it’s all right to be where you are, to take your time with God. I hope and pray that your experience of Taizé will be one that you’ll remember all your lives, as I’ve remembered that first visit all my life. I hope it’ll be a time for friends, for new experiences of God. A time to slow down. A time to be yourself. A time to bask in the glow of prayer and of love.”