

First Fridays at Mercy Center: Praying Around the Cross



Mercy Sister Suzanne Toolan is an internationally known composer of liturgical music.

Her Communion song “I Am the Bread of Life” has been translated into more than twenty languages.

Sister Toolan is a prominent American spokesperson for the music and prayer of the Taizé ecumenical community from France and leads many Taizé-style retreats.

She is the editor, with Barbara Bridge, of *Hear the Prayers That Rise*, an ecumenical collection of music in the Taizé style (www.ocp.org/20214). Her autobiography is also available from OCP (www.ocp.org/20738).

It is a typical Friday evening. Traffic in the San Francisco Bay Area is snarled; the bridges are congested. People are anxious to get home and start what they hope will be a relaxing weekend.

Amid all this confusion you find many stalwart folks headed not home, but to a retreat center in the Burlingame hills. They begin their weekend in a different way: in prayer, in song, in silence. Inter-generational and ethnically diverse, an assembled crowd of more than three hundred comes together in the Mercy Center chapel to pray in the tradition of the Taizé community in France.

Bringing Taizé to Burlingame

It was in the 1970s that one of our sisters went to Taizé. She was so taken with the prayer and with the singing that she brought me a recording. At that time, recorded music took the form of long-playing (LP) records or tapes. I listened to the LP rather reluctantly, thinking that this was something I would not especially like. I soon changed my mind when I heard the very first chant! I said to myself, “This is my music.” It was the music of my heart.

A bit later two Sisters of Mercy, Jean Evans and Judy Carle, made their way to Taizé. They were not only enthralled with the chant, they were very taken with the brothers, with the integrity of their lives as well as the beauty of their worship.

Sister Jean tried to make arrangements for the brothers to come to Mercy Center in California. The brothers seemed interested but did not commit themselves. One week later a Methodist minister from Millbrae (a little town near Burlingame) made the same request of the brothers. They said to him, “When you go home, get in touch with Sister Jean.” Pastor Braxton Combs did just that. Thus started a wonderful relationship with the brothers at Mercy Center in Burlingame, California.

Mercy Center has hosted Taizé “Prayer Around the Cross” each first Friday of the month since 1982.

And from this prayer many other groups have sprung. Most originated in San Francisco, San José, or Oakland, but there was one Baptist minister from Reno, Nevada, who came for six first Fridays with a van full of parishioners. His intent was to start his own prayer in Reno. They invited me to Reno to facilitate the first prayer. I was amused to find that the minister had set up the worship space exactly as it is in Burlingame. And this is certainly not an ideal arrangement. The sisters’ chapel is divided into two sections: the front section with stalls, one side facing the other, the back with pews.

For many years Sister Marguerite and I traveled with cross in hand to many sites up and down the coast of California, as well as to other states. I found myself out almost every night of the week during Lent bringing Taizé to churches of every faith tradition.

Order of Service

Here at Burlingame on first Fridays, people enter into a dark chapel. The only lights are the small vigil lights that illumine the icon cross, the focus for the service. People begin arriving early. Some place a garment where they will sit so that they can visit our excellent bookstore.

We begin the service with a quiet chant that provides a transition from noise and confusion to silence and focus. For the past year we have begun not with a Taizé chant, but with one by OCP’s own Barbara Bridges, “Come to Us, O God/Stay with Us, O Lord” (www.ocp.org/compositions/75753). I find that this chant seeps into the psyche of the group to begin individual and communal prayer, what the late Jesuit Father Dan O’Hanlon (1919–1992) called a communal *lectio divina*.

There is, of course, no celebrant, nor are the musicians “center stage.” Their role is simply to facilitate the prayer in a non-intrusive manner. Instrumentalists appear and ask to be a part of the music ministry. We often have keyboard, violins, harp, cello, flute, recorders, French horn, guitars, and even mandolin on occasion. Sometimes Bob Hurd joins us and that is always a treat.

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After the opening chant and a psalm we come to a vital part of the service: the Scripture reading. We always choose a reading that people can hold in their hearts in silent meditation for at least five minutes. Out of the silence arises a quiet chant, usually “Veni, Sancte Spiritus” (BB 35, TM 22). We then move to intercessions threaded with a Kyrie. A cantor sings prepared intercessions and then we open it up to the assembly, inviting them to speak aloud their own petitions. This is followed by the Lord’s Prayer and a prayer of Brother Roger.

Now we place the icon cross down and invite people to come and pray for a few moments at the cross, bringing their concerns, anxieties, and the burdens of the world to the cross of Jesus. The tradition at Taizé is to kneel and place one’s forehead upon the cross as a gesture of surrendering to Christ all that is in one’s heart. This is a very moving part of the prayer.

When we bring “Prayer Around the Cross” to other places where this gesture is new, we find that people do not remain at the cross very long; but as they become more accustomed to it they stay at the cross for longer periods of time. I have the feeling that many have been preparing for this moment and there is a real emptying of all that is hurtful, all that sits heavily upon the heart.

For some time we brought the prayer to the Federal Correction Institution for Women in Dublin, California. When we picked up the cross after the service it was wet with the women’s tears. When we left the prison, our hearts were heavy with the burdens these women carried.

A new challenge in our service is the presence of cell phones. I don’t mean cell phones ringing but cell phones lighting up to illuminate the words at the beginning of a chant. We make song sheets available as people enter the lobby. Alas, they are not much help because the chapel is in darkness. Cell phones do very well although we don’t encourage this. We ask people to shut off any light as soon as they see the words of the next chant.

Mercy Center is a place where people can come to be quiet and reflective, to be comforted and challenged. Amid all the programs that we do, both hosted and sponsored, this simple ecumenical, contemplative prayer is one of the foundation pieces.

The prayer continues until everyone has had the opportunity to come to the cross.

We then sing one of our signature pieces, a Bach chorale: “Great peace they surely have who in our God confide, who cast on God all care and in God’s love abide.”

Even though the prayer is a prayer around the cross, we like to end with a song of resurrection. After all, it is in the presence of the Risen Jesus that we have come. It has been our tradition to sing “Jesus Christ, Yesterday, Today and Forever” (www.ocp.org/compositions/15951).

The first time we used this chant people picked it up right away; they stood and joined hands. Once when the Taizé brothers were here they registered disapproval of this custom and so we stopped until a dear elderly Presbyterian minister asked why we were no longer singing the chant. I told him that the Taizé brothers did not approve. The minister shook his head and said, “Well, that is too bad because that is what we do at Mercy Center!” We have used the chant ever since.

New Developments

The Taizé brothers’ ministry is with young adults. When the brothers first began coming to Burlingame they let us know that although there were young adults present, there were too many older people. I replied: “At Mercy Center our ministry is to all people; we do not discriminate.” (That stopped them!)

It has always been a desire of ours to engage more young adults. There are schools in our area sending their young men and women at times. But it wasn’t until recently that we have made a concerted effort to engage this age group, young people who are so often without any religious affiliation.

Mercy Sister Patsy Harney has started a group that meets before the service for a light supper and conversation. Now they meet after the service as well. The group is as yet small, but it is growing and meeting a need.

We are grateful to the Brothers of Taizé who have enriched us in so many ways. Their music has enlivened worship throughout the world, and their ministry to young adults has brought hope. Their simplicity and deep spirituality, their total dedication to ecumenism, have been models for us all.

And here in Burlingame, we are grateful to Sisters Jean and Judy for making that initial contact with the brothers when they visited Taizé many years ago.