

Translated into 58 different languages (including 23 Asian ones and 7 African ones), this letter was written by Brother Roger of Taizé and made public during the meeting in Barcelona. It will be a starting-point for reflection, throughout the year 2001, during the weekly meetings in Taizé as well as those held in other parts of the world.

Letter from Taizé

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A Prospect of Happiness?

Letter 2001

1 Among the first words of Christ on earth we find these: "Happy the simple in heart... happy those who weep, they will be comforted... happy the merciful, mercy will be shown to them..." (see Matthew 5,1-12). See also Deuteronomy 4,40.

2 There are also other Gospel realities that bring happiness to a human life. Among them are trust and peace of heart.

3 Simplifying never means choosing a harsh, judgmental attitude devoid of generosity. The spirit of simplicity shines out in kind-heartedness. Our brothers in Taizé, as well as those who live on other continents among the very poor, are aware that we are called to a great simplicity of life. We have discovered that, sometimes with very limited means, we can be enabled to offer a hospitality we did not believe ourselves capable of.

4 The writer Dostoyevsky, an Orthodox Christian, wrote, "I know that men can be happy without losing the ability to live on earth. I do not want to believe, and I cannot believe, that evil is the normal condition of men." (From *A Writer's Journal*.)

5 The philosopher Paul Ricoeur, a Protestant Christian, writes, "I have nothing to reply to those who say, 'There is too much evil in the world for me to believe in God.' God does not want us to suffer. From being all-powerful, God becomes 'all-loving'. God's only power is unarmed love. God has no other power than to love and, when we are suffering, to address a word of assistance to us. Our difficulty is to be able to hear it."

If we could realize that a life of happiness is possible, even in hours of darkness...¹

What makes life happy is to head towards simplicity: simplicity of our heart, and of our life.²

For a life to be beautiful, extraordinary abilities or great expertise are not required. There is happiness in the humble giving of oneself.

When simplicity is closely linked to kind-heartedness,³ then even people without resources can create a space of hope around themselves.

Yes, God wants happiness for us!⁴ But he never invites us to remain passive, or indifferent to the suffering of others.⁵ On the contrary, God encourages us to be creators, and to manage to create even in times of trial.

Our life is not subject to the whims of fate or to a blind destiny. Far from it! Our life finds meaning when it is above all the living response to a call from God.

But how can we recognize such a call and discover what God wants from us?

God wants us to be a reflection of his presence, bearers of a Gospel hope.⁶

All who respond to this call remain aware of their own frailties, and so keep these words of Christ in their heart: “Do not be afraid; just believe !”⁷

There are people who perceive, however faintly at first, that God’s call for them is a vocation for their entire lifetime.⁸

The Holy Spirit has the strength to sustain a yes for our whole life. Has he not placed in us a desire for eternity and the infinite?

In the Spirit, at every age, it is possible to find new vitality and to say to ourselves, “Be steadfast of heart,⁹ and keep going forward!”

And then, by his mysterious presence, the Holy Spirit brings about a change in our hearts, rapidly for some, imperceptibly for others. What had been obscure or even disturbing starts to become clear.

Until the end of our days, a yes spoken in trust can bring so much clarity.

Although we are called to make the gift of ourselves, we are not really built for such a gift. Christ understands our inner resistances. By overcoming them, we demonstrate our love to him.

Attentive to God’s call, we understand that the Gospel invites us to take on responsibilities to alleviate human suffering.¹⁰

The faces of the innocent, of a great many poor people across the earth, question us: how can we share a hope with those who are so deprived of it?

And Christ’s words in the Gospel offer a crystal-clear reply: “Whatever you do for the lowliest, you are doing for me.”¹¹

All God can do is give his love, and suffering never comes from God. God is not the author of evil; he wants neither human distress, nor wars,¹² nor natural

6 It is possible to discover God in particular through the lives of those who, often without realizing it, are a reflection of God among human beings.

7 Mark 5,36.

8 Some have already glimpsed this call in their childhood.

9 Sirach 2,2.

10 In a world in rapid evolution, science and research are making remarkable discoveries, among other things in order to ease suffering, to assist the most deprived. And new technologies are more indispensable than ever. There are opportunities, at times unexpected ones, to share with the poor and the excluded by working toward an economy of greater solidarity. Many NGOs (non-governmental organizations) play a positive role in this respect. In one Asian country, Bangladesh, another initiative is a source of hope. An agency was created to lend small sums of money to the poor. A minimal loan allows people to make a start with a work-project, and they reimburse the amount by making small payments each week. Programs have been started along these lines in many other countries, to help those who would be unable to borrow money from traditional banks—for example, in some Western countries, the unemployed.

11 Matthew 25,40.

12 Jean-Claude Mallet, an expert in international relations, writes, “We must keep building peace continually. It is never attained once and for all. At the end of the twentieth century, the century of world wars and genocides, we must unfortunately note that there are thirty-five armed conflicts, between or within nations, listed by the United Nations. So how can we avoid reflecting on ways to put an end to armed violence? Nothing appears to be more urgent at the beginning of the third millennium, because war wastes enormous economic, material and human resources which could have contributed to the effort of development, and also because war destroys human unity, between peoples and within each person. Each person can contribute to building peace, not as the world does (John 14,27) by victory over others, by conquest, but by victory over oneself and by allowing reconciliation to spring up. In the ongoing search for peace, inner reconciliation and public acts of reconciliation go hand in hand. All forms of hatred separate me from myself and others. Working for reconciliation among peoples also means leading each person to break the circle in which they tend to enclose themselves, helping them to go out of themselves and towards others: peace is of the order of freedom and love.”

13 “Christ is united to every human being without exception, even if he or she is unaware of it.” These words of utter clarity, written by Pope John Paul II, open the door to a new understanding of faith on earth. Trust in God becomes something more accessible.

14 A year ago, during one of the prayers of the European meeting in Warsaw, the Archbishop of Warsaw said, “You are not only committed to an ecumenism that would consist in bringing together divided Christian denominations. You go deeper, wanting to show God’s fullness that leads to human fullness. In fact, it is first of all human beings who are broken. Today the basic problem is not only the divisions between Christians. The main thing is first helping human beings to find unity within themselves.”

15 God is Spirit (John 4,24) and God’s Spirit fills the entire universe (Wisdom 1,7).

16 At the very beginning of the Church, the apostle Paul already discovered this life of communion, and he wrote, “It is no longer I who live; Christ is living in me” (Galatians 2,20). Even a child can enter into this contemplative reality.

17 1 Peter 2,23-24.

18 Peace begins within us. As early as the fourth century Saint Ambrose of Milan wrote, “Begin the work of peace within yourself so that, once you are at peace yourself, you can bring peace to others.”

19 The Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément writes, “God who is ‘Love without limits’ is not a distant sort of God, living in an overpowering eternity. (...) This is a God who is infinitely close to us, deeper within us than we are ourselves, so that however deep our despair may be, God is there, deeper still, standing between us and the void.” (From the book *Taizé: A Meaning to Life*.)

20 Modern medical techniques are more and more able to palliate suffering, even for those who are dying.

21 Romans 8,26.

22 We can pray very simply at any moment. A few words spoken slowly or sung, five, ten times, from the bottom of the heart, can sustain our desire for a communion with God. For example these short prayers: “A thirst fills my soul, to surrender everything to you, Christ.” – “You love us; your forgiveness and your presence in us bring to birth the brightness of trust.” – “Christ Jesus, inner Light, do not let my darkness speak to me; make me able to welcome your love.” – “In all things peace of heart, joy, simplicity, mercy.”

23 One day I was with my brothers in Bangladesh, where they share the life of the very poor. We had been invited to a prayer meeting with the Muslims in the poor district where we were living. They wanted to express their gratitude for our presence there and for the sewing workshop that

disasters, nor violent accidents. God shares the pain of all who are undergoing times of trial and enables us to comfort those who are suffering.

God wants happiness for us: but where is the source of such a hope? It lies in a communion with God, alive at the center of each person’s soul.¹³

Can we understand what we will be given? The day will come when the mystery of this communion with God takes hold of us. It touches what is unique and most intimate in the depths of our being.¹⁴

God is Spirit¹⁵ and his presence remains invisible. He lives within us always, in times of darkness as well as when everything is bathed in light.¹⁶

Could there be chasms of the unknown in us, and also an abyss of guilt that comes from who knows where? God never threatens anyone,¹⁷ and the forgiveness with which he inundates our lives brings healing to our soul.

How could a God of love impose himself by threats? Could God be a tyrant?

If doubts assail us, they are sometimes only interludes of unbelief, nothing more. Keeping watch over our thoughts can help us stand firm amidst the distractions that pull us in all directions.¹⁸

Could the impression arise that God is far from me, as if for a fleeting moment the inward eye could no longer see? We should remember that God never withdraws his presence.¹⁹

The Holy Spirit never leaves our soul: even at death communion with God remains. Knowing that God welcomes us forever into his love becomes a source of peaceful trust.²⁰

Our prayer is a simple reality. Is it perhaps no more than a poor sigh? God hears us all the same. We should never forget that, at the heart of every person, the Holy Spirit is praying.²¹

And remaining in silence in the presence of God is in itself an inner attitude which opens the way to contemplation.²²

As we enter the third millennium, are we sufficiently aware that, two thousand years ago, Christ came to earth not to start a new religion but to offer every human being a communion in God?²³

The second millennium was an age when many Christians became separated from one another. Will we commit ourselves at once, yes, without delay, from the beginning of the third millennium, to do all that is necessary to live in communion²⁴ and to build peace in the world?

When Christians remain in great simplicity and in an infinite kindness of heart, when they seek to discover the profound beauty of the human soul, they are led to be in communion with one another in Christ²⁵ and to become seekers of peace everywhere on earth.

Are we aware that “every baptized person who disposes themselves inwardly to place their trust in the Mystery of the Faith is in the communion of Christ”²⁶?

To be in communion with one another means loving and being loved, forgiving and being forgiven.

When that communion which is the Church becomes transparent by striving to love and to forgive, it enables Gospel realities to shine through with the freshness of springtime.²⁷ Will we enter soon into a springtime of the Church?

Christ calls us, the poor of the Gospel, to live out the hope of a communion and of peace and to let it shine out around us. This is something even the very simplest can achieve.

A prospect of happiness? Yes, God wants happiness for us! And there is happiness in the humble gift of oneself.

we had set up. One of these Muslims, walking back with me as the sun was setting, said to me, “All human beings have the same Master. This is a secret that has not yet been revealed. But later on people will find out.”

24 During his visit to Taizé in October 1986, Pope John Paul II proposed a road to communion by saying to our community: “...By wishing to be yourselves a ‘parable of community,’ you will help all you meet to be faithful to their church affiliation, the fruit of their education and their choice in conscience, but also to enter more and more deeply into the mystery of communion that the Church is in God’s plan.”

25 One question is becoming more important than ever: will Christians in the West and those in the East be able to discover a profound trust in one another? Many Western Christians love their Eastern brothers and sisters, both because they have undergone so many trials, and also because in them there are such transparent gifts of communion. In 1962 an Orthodox bishop from Saint Petersburg, Metropolitan Nikodim, came to Taizé. He was thinking hard about the future of Christians in the West as well as in the East. He bore within himself the hope of a communion and helped us understand that the secret of the Orthodox soul is found above all in a prayer open to contemplation. So many Orthodox Christians have known how to love in the midst of their trials. Kind-heartedness is a vital reality for many of them. They are living witnesses to a trust in the Holy Spirit. By their focus on the resurrection, they strengthen us in the essential of the faith. Today in Taizé, we try to be very attentive to the young people from Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria.

26 Father Stanislas Lyonnet.

27 “It is not that the Gospel has changed, but that we are beginning to understand it better.” Pope John XXIII spoke these words just before he died. One day he also said, “In the current situation of society, prophets of doom see only ruin and calamity; they say that things have become much worse in our time, as if everything used to be perfect; they announce catastrophes, as if the world were close to its end.”

During our last meeting with John XXIII, three of us were present; my brothers Max and Alain were with me. He was already ill. Seeing us so affected by his imminent death, the Pope expressed his confidence in the future of our community. At another moment during the conversation, John XXIII explained to us how he sometimes made decisions while praying. “I speak with God,” he said. He paused a moment, and then added, “Oh, quite humbly! Oh, quite simply!”