

Gianluca Blancini, *Pellegrini in Oriente – la Comunità di Taizé e il mondo ortodosso*. AGC Edizioni, Centro Studi per l'Ecumenismo in Italia, Venezia 2018, p. 184.

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The sufferings brought by the two World Wars, as well as the persecution initiated by the dictatorial systems of the last century created the proper field in Europe for an ecumenical dialogue where details are not essential anymore. It was possible to see the desire of making real ecumenical steps in history, steps meant to rethink approaches towards one another. The effort of dialogue between various Christian denominations of that generation of pioneers of ecumenism deserves special attention through historical research and theological analysis.

The volume written by Gianluca Blancini, Catholic priest of the diocese of Biella (Italy), is part of this research effort to identify and analyze one of the most significant experiences in the ecumenical field: the Taizé community. Taizé is a protestant founded community which developed a profound relationship with the Catholic Church, especially through assuming a monastic identity and Eucharistic communion. But the community has always had connections with the Orthodox Church as well, even if not so obvious and so well known. It is precisely in these respects that the great originality of the volume of Father Blancini resides, the objective of which is stated in the Introduction: “the identification, the description and the explication in a theological key of the consonances” between the two ecclesial realities (Introduction, 1).

What attracts our attention from the very beginning is the title. Originally a PhD thesis, the volume was defended in 2016 at the Pontifical Antonianum (Athenaeum) University in Rome under another title, as *Consonanze Ecumeniche per una lettura teologica della Comunità di Taizé e l'Ortodossia in Europa* (*Ecumenical Consonances for a theological understanding of the Taizé Community and Orthodoxy in Europe*). The new title of the published volume – *Pellegrini in Oriente – la Comunità di Taizé e il mondo ortodosso* (*Pilgrims in the East. The Taizé Community and the Orthodox World*) – is a better choice, being more theological and much clearer, even if, at a first sight, may appear as less academic.

The work consists of four chapters which can actually be considered as two big parts or two big narrations: the internal story of Taizé, and the building of the relationship with the Orthodox East. The first chapter (p. 5-35) is

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dedicated to the narration of the history of the Taizé community. The author constructs the historical stages of community development—from the beginning (the 1940s) to the present—emphasizing the spirit that animated its life: the ecumenical purpose of unity. Blancini considers the monastic aspect of the community as very important in order to understand the Taizé identity. He quotes Frère Roger who was describing the first six years of the community's history: "We can divide our history of six years in three periods of time almost equals. Each of them is dominated by a spirit (...) which can be considered symbols of our evolution: Port-Royal, Saint Francis of Assisi and Cluny" (that is, the old Benedictine monastery nearby Taizé) (p. 17). As in every profound experience of monastic life, there is a central spiritual figure, considered to be the founder of the movement. Father Gianluca Blancini understands this very well and in the second chapter (p. 37-75) carefully constructs the spiritual and ecumenical figure of Frère Roger. His cultural and spiritual profile is extensively investigated, starting from the influence of the family environment. Afterwards, Blancini pays attention to relationships with some people who have exercised a first-class function in the growth of his inner life—in the first period, in particular Father Couturier and Father De Lubac—as well to the importance of participation in Vatican II and the personal friendship of Pope John XXIII. Thanks to these experiences, the ecumenical commitment becomes a dominant note of the personality of the founder as well of the pastoral care of the community.

The second part (the third and fourth chapter) is actually a presentation and a reflection of the relationship between Taizé and the Orthodox World in matters of liturgy and theology. The third chapter (p. 77-110) highlights in particular Taizé's assimilation of some elements of the spirituality and liturgy of the Orthodox Churches with which he has maintained (and entertains) a privileged relationship. Among the liturgical elements imported from the Orthodox Tradition, the author lists: prayer around the cross, lightening the candle for the Saturday evening celebration and, most important, the idea of repetitiveness (repetitive songs). Blancini identifies the sources of this assimilation: the love of Frère Roger for Orthodox Spirituality and his contact with the Orthodox world. Blancini, with the help of the community, found documents which describe the visits of Frère Roger and other brothers to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Russia and Mount Athos. Very important is the narration of the meeting of Frère Roger with Patriarch Athenagoras at the Ecumenical Patriarchate during a second visit in Istanbul in 1970. On this occasion, the Ecumenical Patriarch assured Frère Roger of all his desire to do everything needed to reach full Christian unity (p. 90-92).

The fourth chapter (p. 111-157) focuses more on identifying common systematic theological ideas. Blancini mentions three main directions of the

common theology found in Frère Roger's life and thinking, and, respectively in Orthodox theology: "1. The union between *askesis* and contemplation, underlining the latter a essential spiritual experience; 2. The prayer and the liturgy in a general sense, both found at the very center of the Taizé experience, thanks to the rediscovery of liturgical elements from the Orthodox Church; 3. The tendency to enface the sense of mystery" (p. 111). The close relationship with Orthodoxy is then particularly evident in the liturgical celebration, in which the importance assigned to the images and the event of the resurrection is relevant. The cult of icons, which corresponds to a vision of Christianity as a "religion of faces" (O. Clément), is associated with a conception on the Eucharist as the center of ecumenical research, as a factor of unity and reconciliation, and as the engine for a shared existence. In this case as well the influence of the Orthodox world is felt in an eminent way, as openness to a sense of mystery, which we can approach only with an attitude of active adoration, through silence apophatically understood as a dimension that provides the space for the intimation of the presence of Christ.

The greatest merit of Blancini who avails himself of ample documentation referable not only to written sources, but also to the direct testimony of some brothers, is that of having made us relive, with a rigorous and participated story, an experience of yesterday (and of today) that preserves a surprising, significant topicality. From this point of view, his very detailed descriptions of the pilgrimages that Frère Roger undertook to the Orthodox East show not only that the Taizé community awaits for pilgrims, but that it is also itself a pilgrim.