

# **Chevetogne, Taizé, and the Groupe des Dombes**

**Joseph Famerée**

Joseph Famerée, S.C.J., is ordinary professor in the Faculty of Theology of the Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

## Abstract

Since the mid-twentieth century, three institutions in the French-speaking world have been playing unquestionably important roles in ecumenism. The institutions here presented are, in chronological order of foundation, the Benedictine monastery of Chevetogne (Belgium), the Groupe des Dombes, and the Taizé community (France). In two chapels, the monks of Chevetogne, founded by Lambert Beauduin, celebrate the liturgy, simultaneously, in the Latin and Byzantine rites, in order to anticipate spiritually Christian unity in diversity. The Groupe des Dombes, founded by Paul Couturier, consists of French-speaking theologians, twenty Protestants and twenty Catholics. Theological reflection and common prayer are the two pillars of their work, emphasizing the conversion of the churches. Taizé, founded by Roger Schutz, is an ecumenical community, which seeks to be a 'parable of communion', inspiring a 'pilgrimage of trust on earth', especially among young people.

## Keywords

Chevetogne, Groupe des Dombes, Taizé, French, ecumenism, conversion, parable of communion, Beauduin, Couturier, Schutz

## Introduction

Three institutions in the French-speaking world played unquestionably important roles in twentieth-century ecumenism, and they continue to do so in the present century. They are, in

chronological order of foundation, the Benedictine monastery of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross at Chevetogne in Belgium, the Groupe des Dombes, and the Taizé Community in France.

### Chevetogne

Though, in 1920, Dom Lambert Beauduin (1873–1960) knew little of the tragedy of Christian disunity, his previous liturgical and monastic activity was animated by a spirit of unity in the context of prayer and celebration. It was on 1 June 1921, with the arrival of Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky (1865–1944), a Ukrainian 'uniate', at Mont César, the Benedictine abbey at Louvain in Belgium, that Dom Beauduin's ecumenical initiation began, and it was strengthened as a professor at the Collegio Sant'Anselmo in Rome from October 1921 to March 1925. On 24 November 1923, he drew up a 'Project for the establishment of a monastic institute to serve the apostolate for the unity of the churches'. His stroke of genius, according to the historian of ecumenism, Étienne Fouilloux, was to forge a synthesis between the idea of monastic life and the idea of unity: it was necessary to found a new, international monastery, totally dedicated to that end (Fouilloux 1982, 143ff., 347ff.). The members of the monastery would simply be called monks of unity.

Beauduin's plan found a degree of support in the letter *Equidem Verba* (21 March 1924) of Pope Pius XI, directed however towards Russia, a point not mentioned at all in Beauduin's plan. Despite plenty of reservations, particularly in his own order, but with the support of Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier (1851–1926) and the Belgian bishops, the foundation took place in December 1925 at Amay-sur-Meuse. Less than a year later, there were already fifteen monks and nine postulants. The priory was transferred to Chevetogne in 1939.

In the first issue of *Irénikon*, the journal of the new foundation, in May 1926, Beauduin explained the spirit in which the monks of unity wanted to work. This spirit or perspective can be summed up in three negations: no proselytizing, no charity, and no imperialist notions. The monks of unity thus clearly distanced themselves from mainstream Catholic attitudes of the time. No proselytism, either individually or collectively: there would be no question, as Beauduin put it, of any tendency to 'make our separated brethren disaffected with their churches in order to rally them to ourselves'. In order that 're-union' might one day be possible, it was necessary to work 'in an atmosphere of *respect, trust and mutual sympathy*'. Moreover, any attempt to win polemical victories would provoke challenges, 'in short, would render practically impossible honest fraternal contacts and sincere and truthful rapprochement'. No charitable aid either, if offered alongside activity aiming at union of the churches: charity would lose its disinterested character under such circumstances and the apostolate would become suspect. Finally, there should be no imperialist notion of religious and supernatural unity, deriving 'from a centralising spirit, concerned with enlarging the flock only in order to see a new wave of souls brought into obedience', but rather a 'desire to express the full richness of the life of the mystical body of Christ and the splendour of its visible unity'. Such was the ecumenical methodology recommended by Beauduin, a method both practical and existential, aimed at 'drawing hearts and minds together in trust and love' (Beauduin 1926, 117–119).

This 'irenic method', which inspired the name of the monastic journal, was nourished, from the beginning, by a liturgical spirituality: orientated first towards the Christian East, the monks of unity celebrated the liturgy simultaneously in two chapels, in the Latin and Byzantine (mainly Slavonic) rites, according to the rite each one chose on his entry into the monastery. In doing so, they experienced from within the profound spiritual identity of the separated brethren of the East and anticipated liturgically the unity in diversity they hoped for.

This true 'empathy', by which they 'put themselves in the place of the other' as far as possible, was accompanied by a deep intellectual study of eastern Christianity (Famerée 2005, 502–503).

It was in this truly theological context that the ecumenical Journées (or Semaines or Colloques) de Chevetogne developed (Rousseau 1969, 451–485; Fouilloux 1982, 768–772; Lanne 1986, 53–58; Verdoodt 1986). They began in 1942 with meetings at the monastery between Fr. Clement Lialine (1901–1958) of Chevetogne and some of his former fellow students from Louvain who were drawn by the beauty of the eastern liturgy and hoping to learn more about it. Among them were Frs Charles Moeller (1912–1986) and Roger Aubert (1914–2009).

How could East and West understand each other better? How might favourable conditions for dialogue be created at the very heart of Catholic theology? According to the historian Fouilloux, those days were, at least in the beginning, 'one of the places where the theology of dialogue, the theology of ecumenism, was sought'. Bit by bit, non-Catholics were invited, and those days, faithful to their origins, became 'places of research where *all* confessions were invited to reflect on a theme that was not directly part of inter-church debate, but which, nevertheless, in one way or another, had a bearing on it. The concern was with foundations rather than superstructures.' They were also opened up 'to Catholic ecumenists of different tendencies and nationalities', though the Belgian heart remained the driving force. In the early 1950s, their international character and the publicity surrounding them, discreet though it was, raised suspicions at the Vatican (Fouilloux 1982, 769).

From the very beginning, a solution to the crucial problem of the divorce between East and West (and more broadly with the separated churches) was sought along the lines of a 'total ecclesiology' and an 'eschatological humanism', so as to heal the fracture without losing anything essential from either of the two traditions. The important session in 1945 sought to

define ‘Christian humanism’ precisely, and in association with that to evaluate the theological renewal then underway. In a certain continuity with that, the meeting in 1947 analyzed the differences between Christian anthropologies. There was increased participation from France (with Yves Congar, notably) and from non-Roman confessions, both Eastern and Western. From 1949, the Journées de Chevetogne became annual and fully ecumenical, not just Eastern. One topic after another from the whole gamut of Catholic theology was scrutinized on the basis of shared research. The reputation and importance of these meetings grew steadily during the 1950s. If Geneva was delighted by them, Rome was worried. The Journées continued, nevertheless, thanks, among others, to the support of Mgr Charue, bishop of Namur, and they made an important contribution to the preparations for the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). It suffices to recall some of the themes of those years: the Bible and ecumenism, Tradition and ecumenism, schism in the church, baptism and entry into the church, the church as bride, the Holy Spirit and the church, and eucharistic presence in the church. After the announcement of the Council, the meetings were more directly orientated towards it, and they considered the idea of a council, the local church, the infallibility of the church, and so on. It should also be emphasized that certain monks of Chevetogne were very active at Vatican II, Dom Olivier Rousseau (1898–1984) and Dom Emmanuel Lanne (1923–2010), in particular.

Since that time, the Colloques de Chevetogne have continued their reflections in order to help the progress of Christian unity, tackling even the most delicate issues that still today constitute stumbling blocks, for example, proselytism, and *communicatio in sacris* (Colloque 1994). After a gap of twelve years, they now have a lighter feel, concentrating on a spiritual ecumenism deeply rooted in the liturgy, a return to the sources in a way.

### The Groupe des Dombes

Abbé Paul Couturier (1881–1953) of Lyons is well known as the father of 'spiritual ecumenism' (Congar 1966, 20), but less so as the founder of the Groupe des Dombes (Famerée 2008, 99–116; Fouilloux 1982, 269–345, 772–776; Clifford 2005). He was very influenced by Dom Lambert Beauduin, whose existential and spiritual vision of ecumenism resonated with the deepest aspirations of Couturier, who was going to 'promote spiritual ecumenism as the heart of all work towards Christian unity'. He 'would unfold the implications of a vision centred on the mystical body of Christ, a Christ-centred vision, in his efforts to promote the Week of Prayer for Christian unity and in his insistence on prayer as the only suitable context for theological dialogue' (Clifford 2005, 13).

From 1935, Couturier infused a new spirit into the Catholic octave of prayer for the unity of the Christian world (18–25 January), still understood then as requiring the return of heretics and schismatics to the Catholic Church. He wanted to make it a week of universal prayer, truly common to all Christians, for the re-establishment of unity according to the will of Christ, when and by the means that he willed. Each year, a series of talks was given in the context of the week of prayer, showing the strict ('matriciel') link for Couturier between spiritual and doctrinal renewal. Moreover, Couturier 'sought to establish a Catholic–Protestant conversation that would contribute to growth towards unity in faith' (Clifford 2005, 33). At the beginning of the 1930s, since it was difficult to get an entrée among French reformed pastors, Abbé Laurent Remilleux, at Couturier's request, established contact with a small ecumenical fraternity of Swiss-German reformed pastors, including Berthold Zwicky and Richard Bäumlín, which met at Erlenbach in Switzerland. This encounter was later regarded by Couturier as the real foundation of the Groupe des Dombes. It 'prepared the way for the formation of an ecumenical group composed of Swiss Protestant pastors and Catholic priests from Lyons who gathered alternately at the Abbey of Notre-Dame des Dombes (1937, 1939)

and the presbytery of Erlenbach (1938, 1942)' (Clifford 2005, 36). It was this Cistercian abbey, thirty kilometres North of Lyons, that gave its name to the Groupe.

The Groupe grew rapidly to include pastors and priests from France and from French-speaking Switzerland (most recently, also, from Belgium). It is noteworthy that 'the format quickly shifted from that of "retraites spirituelles" to discover a more theological orientation' (Clifford 2005, 36). The strong point of the early ecumenical experience of the Groupe (1937–42) was its rootedness in prayer and in a fraternal spirit. This also characterized the development of the Groupe after 1942. Today, the Groupe consists of some forty French-speaking theologians, pastors, and priests: twenty are Protestant (Lutheran and Reformed), and twenty Catholic. Since 1998, some women have been members (ten in 2018).

From 1946, the Groupe met regularly each year, either at the Abbey of Notre-Dame des Dombes, or in Protestant presbyteries or houses of prayer, and from 1968, it met solely at the Abbey. Since 1998, the annual meeting has been held at the Benedictine Abbey of Pradines, north west of Lyons.

The Groupe des Dombes is not an official body. It does not have to be accountable for its activities or publications to any ecclesiastical authority. One becomes a member by co-option of the other members, not by nomination by a church. The criteria for membership are theological interest in ecumenical questions, a particular interest in ecclesiology, and practical experience of the search for unity of confessional churches. As a result, the Dombes theologians enjoy a certain institutional independence whilst still trying loyally to represent their own Christian tradition. The confessional traditions represented in the Groupe are the major ones involved in church divisions in francophone Europe. The aim of the 'Dombists' is to re-examine the factors of division and to test new conceptions of unity between the churches. Theological reflection and common liturgical prayer have thus become the two

pillars of their work. Theologians from other Christian traditions are regularly invited to take part in the reflection of the Groupe.

The Groupe meets once a year, generally in the last week of August. During the week, in the spirit of the Groupe's origins and of Abbé Couturier, the members pray together and share in the liturgical offices of the monastic community. The Groupe alternates daily between celebrations of the Mass and of the Lord's Supper. Between the annual sessions, texts and papers prepared by particular members are circulated as the basis for the work of the following session. During the annual session, the forty members of the Groupe work together continuously from morning to evening. The miracle is that this truly collaborative work regularly produces documents that are coherent, original, and unanimously approved. From time to time, there can be meetings of the separate confessional groups when there is disagreement within one or other of them.

The work of the Groupe is devoted to study of the main themes and doctrines that still divide Protestants and Catholics. For eighty years, the Groupe has published 'theses' (1956–70) and 'documents' (1972–2014). The latter have dealt successively with eucharistic faith; reconciliation of ministries; episcopal ministry; the Holy Spirit, the church and the sacraments; the ministry of the pope; the conversion of the churches; Mary in the plan of God; doctrinal authority within the church; the Lord's Prayer, a route map for the conversion of the churches; and finally, communion and conversion of the churches. All of these documents have been translated into English (Groupe des Dombes 2010a and 2010b), with the exception, as yet, of the final two (Groupe des Dombes, 2011 and 2014).

The first phase of the Groupe (1956–1979) aimed at convergence in the interpretation of doctrine. A renewed common interpretation of the ancient confessions of faith and of the Tradition prior to the divisions of the sixteenth century would allow the divisive effects of the post-Reformation confessions of faith and confessional dogmas to be overcome. In the course

of this first phase, they moved from a doctrinal perspective on the Church to taking account of the institutional reality of the churches. The ecumenists of the Groupe also wanted to speak to the churches themselves and to propose to them a process of growth in unity for their churchly life.

The second phase, still in process, has seen a hermeneutic shift from dogmatics to history. The importance of the theme of *metanoia* for the Groupe since 1979 indicates this change of hermeneutical perspective: unity can only result from a process of *conversion*. Initiating this process required that priority in the analysis of ecclesial reality be given to the historical fact of division over the dogmatic affirmation of unity. Such an inversion of priorities called for an improvement in the process of repentance and reconciliation, and the purification of memories by means of a common, penitential re-reading of history. Thus, conversion had to extend to the churches themselves as corporate realities. That is why history subsequent to the apostolic Scriptures and the fathers of the Church became increasingly important, and even primary, in the documents of the Groupe, as a critical reference point in interpreting the division and conflict of the churches and in discerning the ways of conversion. Starting with 'The Ministry of Communion in the Universal Church' (1985), all the texts of the Groupe have been marked by a new sequence: history, Scripture, conversion. This proposal of precise forms of conversion for confessional churchly identities, based on rigorous historical analysis, now characterizes all the publications of the Groupe and gives them a particular value.

### Taizé

Another foundation with links to the Groupe des Dombes and, more particularly, to Abbé Couturier, is that of Taizé. In August 1940, Roger Schutz (1915–2005) was twenty-five years old and a theological student at Lausanne. He decided to go to France to help that country

(Fouilloux 1982, 497–499; Scatena 2011). He went to Burgundy, from which his mother had come, and bought a big house at Taizé-lès-Cluny where he established himself, half-way between Geneva and Lyons, not far from the Swiss border and a little south of the demarcation line between the occupied zone of France and that controlled by the Vichy regime. His aim was to help refugees from the occupied zone, but also to create a community with the motto 'ora et labora ut regnet' ('pray and work so that He may reign'). Under the influence of Port-Royal, he had in mind a 'haven of study which would revolve around a stable group' (Fouilloux 1982, 497). Thanks to the conferences that he organized for members of the Christian student associations of Suisse Romande, he hoped for the birth of a big community (the 'Grande Communauté') that might sustain the small one (the 'Communauté régulière') at Cluny (Scatena 2011, 18–19).

In 1942, he was joined by two other young Swiss, Max Thurian (1921–1996), a theological student, and Pierre Souvairan (1921–1998), an apprentice engineer. Their life together became organised, with religious and temporal aspects. Taizé was a place of welcome and a farming venture. In December 1942, to escape the Germans, who had been informed of Jews being welcomed at the house in Cluny, the three young men left Burgundy for Geneva, where they were joined by another student, Daniel de Montmollin (born, 1921). The group now took time to clarify their religious project, and dealt with their first critics. In his licentiate (or master's) thesis in theology, *The Monastic Ideal up to the Time of St Benedict (6th century) and its Conformity with the Gospel*, defended on 30 April 1943 at the Faculty of the Free Evangelical Church of the canton of Vaud (Fouilloux 1982, 498), Schutz made himself the promoter of the renewal of religious community life in the very churches of the Reform. As a result, he clashed with the strictest Lutherans and Calvinists. In Autumn 1944, the four men returned to Taizé.

From the end of 1940, Schutz had been visiting Abbé Couturier, in order, as he said, to prepare the ground for his project as an ecumenical ministry (Fouilloux 1982, 498). The discussions with Couturier and his entourage continued over the following years and were determinative in fixing the ecumenical orientation of Taizé, which had been rather fluid at the start.

By 1949, there were seven brothers. At Easter, they took a lifelong vow 'to renounce all property', 'to remain celibate', and 'to accept the decisions taken in community, as expressed by the prior', in accordance with the terms written up in the Rule of Taizé by Frère Roger in the winter of 1952–53 (Gonzalez-Balado 53–54). Since then, the community has grown steadily in number and in its international composition. During the 1950s, the community also began to spread by establishing small 'brotherhoods' outside Taizé, in disadvantaged working class districts in Europe and in other continents, to be 'a presence of friendship and sharing' (Gonzalez-Balado, 63–64).

At the beginning, the Taizé community was made up simply of Protestants. From 1960 onward, it included some Anglicans. In 1969, it welcomed the first Catholic brother. Today, the prior is a Catholic, Frère Alois (born, 1954). Taizé is thus an ecumenical community, not belonging, as a community, to any confession. It seeks to live as an anticipation of Christian unity (Gonzalez-Balado, 57–60), and to be a 'parable of communion', to use an expression dear to Frère Roger.

Beginning in the 1960s, young people began to flock to Taizé, wanting to reflect on their faith, or simply to find meaning in their lives. It was in September 1966 that the first international rally of young people took place, at which the controversial issues of 1968 were already voiced. How did they then move to the idea of a 'council of young people'?

At the end of the summer of 1969, in the midst of a church and a world in crisis, and faced with an ecumenism that seemed to be stuck, the young people of Taizé wondered how

they could bring about a rebirth of hope. They decided to look for ways in which they could announce good news to the church and to the world at Easter 1970. A team of young people from all five continents, but especially from the South, gathered suggestions. On Easter Day, in the Church of the Reconciliation, packed with young people, the good news was announced: the Risen Christ was preparing a springtime for the church, a church renouncing the means of power and ready to share with all, and he was giving to young people the courage to open up ways of reconciliation for all humanity. On the same occasion, Frère Roger announced the holding of a 'council of young people', 'something that would unite young people of all countries and commit us unreservedly to the cause of Christ and the Gospel' (Gonzalez-Balado 1977, 96). Three words captured the common feeling: struggle, contemplation, communion. On 30 August 1974, at the opening of the council, 40,000 young people from more than a hundred nationalities were present on the hillside at Taizé. The council, subsequently celebrated in various continents, was fundamentally a source of Easter commitment to lead a life inspired by the Beatitudes (Gonzalez-Balado, 87–121).

Following a 'dynamic of the provisional' (Frère Roger 1965), the community of Taizé has, since 1982, inspired a 'pilgrimage of trust on earth' in the main cities of Europe and other continents, aiming to stimulate young people to be agents of trust and reconciliation wherever they live. At the end of each year, a five-day European meeting, prepared with local parishes, gathers tens of thousands of young people (Clément 1997, 81–83).

### References

BEAUDUIN, LAMBERT (1926). 'Dans quel esprit nous voudrions travailler', *Irénikon* 1:117–119.

CLÉMENT, OLIVIER (1997). *Taizé: A Meaning to Life* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications).

CLIFFORD, CATHERINE E. (2005). *The Groupe des Dombes: A Dialogue of Conversion* (New York, Washington, DC/Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, Oxford: Peter Lang).

CLIFFORD, CATHERINE E., ed. (2010). *For the Communion of the Churches: The Contribution of the Groupe des Dombes* (Grand Rapids, MI, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans).

COLLOQUE (1994). 'Mission, Prosélytisme et Unité Chrétienne', various papers in *Irénikon* 67(1994): 451–480, and *Irénikon* 68(1995): 5–78.

CONGAR, YVES (1966). *Dialogue Between Christians: Catholic Contributions to Ecumenism*, Trans. Philip Loretz (London, Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman).

FAMERÉE, JOSEPH (2005). 'Les méthodes en œcuménisme: des Conversations de Malines à Vatican II (1921–1962)', *Irénikon* 78: 491–520.

FAMERÉE, JOSEPH (2008). 'The Contribution of the *Groupe des Dombes* to Ecumenism: Past Achievements and Future Challenges', *Louvain Studies* 33: 99–116.

FOUILLoux, ÉTIENNE (1982). *Les catholiques et l'unité chrétienne du XIXe au XXe siècle: Itinéraires européens d'expression française* (Paris: Centurion).

GONZALEZ-BALADO, JOSÉ LUIS (1977). *Le défi de Taizé: Frère Roger* (Paris, Éd. du Seuil).

LE GROUPE DES DOMBES (2010a). *For the Communion of the Churches: The Contribution of the Groupe des Dombes*, trans. C. E. Clifford (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans).

LE GROUPE DES DOMBES (2010b). 'One Teacher': Doctrinal Authority in the Church, trans. C. E. Clifford (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans).

LE GROUPE DES DOMBES (2011). *'Vous donc, priez ainsi' (Mt 6: 9): Le Notre Père itinéraire pour la conversion des Églises* (Montrouge: Bayard).

LE GROUPE DES DOMBES (2014). *Communion et conversion des Églises* (Montrouge: Bayard).

LANNE, EMMANUEL (1986). 'Les semaines œcuméniques de Chevetogne', in J.-M. van Cangh, ed., *In memoriam Mgr Charles Moeller* (Louvain-la-Neuve: CIACO): 53–58.

FRÈRE ROGER (1965). *Dynamique du provisoire* (Taizé: Les Presses de Taizé).

ROUSSEAU, OLIVIER (1969). 'Les journées œcuméniques de Chevetogne (1942-1967)', in *Au service de la Parole de Dieu: Mélanges offerts à Monseigneur André-Marie Charue, Évêque de Namur* (Gembloux: Éd. J. Duculot), 451–485.

SCATENA, SILVIA (2011). *Taizé: Le origini della comunità e l'attesa del concilio* (Zürich, Münster: LIT Verlag).

VERDOODT, ALBERT (1986). *Les colloques œcuméniques de Chevetogne (1942–1983) et la réception par l'Église catholique des charismes d'autres communions chrétiennes* (Chevetogne: Éd. de Chevetogne).

### **Suggested Reading**

AAVV (1999). 'Vers une seule Communauté eucharistique: Eucharistie et communion des Églises', Actes du Colloque de Chevetogne 1999, *Irénikon* 72/3-4.

SCAMPINI, JORGE ALEJANDRO (2003). *'La conversión de las Iglesias, una necesidad y una urgencia de la fe': La experiencia del Groupe des Dombes como desarrollo de un método ecuménico eclesial (1937–1997)* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse).

SCATENA, SILVIA (2018). *Taizé, una parabola di unità: Storia della comunità dalle origini al concilio dei giovani* (Bologna: Il Mulino).