

Ladies and gentlemen! It is very moving for me to be here today. Thank you very much for the invitation.

I would like to speak from my personal experience on the subject of how prayer can overcome hatred. 35 years ago, in the fall of 1989, I was living in East Berlin in the former GDR. I was a freelance artist at the time. I was able to use this job title to secretly prepare prayer meetings in various Eastern European countries for the Taize community. Under the guise of a traveling artist, I was on the road in Romania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and the former Soviet Union. I visited Christians of various denominations who were often only able to live their faith in secret. While giving me shelter, they were breaking the laws of their country, which threatened this with severe punishment, especially in Romania and the Soviet Union. There were Christian communities and religious orders, priests and pastors who lived their vocation in secret and officially had a different profession. Some of them had spent years in prison. The situation was particularly difficult in Romania. The dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu used brutal means to suppress the population. Private contact with foreigners was forbidden. In addition to the Orthodox Romanians, German-speaking Catholics and Protestants and Hungarian-speaking Catholics and Reformed Christians also lived in Romania - here, too, contact with one another was not welcome. The secret police caused great mistrust among the people. False rumors about each other were deliberately spread to stir up prejudice and hatred. This made it easier to control the people. There was a street in Bucharest where four different churches stood close together: A Romanian Orthodox church, a Protestant church for German-speaking Romanians, a Catholic church for different nationalities and a Hungarian Reformed church. But there was no significant exchange between them - everyone was afraid of the others because they thought they might be working for the secret police. In the mid-1980s, I spent several weeks in Romania with a young woman from the Netherlands to visit Christians there. With our visits, we wanted to show them that they are not forgotten, that they are being prayed for in other countries and that we experience fellowship through prayer. Our meetings and prayers often took place secretly, after church services or in hiding. But these meetings and prayers only ever took place in separate groups of Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant or Reformed Christians.

In a small town, we found a very courageous and lively Protestant congregation. During the time of our visit, they wanted to invite young people to a Taize prayer in the basement of the parish hall every evening. On the first evening, there were only German-speaking Protestant participants. After the prayer, we talked about how nice it would be if, as in Taize, different denominations could participate and the readings and prayers could be read in different languages. And so some began to invite their neighbors. On the second day, Reformed Christians from the Hungarian minority joined in and on the third day, Catholic Christians from the German and Hungarian minorities. People always had to come and go carefully, secretly and individually, so that the secret police did not get suspicious. Nevertheless, more and more people came, especially young people. We felt a great longing for community. After the prayer, we always sat together for a long time to get to know each other. Although many knew each other by sight, they had hardly spoken to each other until then. On the 4th evening, we asked whether Romanian Orthodox Christians could also be invited to the next prayer. Many reacted defensively. The mistrust towards the Romanian Orthodox majority population was too great. But then a surprise happened on the last day of our visit: Romanian Orthodox Christians joined us for the first time! The prayer lasted a particularly long time that evening. Nevertheless, everyone stayed together afterwards and got talking to each other and asked each other lots of questions. Although the secret police interrogated the family we had stayed with the next day after our departure, lasting relationships remained from this prayer and even friendships developed, as I was later told.

However, I experienced the power of prayer most impressively in October 1989 in the Gethsemane Church in East Berlin. I spoke about this last year at the end of the St Egidio World Peace Meeting in front of the Brandenburg Gate. In the Gethsemane Church, which is located in the middle of a very densely populated residential area, there were prayers for peace and a vigil for the multitude of political prisoners every evening from October 3. The situation in our country was getting worse and worse at the time. Thousands of people tried to flee across the Hungarian border or the German embassy in Prague. Honecker had clearly rejected Gorbachev's reform efforts.

On October 4, I also began a fasting campaign as a specific offer of non-violent resistance. For me, this decision changed my life. From then on, I sat day and night in the church, which was now always open, fasting and praying. I was no longer allowed to leave the church, as I would have been arrested immediately. I fasted alone for two days, then, on after the other, lots of people joined the fasting campaign. I was supported by the Taize prayer group right from the start. We sang Taize songs and prayed psalms. People came to the church day and night, seeking conversations, protection or silence. Every evening at 18:00, hundreds came to the prayer for peace. There were more every day. Many were in a church for the first time in their lives. Whenever unrest arose, I stepped up to the microphone and began to sing the canon "Dona nobis pacem" with the people. On October 7 and 8, hundreds of people were arrested after the prayer and driven away in army trucks. At first, no one knew where they were or what was happening to them. That was shocking!

On Monday, October 9, we felt therefore particularly tense. The church was overcrowded long before the prayer for peace. As soon as the prayer began at 18:00, the church was cordoned off from the outside by the police and the army, with snipers hiding on the rooftops. We expected the worst. We sang and prayed and hoped. And then we heard from Leipzig: thousands of people were demonstrating in the city center after Monday prayers and the police and army were not intervening! We opened the doors of the Gethsemane Church and saw: the water cannons and army trucks drove away, the police withdrew. That was unbelievable! We went out onto the street in front of the church, singing and holding candles. Countless people from the houses around us joined us. From then on, there was no stopping us. Every evening, more and more people came to church and then took to the streets.

One month later, on November 9, the Wall fell. But the decisive day was October 9: it was a miracle that there was no bloodshed. A leading GDR politician said afterwards: "We expected everything, we were prepared for everything, but not candles and prayers." Of course, many factors played a role, such as Gorbachev's policies and the observation by the West, but the non-violence of the protesters was a decisive factor. The prayers contributed significantly to the non-violence of the protests.

The last experience I want to tell you about was in June this year. I still live in eastern Germany, where the far-right, xenophobic AfD now receives 30% support from the population. In Magdeburg, about 1/3 of the 20,000 students at the universities are international students. In the week before the local elections, we held an interfaith prayer service for the first time on the university campus with students from 7 different religions and Christians from 4 denominations. The students read texts from their religions on the topic of "peaceful coexistence" and prayed in their languages. It was a very moving sign, especially against the background of the war in Gaza. Listening to the prayers sung by the students in foreign languages, I was deeply touched, the prayer gave us great courage and we now want to repeat it regularly.

I believe that prayers can work in many ways. They open us up to God, to our fellow human beings and to ourselves. They can free us personally from impatience and discord. They can connect us with other people and give us the strength to offer non-violent resistance.

When many different people pray together in public, they can send a strong signal to the society. Just as we hope it will be for our meeting here in Paris.

Thank you for your attention!