



The Heart of L'Arche

A spirituality for every day

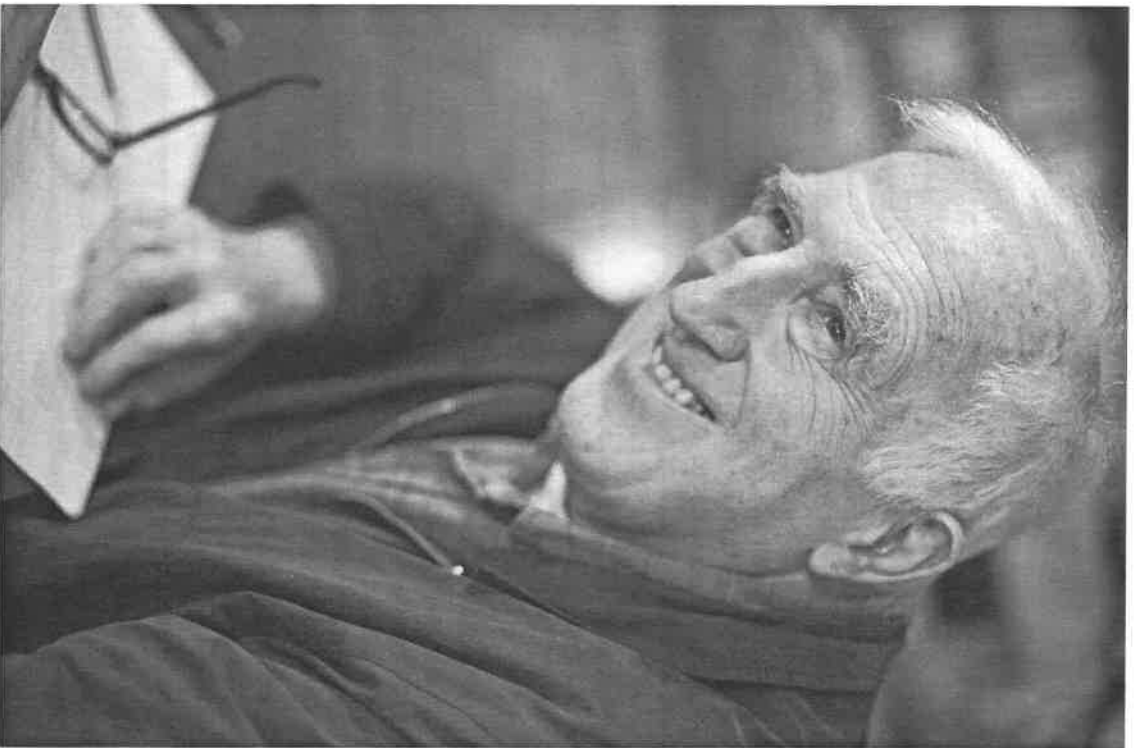
JEAN VANIER

Introduction

In August 1964, inspired and encouraged by Dominican Father Thomas Philippe, I began to share my life with Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux. Living with these two men with intellectual disabilities, and with others who, like them, suffer from intellectual disabilities, has transformed my life. Before I met them, my life had been governed chiefly by my head and by a sense of duty. I had created inner barriers to protect myself from my fears and vulnerability. In L'Arche, I began to learn to live from the heart.

Despite some difficult moments, these forty-seven years have brought me great joy. My heart has been opened and my understanding has grown. I have learned a great deal about the human heart and its need for, but also its fear of, relationships of love and communion with others. I have learned much about the gospel, and about the life and person of Jesus. L'Arche has been for me a school of love.

Society regards people with disabilities as “misfits,” “sub-human.” The birth of a child with a disability is considered a tragedy for a family. In L'Arche we discover that these people have a great openness of heart and capacity for love; they seem to reveal what is most fundamental in all of us. Living with them in community can be difficult, but it also transforms us and teaches us what really matters in life. We may come to L'Arche to help the weak, but



© Elodie Perriot

Jean Vanier

we soon realize that, in fact, it is they who are helping us! Here we touch the fundamental mystery of L'Arche and of Faith and Light (an international Christian association for people with intellectual disabilities and their families and friends). These who are the most rejected are also those who can heal us, if we enter into a relationship of friendship with them. The stone that was rejected by the builders has become the corner stone (Acts 4:11).

Life in L'Arche is demanding, and it involves a degree of sacrifice. Those who come to live in L'Arche have to learn to accept reduced salaries, longer working hours and the loss of certain friendships and cultural activities. At the same time, we gain a great deal: community life, a sense of being loved, a new sense of meaning and purpose, and a way of living in which our faith, gifts and competence are integrated. L'Arche is a place where we can grow and deepen our humanity as well as our spirituality.

God has given L'Arche as a gift to this particular time in history. Today, so much emphasis is put on technology, on scientific knowledge and on individual success that people, forgetting the importance of the heart and of faithful relationship, sink into depression and despair. Society often seeks to eliminate people who are weak, before their birth or through euthanasia, arguing that they are a nuisance and cost too much. Through L'Arche, God reminds us of the essential purpose of human life: out of love, we have been created to love. We are called to use all our energies and gifts to create a more just and loving society, where each person, whatever their culture, religion, abilities or disabilities, has a place.

Our communities want to witness to the church and to the world that God knows all persons in their deepest being, and loves them in their brokenness. God is love. God is goodness, compassion and forgiveness. L'Arche is not a solution to a social

problem. L'Arche is a sign that love is possible, and that we are not condemned to live in a state of war and conflict where the strong crush the weak. Our communities embody the belief that each person is unique, precious and sacred.

L'Arche is a family created and sustained by God. Being a family means sharing one spirit, one vision and one spirituality. This is particularly true of a family created in response to a call from God, without the natural family bonds of flesh and blood. A spirituality is a way of life that implies choices and a particular ordering of priorities. Each religion has a spirituality, a way of living and growing in union with God. The gospel is the source of Christian spirituality, but there are many ways of living out the gospel.

Throughout history, according to the needs of particular ages and cultures, the Holy Spirit has called forth men and women to create new families and to bear witness to the love of God, the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the East as in the West, in the early days of the church, there were the desert fathers and the foundation of monastic families. They developed a spirituality centered on a life of prayer, community life, obedience and liturgy. Much later, Franciscan families came into being. They lived a life of poverty and a belief in the presence of God in nature and in the poor. Other spiritualities have stressed the importance of integration with and commitment to society. There are spiritualities for marriage, and particular spiritualities for other states of life. Each one has the same foundation: the gospel and the life of Jesus. Each one offers a way to grow in love and become liberated from fear, a path to communion with Jesus and other people, particularly those who are marginalized.

The Holy Spirit created L'Arche with the support of Father Thomas Philippe to reveal to an age obsessed with achievement that the essential value of each person lies not in the intelligence, but in the wisdom of the heart. God has chosen to manifest himself in a particular way in people with disabilities, through their fragility and the simplicity of their hearts.

In this book, I want to talk about some of the essential elements of our spirituality that we live daily in our communities throughout the world. I write from my own experience, in my own language, with my own particular sensitivities. Others in L'Arche might write quite differently or emphasize different aspects. This book describes a path to unity, peace, forgiveness and freedom that people with disabilities have given to L'Arche. Other people know this path as they share their lives with those who are weak and dependent in other ways: the elderly, the dying, people with HIV/AIDS, people suffering from mental illnesses, and so on. L'Arche communities form a new family in the greater human family, the people of God.

Some L'Arche communities are interfaith. In India, for example, our communities welcome Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Each person is rooted in his or her religious tradition. In some ways, Gandhi's spirituality was similar to L'Arche's. He, too, found God in the poor, the suffering, the rejected; he learned that as we become closer to the poor and enter into a covenant of love with them, we draw closer to God. This book, however, deals mainly with the biblical foundations of L'Arche's spirituality: the life and message of Jesus passed down to us through the gospels, which inspired the initial foundation of L'Arche.

The questions of L'Arche today are not the same as those we lived during the first years of L'Arche. Governments have entered more and more into the field of disabilities, which was tradition-

ally the realm of religious or parent groups. Governments have created laws, which are of course needed but can be challenging. Centres for people with disabilities must be professional and obedient to labour laws. Authorities tend to be wary of volunteerism, religious practices, and of using people with disabilities to further secondary goals, religious or otherwise.

At the same time, young people, well informed by television and the Internet, can be wary of religion and spiritual commitment. Their ties are often to other young people with whom they communicate through email and Skype. It is not easy for them to root their joy and home in a community such as L'Arche; they like to have more autonomy. Life in community can gradually be seen as a place of work. Yet in their hearts, many young people are looking for alternative ways of living, and reject prevailing values of individual success, competition and rivalry.

A book on the spirituality of L'Arche and Faith and Light is needed even more today. Our communities must follow norms, be as professional as possible, accept labour laws and so on. How then can they truly be communities where we love each other and we are committed to each other? Together we embody a deeper meaning than just being just a good place for people with disabilities to live. How can we be a place where we all grow together in a spirituality of love, mutual gift of self, inspired by Jesus and by the love of God? May this little book inspire many to discover the deepest meaning of L'Arche and Faith and Light.

A question of language

Language has evolved a great deal over the last forty-seven years. People used to talk about the “mentally retarded,” the “mentally handicapped” or the “mentally deficient.” Today we use other terms: “people with learning disabilities” or “people with intellectual disabilities.” Language evolves according to culture, country and times. Behind the change of language is the desire to affirm that a person with a mental handicap is first and foremost *a person*, who should be respected and given the opportunity to exercise his or her particular gifts.

In this book, I have used the term “a person with an intellectual disability.” They are truly *people*, with all the implications that this word holds. Each person is unique and important. Yet there is difference. Some people come or are sent to L'Arche because of their disability; others choose freely to come and live with them. The important thing in language is to signify difference while respecting the person.

Sometimes today people have difficulty with the words “the poor” and “the weak.” The gospel message talks about the “poor,” which is frequently interpreted as the “economically poor.” However, a person without friends or family, or a parent who has lost a child, is also poor. The poor person is one who is in need, who recognizes this need and who cries out for help. Weakness is frequently considered a defect. Yet are we not all weak and needy in some way? We all have our vulnerabilities, our limits and our disabilities. When we recognize our weaknesses, we can ask for help; we can work together. We need each other. It is obvious that the weak need the strong, but, as we are discovering in L'Arche, the strong also need the weak. In this book I have occasionally

used the words “poor” and “weak,” even though they go against certain cultural norms that want everyone to be strong.

Special thanks

I would like to thank Claire de Miribel, who helped with the initial version of this book and who was called two years ago to live it fully with Jesus in Heaven.

Jean Vanier
March 2011



© Elodie Perriot

Jean Vanier, Cariosa Kilcommons and Patrick Druault at L'Arche Troisy, France.

1

The mystery of Jesus

Christian spirituality is founded on Jesus. We in L'Arche are called to live in a special way the mystery of the poverty and weakness of Jesus, who came to be with the poor and the weak.

Jesus came to bring good news to the poor. He set out his mission when, in the synagogue in Nazareth, he applied to himself the words of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring the good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free.
(Lutke 4:18)

Through L'Arche I began to understand what this good news is for the poor.

In the time of Jesus, many people were poor, oppressed, blind and rejected. Many lepers suffered not only the pain of their ulcers,

but even more, the pain of rejection. They were regarded as "untouchables"; those who associated with them became impure. Their disease was seen as a punishment from God.

People like these were outcasts, imprisoned in broken self-images and feelings of misery and guilt. They had neither future nor hope. Jesus came to reveal to each one that they were important and were loved by God. That is the good news.

At the same time, others lived in luxury. They had power, prestige and privilege. They lived complacently. Their good fortune and well-being were seen by them as signs of God's blessing and favour. A wall separated these two worlds: the rich who, on the whole, despised the poor, and the poor who remained turned in on themselves in dejection and sadness. Jesus described the two worlds in one of his parables:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table. ... The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "... between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."
(Luke 16:19-26)

Jesus ate with rich people like Simon the Pharisee and Zaccheus. He called them to change, to share their goods with those in need instead of looking down on them. He did not insist that they sell their houses, but he did call them to open their hearts to the poor. After meeting Jesus, Zaccheus decided to give half his goods to the poor. Jesus is very clear when he says:

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you,
and when they exclude you,
and when they revile you,
and defame you on account
of the Son of Man.
Rejoice in that day and leap for joy
for surely your reward is great in heaven;
for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.
But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.
Woe to you when all speak well of you!
for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.
(Luke 6:20-26)

Jesus did not come to judge or condemn, but to gather into one all the scattered children of God (John 11:52). He came to

break down the walls that separate the rich from the poor, the strong from the weak, the healthy from the sick, so that they might be reconciled to one another and discover that they are all part of one body. He came to heal the wealthy and to lead them to love; he came to bring hope to those who are rejected.

When Jesus walked the roads of Galilee, people who were weak, sick and poor sensed his goodness and compassion. He loved them. He healed the sick and gave strength and hope to each person he met. He even went into places of ill-repute; he was close to those who felt themselves religious outcasts. He spoke to them with kindness, revealing God's goodness and mercy. He wanted to change the way society was organized, not through force or new, rigid laws, but by befriending the powerless and teaching a way of humility and communion between hearts.

The Jewish people were oppressed and humiliated. Under Roman occupation they were living under the yoke of foreign soldiers and the brutal power of the Roman Emperor's representative. Between Jews and Romans there stood a wall of prejudice and hatred.

Jesus did not seek to become a king so that he could create a new, just society in which each person would be properly respected. Rather, he took the downward path of humility in order to become one with the wounded. Paul invited his disciples in Philippi to take the same path:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,

20

being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.
 (Philippians 2:5-8)

Jesus invites his disciples not to seek importance or power, even for the sake of doing good to others, but rather to take the lowest place, to serve others like a slave. "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly," says Mary in her Magnificat (Luke 1:52).

Jesus offers an entirely new vision. God is compassionate; he watches over the poor and calls the rich to enter into relationship with them. He is the kind of God we find, for example, in Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
 to loose the bonds of injustice,
 to undo the thongs of the yoke,
 to let the oppressed go free,
 and to break every yoke?
 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
 and to bring the homeless poor into your house;
 when you see the naked, to cover them,
 and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
 and your healing shall spring up quickly;
 your vindicator shall go before you,
 the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
 you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
 If you remove the yoke from among you,

21

the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom will be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
(Isaiah 58:6-11)

Jesus does not just serve the poor, he becomes one of them. The Word becomes flesh; the All-Powerful comes as a defenceless child who awakens love in our hearts. At the same time, his words, his actions, his whole way of being, disturb and rattle people, especially powerful people. They refuse to listen to him or to accept him: they even seek to kill him. Finally, they give him over to the civil authorities, the Roman leaders. Jesus is condemned to death and dies in total abjection. He is mocked by all. The man of compassion becomes a man in need of compassion, a poor man. Jesus overturns the established order. He urges people not simply to do good to the poor but to discover through relationship with him and with them that God is hidden in the poor. Through his actions in life, and his abject vulnerability in death, he reveals to us that the poor and the weak have the power to heal and free people.