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Arche Kenya Project (Efiatha Home) in Nyahururu

## A spirituality lived in community

### **The community is a body**

**L**Arche's aim is to create communities where people suffering from intellectual disabilities can live together with those called to be their friends. The challenge of our communities is to bring together in unity people who are talented and strong with people who are weak and have been marginalized.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes:

[Jesus] is our peace.

In his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us ... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross,

thus putting to death that hostility through it.  
So he came and proclaimed peace ...

(Ephesians 2:14-17)

Jesus' work is to destroy the barriers, prejudices and fear that separate people with disabilities from "normal" people, so as to unite them in a single body. It is the complete reversal of a hierarchical society in which the powerful, the influential and the privileged are elevated, and the weak and poor are put down. Those who are weakest form the heart of the body instituted by Jesus, in which competition no longer exists. Here each person has a place; no one is superior to anyone else. Each person is unique and essential.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes this body, which is in fact the church and every Christian community, where every person has a particular role to play.

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member ...  
(1 Corinthians 12:18-24)

We do not know to whom Paul was referring when he spoke of "those members that we think less honourable"—those whom one hides away or, as at the beginning of this same letter, "the foolish, the feeble, the outcast." But people with intellectual disabilities perfectly fulfill his criteria. So often through the ages, they have been hidden away. Paul says that they are necessary to the body, and that they must be treated with special honour. They are important; they have a role to play in our communities and in the church. L'Arche aims to be a body where the weak and the strong are united.

Many types of communities direct their main activities outside the community. Their members teach, care for the sick, campaign, announce the good news. In monasteries, life is centered on prayer and liturgy. At L'Arche, however, the main emphasis is on welcoming people, caring for them, working and living in community with people suffering from intellectual disabilities who form part of the community. This kind of life, lived in communion with people who are weak, is the source of healing and liberation for assistants as much as for those with disabilities.

Through this daily life with those who are weak, Jesus enables us to participate in the communion that he enjoys with the Father. As we share the same table and become friends with people suffering from intellectual disabilities, people who have suffered marginalization, we achieve unity, reconciliation and peace. We grow in divine tenderness. We discover the forgiveness of Jesus and become a symbol of the wedding feast of heaven.

This is why unity is all-important in a L'Arche community. The spirituality of L'Arche echoes Paul's words to the community at Philippi. Each person is called to be an instrument of unity, without which everything collapses:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.  
(Philippians 2:1-4)

The ideal community, in which there is no rivalry and each one finds his or her place, is not something that can be achieved once and for all. It requires a daily struggle. Difficulties in relationships, jealousies, anger and fear all spring up very quickly in community life. One starts to ignore certain people. People can be living together in a house and yet pass one another like ships in the night.

It is not easy to enter into community life when competitiveness has been bred into us, when we have grown up to try to be the best, to get increasingly good results, to prove ourselves and try to be admired. Often people develop this need to shine and be admired as a way of soothing anguish and lack of self-esteem. The urge to shine runs contrary to the spirit of cooperation and communion that is at the heart of community life. Entering into this way of life involves real grief. No one is asked to give up his or her whole life or personal opinions, but everyone must be ready to listen to others, seek unity and not impose their way of looking at things. Community living implies cooperating with others and sharing decision-making with them. This means spending time in meetings that can seem long and demanding. Some might feel that it would be much easier and more efficient for house leaders

to make decisions by themselves. If they did, they would fail to respect others, especially the humblest. Living in community implies trying to help each person be responsible for him or herself. Meetings allow all persons to express themselves and listen to others. They offer opportunities for unity to develop.

Community living and the search for unity demand a constant effort to be attentive to and respectful of others, especially those whom we find less agreeable. They demand an effort to accept differences and to live for forgiveness daily.

This search for unity is rendered more difficult in L'Arche because of the extreme diversity of all its members. A L'Arche community is a people on a journey. Among these people are those with intellectual disabilities and those who chose to come and be with them; those who are celibate and those who are undecided about celibacy; those who are married; those who live in the homes and those who have other roles in the community, in the workshops or administration; those given to adoration who live in the community house of prayer; board members; and friends who come to help. Moreover, there are all the differences of age, education, culture, gifts and capacities; people are limited or disabled in different ways; people are at different stages in their faith journey. Finally, there are all those differences that stem from the length of time people have been in the community.

Unity in all this diversity comes through those with intellectual disabilities. They are at the heart of the community. Through their thirst to be loved and accepted, through the depth of their trust flowing from their weakness, they bring people to oneness. They give our lives and our communities their fundamental meaning. This is accomplished through faith and trust in God, and through the love that flows from the heart of the Trinity.

This flow of love opens the heart of each one, giving them new strength to overcome selfishness and to work for unity, peace and reconciliation.

Community life gives a sense of belonging. We are all part of the same body; we need each other. This sense of belonging gives security; if we are sick, we know we can count on others. However, we must remember that each person is called to grow, to develop in his or her capacities, and to become more responsible. Community is not a static reality. Since each person is called to change and develop, which sometimes may mean to become weaker, community itself is a developing reality. The sense of belonging and the need for security are the basis of the growth of each person to inner freedom. If we want greater freedom, we may reject belonging and can then fall into anguish. Conversely, too much "belonging" can stifle inner freedom. Life in community implies harmony between belonging and personal freedom.

### Love through small things

After spending time at L'Arche, many assistants agree that living a simple life with people with intellectual disabilities has transformed them. Frequently, they have grown up in a world of conflict and competition in which they had to put on masks and be tough. At L'Arche, they learn to drop their defenses, to be vulnerable and to be themselves. Although it is demanding, living a practical life close to other people seems to make them happy. Sometimes, the same assistants who say that L'Arche has transformed them also say that they cannot stay. I remember an assistant who had been at L'Arche for two years telling me that, although he had never been so happy in his life, he had to leave. That many people find themselves in this position shows that community life, though beautiful, involves struggle and grief.

The media—especially television—breed a longing for novelty, powerful experiences, and grand gestures. To remain faithful to small things without having first made one's fortune seems regressive.

So many marriages break down these days. Could this be because people are afraid of the boredom of the daily routine? They are often stressed out by the hurried, distracting elements that make up their lives—commuting, superficial friendships, the constant blare of the television—and by their inability to cope with their anguish and the difficulties they face in relationships. They no longer know how to find joy in small things. A daily routine consisting of meals, washing, gardening and simple friendships seems too dull and unproductive. If one is going to stay at L'Arche and live this kind of life, not just for a few months or years but for a whole lifetime, one needs to discover a spirituality of love through small things.

The community life we live at L'Arche with people who are weak is rooted in simple, material things: cooking meals, spending time together at table, washing the dishes, doing the laundry and the housework, helping meetings to go smoothly, organizing the house so that it is a happy, welcoming place: thousands of little things that all take time. It also means looking after the needs of the weaker people: giving them baths, cutting their nails, helping them buy clothes. In the gardens or the workshops, it means doing the best one can with the resources available.

These little things can often be seen as insignificant and valueless. However, all these small gestures can become gestures of love that help create a warm atmosphere in which the communion of hearts can grow. In this way, community life becomes a school of love.

In community life, it is obviously necessary to have people who are in charge, people with vision who help keep the community unified. However, the less conspicuous people also play an essential role: they love tenderly, take time to live with people, give them baths, prepare their meals. Because they live so close to the people with disabilities, they are instruments of love.

L'Arche communities try to be loving, happy places. There is a great temptation to allow ourselves to be seduced by big things, riches, success, power, possessions and privileges. If we devoted all our energies to these things, it would be easy to forget about human beings, about the need to create places of love and real friendship.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds his disciples that, without love, the search for great things leads nowhere.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:1-7)

## Recovering hope

Our societies are becoming increasingly fragmented. The natural centres of friendship and community, such as parishes and villages, are breaking up. People go their own ways, pursuing their own particular projects and pastimes. People have their friends, and their friendships can quickly become exclusive. The poor are excluded from them.

Is it not vital today to create alternative ways of living, places of unity, where people really communicate with and open up to one another, and together find out what their lives are really all about? Too many people have lost confidence, not only in themselves, but in society and the human race. Wars, reports of corruption, greed and inequality all reinforce the idea that human beings are evil, that we live in a jungle where people must fight for themselves and where generosity and love are rarely found. To many people, faithfulness in marriage seems impossible. The divorce rate shows this. Some forms of feminism seem to confirm that men are intrinsically bad, and that no communion is possible between men and women.

We all need to recover trust and hope: to rediscover the fundamental beauty of the human heart and its capacity for love. L'Arche communities try to bear witness to the fact that love is possible, that, as individuals and as a society, we are not condemned to selfishness. Like all Christian communities, L'Arche communities want to witness to a belief in love, a belief that human beings can put aside their egoism and open themselves to others. This is their mission in society. Just as a lamp must not be hidden under a bushel, but must shine for everyone in a house (Matthew 5), so our communities must enable others to find hope and to live lives of love, sharing and rejoicing in

the gift of life. This is why all true communities are called to be integrated into their neighbourhoods and open to those living around them, particularly to the needy and the suffering. This simple daily way of life in which we are really united to others has universal significance. It helps us to discover that the smallest thing we do for a brother or sister can in some way affect the world. It can be a path to peace.

### Descending into humility

Jesus took the downward path of humility. It led him to meet people who were poor and isolated, and to enter into communion with them. Jesus did not seek to free people through changing the law, but through helping them to grow in trust and faith. If we trust Jesus, and try to live in communion with him, he gradually frees us from the fear and selfishness that are inside us governing our lives.

Jesus calls his disciples to follow him on the downward path. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). He asks us to take the lowest place and become humble, not to imprison us in negative self-images, or make us victims, incapable of responsibility towards our brothers and sisters, but to follow him so we might find him in the poorest of our brothers and sisters—the ones who are always in the lowest place. He invites us to eat with them and open our hearts to live a covenant with them. This is why Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit, who changes our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. He gives us a new power that reveals itself in our weakness: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Jesus knows that we have a tendency to try to assume power and control others. In each of us there is a little latent dictator.

Some parents want to completely control their children. Religious dictators oppress others in the name of truth and religion. Those in power often rejected the prophets of the Old Testament. The religious leaders killed Jesus. Jesus had strong words for those who used religion to achieve personal glory and who oppressed the poor without listening to them. There is always a danger that people who are generous will become self-satisfied. There is a danger that they will become involved with weaker people simply in order to have power over them. There is a danger that they will desire admiration for their good deeds. Jesus spoke of this danger in one of his parables:

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)

Imagine the fury of the religious leaders when they heard this parable. They thought that Jesus was trying to undermine their authority, whereas all he wanted was to call each person to recognize his or her own poverty.

The evening before he died, during the paschal meal, his last supper, Jesus took off his robe, and, in the tunic of a slave, began to wash the feet of his apostles. They were astonished, shocked.

Peter protested. He could not bear the idea of Jesus, the master, kneeling before him and washing his feet like a slave. After he had put his robe back on, Jesus explained what he had been doing. He had set an example so that they in turn should wash the feet of others: "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13:17).

Jesus knew the dangers that awaited his disciples: religious pride and the desire for spiritual power. There was a risk that they would compete with one another in seeking power. The unity between the disciples would then be wounded. If their unity broke down, it would be hard for people to believe in the truth of their message. On the contrary, Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). He prayed that his disciples might be one so that the world might believe in his message of love.

Jesus called his disciples to humility and littleness. He called them to become like small children, not to seek to prove that they were in the right and that others were wrong. He called them to be with the poor, those without a voice, and through them to live in communion with him, just as he lived in communion with the Father. Pride destroys community; humility helps to build it up. Humility means seeing in the beauty of others the gift of God; it means recognizing the darkness in ourselves, the self-satisfaction behind our good deeds, our longing to take first place. It means recognizing that we need Jesus to free us from this pride that is inside all of us.

Humility means accepting our place in the body of a community and respecting the place of others. It means obeying others and serving them. Humility means recognizing the importance of doing small things for the community. Humility also

means having the courage of one's convictions and being fully responsible so that the community can be more loving and true.

By being in communion with Jesus, who is gentle and humble of heart, we can be freed of our tendencies to judge and condemn others. We live humbly with the humble and build with them places of peace and love, places of hope in a wounded world.

Recently, an assistant who has been at L'Arche a long time said to me, "I am lucky to be able to just be in my house. If I were in charge it would not be like this, but as it is, I can be with people, give them their baths, play with them. I have time to pray; I feel completely relaxed." This is what the downward path means. The way of L'Arche is a way of humility.

### **Community life: a source of life**

Living in community involves much grief. It is a hard and demanding life, but it also brings deep joy and a new freedom. Community life is a source of nourishment.

Entering into community life means giving up a particular kind of independence and personal success. It means allowing the barriers with which we protect ourselves to fall so we can allow that which is most fundamental in us to emerge: the vulnerability of our hearts, and our ability to live in communion. As this happens, each person discovers that they are loved for what they are, with all their gifts and weaknesses. Each can become fully themselves, without a mask, and discover gradually an inner unity. When we have found our place, when we belong to a family, we discover a new security that brings with it the grace of inner peace. We discover our fruitfulness.

In community we learn to welcome differences and to live forgiveness. We live the joy of witnessing to love and compassion.

At L'Arche, the assistants have much to endure. They are sometimes tired; there are tensions. There are also moments of relaxation and celebration. I had never laughed so much before I came to L'Arche. There is the joy of being with very simple people who communicate through humour and peace. There is the joy of being with brothers and sisters who love one another and call one another to fidelity. There is the joy of knowing that we are loved by God in this simple daily life.