



Dore Ann Bartram and Cheryl Zinyk baking, L'Arche Toronto, Canada

© L'Arche communities

4

Trusting in God who walks with us

The work of God

When I welcomed Raphaël and Philippe, I had no particular plan or precise ideas. I knew nothing about people with intellectual disabilities, but I had been touched by them in the asylums and institutions I had visited. I wanted, for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, to help them find a more human and Christian life. I had no idea of how a L'Arche community should be organized. As the days went by, I began to understand Raphaël's and Philippe's needs and discover what community really meant. I think it would be difficult to find a founder less capable than I was. I tried to live each day as it came. Father Thomas was always there to advise and encourage me. I was naive, but determined. I wanted to work for Jesus and for his kingdom. I tried to be attentive to the way in which Providence was guiding me precisely because I did not really know what I was being asked to do!

I am more and more convinced that God has supported and guided L'Arche over the years to reveal to society and the church the place and value of people with intellectual disabilities—particularly at this point in history; when their lives are threatened because people are asking whether they should be alive at all.

When I look at the seed that was planted in the ground on August 4, 1964, and the tree it has since become, with L'Arche communities all over the world; when I see the beauty and blessedness of so many of the people suffering from disabilities and of so many of the assistants who have come to share their lives with them, I know that this is a work of God that has grown and developed in spite of me and with me. My role was to welcome events as they came and let them guide me. Later I discovered that my ignorance and poverty at the beginning of L'Arche helped me be more attentive to God, and let him guide me from day to day. Had I had a clear plan, I might have been less ready to welcome God's plan. Thus it is that today we have communities that are ecumenical, others that are interfaith and others aligned with a particular church.

As I look back over these nearly fifty years of L'Arche, I am amazed how God has led us. We have wonderful leaders nurturing and developing the vision of L'Arche, reflecting and renewing our structures at all levels, facing with wisdom the new challenges presented by government regulations.

The necessity of insecurity

At the start, all God's works bring with them this insecurity and poverty that allow us to be more genuinely open to God's action. Then, through the action of Providence, people and money begin to arrive. When people, money and structures are plentiful, the community is in danger. It is easy for it to think that

it has less need of God, and to consider itself self-sufficient. Life becomes comfortable, and enthusiasm wanes. Those who get in the way are excluded. People are less present to others; they think more about themselves.

This was the history of the people of Israel. Abraham trusted. He left his homeland and set out into the unknown. Gradually a people grew up, with its own laws and structures and king. The people acquired a certain fame, riches, knowledge. The temptation grew for the people of Israel to want to be big and strong like the surrounding peoples, who were self-sufficient. Depending on God became too insecure; they felt they needed riches and an army to defend themselves and be secure.

At L'Arche, we will avoid this movement from insecurity to security and then to decadence only if we remain alert to three things: fidelity to those with disabilities who cry out and disturb, the quality of community life, and trust in Providence. It is not enough to have one founder of L'Arche or of any other community. Each leader is called to refound the community. The people of Israel had kings and prophets. We need people to look after things, and to look after them well. We also need prophets who remind us of the community's meaning and vocation today and communicate a new flame and a new ardour to ensure that God's plan is fulfilled. God has looked after us, inspiring excellent assistants to be committed to our communities and giving us excellent leaders.

If we are faithful to the needs of the weak and to community life, we will remain open to the prophetic inspiration of the Spirit. People with intellectual disabilities know how to disturb us. They disturb us all the more when they sense a lack of real attention and truth. Lack of money and assistants keeps us insecure

and forces us to remain open to others and to God. Crises in the community—those of the people with disabilities but also those of assistants: illnesses, accidents, conflicts—demand of us not only human wisdom and the development of appropriate structures, but also constant recourse to God's help. A crisis is an unexpected poverty that calls us to rediscover what is really essential, to rediscover trust and love.

Dependence on God can bring with it weariness and fear. In every community, and in every individual, there are tendencies to seek security, possessions and an organization that will foresee and control all. It is possible to have a false abandonment to Providence in which one seeks merely to cover up one's shortcomings, human failings and lack of reflection through prayer and abandonment to God.

L'Arche needs human wisdom and competence. We need to take care of our communities competently; we need good doctors and psychologists. We need to know how to collaborate with government authorities. However, the purpose of all these things is to enable us to better respond to the cry of those who are in need, to allow ourselves to be disturbed by them, and to announce again and again the good news of love.

Remaining open

The nature of a community's dependence on God is determined by whether it is young and small, or larger and more structured. Young and small communities are frequently prophetic in their poverty and spiritual needs. Big communities need to turn to God in order to remain prophetic, to continue to grow in love and to meet new challenges in responding to the cry of those who are vulnerable. They have to be careful not to become overwhelmed by administrative details.

Recently, a French bishop confessed to me how difficult it was to start up new things in his diocese. The priests and other church officials were already rather overworked, and money was always short. The reaction of his diocesan council was always: "How can we start new initiatives when we have neither the people nor the resources?" I can understand this reaction. Prudence urges us to strengthen the things we already have. The bishop added: "It seems to me that we have to be attentive to the Holy Spirit, and to find new resources and new vocations through new initiatives."

We need to dare to take the lead, be discerning and start new things. The history of the church is a history of constant renewal. New families grow up; new kinds of spirituality appear. This renewal challenges the existing order. New ideas, new communities and new approaches always provoke resistance. How can we make sure that we are not so caught up in things that already exist that we allow no space for anything new? Maybe in the future we will create smaller communities that are less dependent on state control and financing. Our vocation is to reveal the beauty and value of every person, particularly the weakest and most vulnerable.

The gospel reveals the absolute opposition between God and mammon. In a community based on faith, either one accepts a certain poverty and insecurity to enable God to work, or one refuses this dependence, littleness and poverty, and seeks the means to control things completely: that is mammon.

Isaiah says that openness and trust in God who leads us are essential in any community that wants to welcome the poor:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you;
and through the rivers,
they shall not overwhelm you.
When you walk through fire
you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour ...
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you ...
Do not fear, for I am with you.
(Isaiah 43:1-5)

Jesus calls us to live in complete trust and to allow God to lead us:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! ... If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying ... your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.
“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”
(Luke 12:22-24; 27-32)

We need to allow ourselves to be led by God, who walks with us on our journey. Some aspects of L’Arche’s organization seem impossible: living with people who are weak and poor, allowing ourselves to be disturbed by them, creating communities with them. What folly! We are defying our fundamental selfishness! Love is impossible! But God manifests his glory in making the impossible possible. Through the impossible, God reveals divine power and enables us to become witnesses of the resurrection, of the Father’s love for the small and weak.

Today, many L’Arche communities have the money they need to run smoothly. This money comes partly from gifts. Providence provides. Yet L’Arche is short of assistants. Sometimes, the assistants we have are stretched to their limits. There is a great temptation to hire assistants who are attracted by the idea of a salary rather than by a real desire to live the spirituality of L’Arche. At the beginning, I thought we were short of assistants because L’Arche was a young, little-known organization. Now I believe that the shortage of assistants is an essential part of our life. It worries and wearies us, but it forces us to be open and constantly welcoming. A community that welcomes poor people will always be poor. We would really love to have plenty of perfect assistants. We would love to be in a position of security. But it will never be like that. Our weakness is like that of the people of Israel: to live and survive, we need not only love and faith, but also a kind of poverty that keeps us dependent on God. Only by being like children, dependent on the Father’s love, waiting for him to give us all we need, will we be able to carry on with our journey. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

A spirituality rooted in the church

The place of l'Arche in the people of God

When the Lord called Moses on Mount Horeb, he said to him:

“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt;

I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters.

Indeed, I know their sufferings,

and I have come down to deliver them

from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land

to a good and broad land,

a land flowing with milk and honey ...

So come, I will send you to Pharaoh

to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

(Exodus 3:7-10)



© Guenda Malvezzi

Bishop Gérard Daucourt with Raffaella, Cristina and Samuele
from l'Arche in Bologna, Italy

The Bible shows us how much God cares for people. It allows us to know the love of God revealed in Jesus, the Word made flesh.

All biblical history—from the time of Genesis, through Abraham, Moses and all the prophets until the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles and the beginnings of the church—reveals a God who watches over humanity and longs to lead us to inner freedom and peace. Biblical history is also the history of a people who fear God, who allow themselves to be seduced by riches and pride, who turn away from the love and power God wants to show them in order that they can be transformed and become instruments of peace and love.

We are all loved by God, but the gospel shows us that the poor, the weak and the marginalized have a special place in God's heart. Just as God called Moses to free the people from slavery, so God calls and sends assistants to L'Arche to welcome those who are oppressed and suffering rejection because of their intellectual disabilities. God opens the hearts of assistants to the cry and to the anguish of these fragile people. The mystery is that these people, with all their fragility and weakness, transform the assistants, evangelize them and call them into the heart of the gospel and into the heart of God.

Jesus, the new Moses, came to lead his people towards the Father by showing them the path of love and forgiveness. He came to give his disciples the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, to enable them to leave their prisons of pride and selfishness and open their hearts to universal love. To receive this gift of love and this new power of the Holy Spirit, we need trust. This is what faith means: trusting in the promises Jesus made to his church.

Since the beginning of the church, the Holy Spirit has guided God's people. Throughout the ages, the good news has been announced to the poor; a new life has grown in their hearts. There have also been struggles to extinguish the good news and to turn the people of God away from the truth that disturbs the powerful. Those who are weak have often been pushed aside.

The spirituality of L'Arche is rooted in the people of God, the body of Christ. Like all Christians, we are called to live in hope. Like all Christ's disciples, we are called to receive God's gifts and to take part in remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus in the eucharist. We are called to live from the word of God, the body of Christ, called to live in communion with Jesus just as he lives in communion with his Father.

The spirituality of L'Arche is one way of travelling towards God, of living the beatitudes and the gospel of Jesus. To live this spirituality fully, we need to be united with the body of Christ, the church, and with her pastors. We need to work with them so that the whole body of Christ can share in the gift we have received, and so that we can receive other gifts. The body needs to be united and to rejoice in the gifts God manifests, at the same time as it humbly recognizes its weaknesses, and neither judges nor criticizes.

L'Arche should not be closed in on itself. It should be a part of the whole church, and this church is called not to be a fortress but a fountain that gives life. The presence of priests and ministers in our communities is a sign of this. How easy it is in our communities to forget the promises of Jesus! It is easy to be so caught up in the daily routine that one forgets that people with disabilities are a sign of God's presence. It is easy to forget what is most essential: the communion, the covenant we have been

given in Jesus. Our possessions and our bodies, instead of being instruments of grace and communion with Jesus, take up all our attention. We rely on our own power or become caught up in our own angers and depressions, rather than relying on Jesus. Rather than building a community founded on the weak, a sign of the love of God, we create a little institution in search of security and recognition. The work of God can very easily be choked, the signs of God extinguished. To bear witness to the gospel, L'Arche needs to drink from the source of life flowing from the church.

Our communities should play their part in the neighbourhoods in which they are situated, being open to those living around them and to friends. They should be integrated into their parishes and their local churches. The parishes are living cells of the body that is the church. We need to work hard so that they become beautiful, alive, living fully the riches within them. We need to take our places in local churches, to be open and, through our lives together, bear witness to the fact that love is possible and that a person who suffers from an intellectual disability has a gift to offer others. We need to receive with wonder the gifts of others, and be in communion with different religious authorities.

Christians divided and yet in communion

L'Arche is a Christian community, but many people who come to live with us are not particularly open to the Christian faith. While some are people with faith and a love of liturgy, others are not attracted by regular religious practice. When it comes to prayer and communion with God, each person is called to find his or her own way. All, at whatever stage they are on their journey, are encouraged to open themselves to others by living a life of fraternity, sharing, welcome, generosity and forgiveness. Diversity is a treasure. The important thing is that we should

create a kind of life in which all persons, at their own pace, can grow in the love of God and interior peace.

In 1969, a L'Arche community was founded in Canada by an Anglican couple, Steve and Ann Newroth. In 1970, a community that welcomed people from both Hindu and Christian faiths was founded in India, in Bangalore, by Gabrielle Einsle. Very early in its life, L'Arche developed an interdenominational and interfaith dimension. We had welcomed people with intellectual disabilities not because they belonged to a particular religion, but because they were suffering rejection. This led us down a road of ecumenism and interfaith sharing. Intrinsic to the spirituality of L'Arche is a love that respects others, whatever they are like, with their strengths and their beliefs. This means helping people grow in acceptance of themselves and their own history, and in the love of God and of others. Since L'Arche does not want to set itself apart from the rest of society, all persons, according to their desires and potential, need to be rooted in their own church or religious tradition.

In trying to be attentive to the human and spiritual needs of each of its members, L'Arche has been increasingly drawn into God's plan for unity: the unity of all human beings and of all Christians. Jesus' great longing is that all should be one, as he and the Father are one. Divisions, which lead to oppression, hatred and wars, wound the heart of God. People suffering from disabilities show us the way to unity through welcome, reconciliation and forgiveness.

When L'Arche started up in Muslim or Hindu areas, I realized that the tears and sufferings of a mother faced with a severely disabled child are the same, whatever her religion. We share a common humanity. We are all God's people. We all have vulnerable hearts, capable both of loving and of being loved. We can all

grow in love and gradually free ourselves from the prisons that enclose us in ourselves.

This vocation to unity is demanding. It demands a certain maturity of heart to be able to welcome and respect others in their particular journey of faith, and to discover that, beneath our differences, much unites us. This is possible only if we are firmly anchored in the love of God and meet each one's heart with respect and love. It implies also that our spirituality be well anchored in good theology. We need to understand what God is calling us to be and to live.

Growing in love

The spirituality of L'Arche is both profoundly human and profoundly divine. It is like a seed planted by God in the soil of our beings. The soil needs to be tended; the seed needs to be watered and fed. If the soil is too hard, the seed will not be able to develop. We have been led into the heart of what it means to be human. To be human is to be spiritual: to be human is to be liberated, little by little, from fears that risk paralyzing us. To be human is to be loved and to love, and to open up to those who are different. This road to openness and liberation is inspired by spirituality. Spirituality inspires and leads us to the total maturity of our humanity but it can also lead us into a greater communion with God in Jesus.

Life at L'Arche is demanding. It is hard enough leaving one's family, job and the freedom to do what one likes. It is harder still to remain faithful through the years. Like all Christian life, it is a continual growth in love for which we need a gift of God. It demands that we allow ourselves to be constantly pruned. Over the years, each of us has developed defence mechanisms and prejudices through which we defend ourselves from others

and from suffering. In the deepest parts of our beings, each of us has hidden fears that, consciously or sub-consciously, govern the way we think and behave. Each of us has barriers that stand in the way of our loving some people, and lead us to form bonds with others. God's work is to prune us and dismantle our defence mechanisms so that our hearts can be open to the Holy Spirit and to divine love. God's work is to progressively penetrate our unconscious world, our inner world of guilt, confusion and anguish, to free us, heal us and lead us to wholeness.

It takes a long time to discover unity in ourselves so that we can be a source of unity for others; to welcome our wounds so that we can welcome those of others. It takes a long time to drop our masks and accept ourselves as we are with all our limitations, so that we can accept others. To carry on walking down this road, we need to be attentive to God's call and Jesus' promises, and to make choices that bring with them the acceptance of loss.

Few of the people suffering from disabilities chose to be at L'Arche. For most of them, there was no alternative. Little by little they have come to accept community life which, we hope, answers their deepest needs. After a time, some of them, like Michel, choose L'Arche for themselves. "I could now call myself 'Michel Arche,'" Michel said one day, "because L'Arche has given me life."

Some assistants come to L'Arche in response to a call from God to live a covenant with people with disabilities. Others come for shorter or longer periods of time to find meaning in their lives. Gradually, they discover the world of tenderness and faith in the gospel; their hearts are touched. Transformed, they leave L'Arche to carry on their journey elsewhere. Those whose vocation it is to live at L'Arche discover in the people with disabilities a source of life, a treasure of tenderness. Jesus compares

the kingdom of heaven to a treasure hidden in a field. The person who finds this treasure sells all that he or she has to buy the field.

If we are to grow in love and remain faithful to Jesus hidden in the poor, and faithful to this vocation to unity, we need a certain discipline. Like athletes who want to win, we need to find the right way to look after ourselves. We cannot remain faithful unless we are nourished spiritually and intellectually; we need the strength of the Holy Spirit, we need the Eucharist, we need to share and help each other in community, but above all we need that nourishment that comes from people who are vulnerable and loving. We need to benefit from the help that spiritual masters through the ages have offered to lead us towards God. There are many pitfalls on the way. We need wise accompaniment.

Some assistants feel themselves called to live their vocation with a life companion, and to start a family. Without living with people suffering from disabilities, they are fully members of the community. Their union as a couple is strengthened and nourished by their union with the poor in the community.

Other assistants feel called to live a celibate life in L'Arche, to be thus united with Jesus and with people suffering from disabilities who will never be able to marry. They share their life with them and eat at the same table. By renouncing marriage, their union with Jesus and their desire to serve him at L'Arche in the way of the gospel grows through their relationship with people who are weak. Their celibacy is full of love for people. Other assistants do not feel called to be celibate; they find being single very hard. Through this, they are in solidarity with some of the disabled people who also find a celibate life hard.

Each assistant has his or her own path. Each is sustained by the presence of people with disabilities and by the union that binds them together. Love, trust and the cry of the poor are the anchors that keep each person on the road of love.

Conclusion

Arche communities reveal the paradox presented by weakness and poverty. That which we reject and push aside can become a means of grace, unity, freedom and peace.

Human beings are attracted by success, wealth, power and the limelight, by all that is shiny and big. They reject things that are ugly and poor. By climbing up the social ladder, they become lonelier and lonelier, and increasingly need to defend, hide and protect themselves. They are frightened, and the fear of others often results from a lack of confidence in themselves. They lose a sense of human solidarity, and cut themselves off from the poor. This rejection reveals the shadows, the prejudices and the great poverty of their hearts. But if they can begin to forge links with those who are rejected, they will set out on the road towards freedom.

The Word was made flesh. He hid the glory of his divinity and became one of us. He shared with us his needs, particularly his need for love, and he shared his sufferings. He became poor. He took the downward path and emptied himself to show us a way of communion and love.

At L'Arche we wish to follow Jesus on this path of littleness, humility and trust. We believe that this path is a path of liberation and joy. The spirituality of L'Arche is a way of love and friendship with people who are poor and weak. We are called, in Jesus' name, to live with them a community life that is humble and poor. In eating with them, we discover the beatitude promised by Jesus: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed" (Luke 14:13).

In the church, each person is called to live a certain aspect of the life of Jesus. Some, like the apostles, are called to announce the good news throughout the world, others to heal the sick, others to teach, others to shepherd the flock of God. Our role at L'Arche is to live, like Jesus of Nazareth, a simple and poor life open to neighbours and to those who suffer. Jesus lived this hidden life for twenty-eight years. He lived humbly with humble people, ate at the same table as the poor, worked with his hands. With him in this simple life of Nazareth were Mary and Joseph.

During the public life of Jesus, Mary was scarcely ever present. The apostles surrounded Jesus. However, they were not present with him in Nazareth nor at the cross. There, it was Mary who was close to Jesus. She is the loving, silent, faithful woman who lives in communion and tenderness with Jesus. At L'Arche, we are called to participate in this Nazareth life: to be signs of love in a broken and suffering world. We are also called to participate in the mystery of Mary's compassion for the suffering and rejected Jesus, through being close to people who are crucified, anguished and rejected, people who will never be healed.

Like the Hebrew people travelling through the desert, L'Arche is a people on a journey. We must continue to set out,

to be disturbed and astonished. After forty-seven years, we have discovered certain aspects of the gospel that had been hidden to us. Our spirituality, our covenant with the poor, is a mystery that we must never cease to contemplate. We must continually set off again, letting ourselves be disturbed by insecurity and led into a new wonderment.

As we continue on our road, we will discover and live other aspects of this mystery, the mystery of Jesus' incarnation, and of the communion we live with him through his hidden presence in the poor.