New Blackfriars

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Comment: Jean Vanier in memoriam

Jean Vanier died on 7 May, aged 90. In the obituaries in the British press he was hailed as a great humanitarian. In the last of his thirty books, A Cry is Heard published in September 2018, he declared 'My desire in growing old is to live what I have always proclaimed: that God is at the heart of weakness. I would like in my old age, with the possible loss of memory, mobility and even speech, to keep proclaiming his presence'. He could not have been more Catholic, afflicted in the end by discovering the sexually abusive behaviour of his old friend and mentor, as well as being out ahead in showing how we may live with intellectually disabled people.

Born in Geneva in 1928, Jean Vanier was one of five children of devout parents from Quebec, his father a diplomat, who would (in 1959) become Governor-General of Canada. Jean was always an original. In 1942, aged 13, he crossed the U-boat patrolled Atlantic, unaccompanied, to enter the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth. After eight years in the Navy, he went to L'Eau Vive, near Paris, an innovative centre for lay students of Catholic theology, run by Fr Thomas Philippe O.P., who was suddenly removed in 1954 in the purge of the Paris Dominican elite, by the Master of the Order, to demonstrate to the French bishops and the authorities in the Vatican that he controlled them still, whatever their suspect activities (ecumenism, collaboration with the worker-priest movement etc.).

Many years later, in 2015, Vanier was profoundly shaken when women testified that Fr Philippe molested them in the context of spiritual direction (he died in 1993).

Deciding against going on to ordination, Vanier sampled monastic life, but then completed a Ph.D. thesis on Aristotle's ethics, and took up a post teaching ethics at the University of Toronto, where he stayed until April 1964.

Meanwhile Fr Philippe had become chaplain in Trosly-Breuil, a small town in Picardy, at a home for adults with intellectual disabilities. On visiting him, Vanier felt as drawn to these adults as they were to him: this, at a time when such people were shut away for life in lunatic asylums or mental hospitals. His idea, radical in the 1960s, was for a small family community, 'living with' the disabled and not just 'doing good' to them. With the help of friends, he bought a dilapidated house in Trosly-Breuil, thus founding L'Arche, which, like the Ark from which it took its name, was dedicated to welcoming all manner of fragile beings—a place where 'people with a disability

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yearn for a real encounter', as he put it in the philosophical jargon of the day.

L'Arche became a movement. Young people in particular, motivated by the Second Vatican Council, were drawn to the idea of living in community with the poor, in the name of faith. Then, one of Mahatma Gandhi's followers invited Vanier to India, resulting in the setting-up of an interfaith L'Arche in Bangalore in 1970. Communities sprang up in Haiti, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Britain and Belgium. Currently, L'Arche has 140 communities in 40 countries.

Famously, as Anglicans will recall, as a guest at the fractious Lambeth Conference of 1998, Vanier silenced the hall when he knelt in front of Archbishop George Carey to wash his feet in a basin. The Archbishop embraced him before washing the feet of his wife, Eileen. The ceremony continued, with hundreds of bishops, spouses, staff, and guests. More recently, in 2017, when invited by Archbishop Welby to mediate at the Primates' Meeting, he instructed the bishops to wash each other's feet—the healing impact of which was enormous, the Archbishop said, declaring himself 'quite unravelled by it'.

The point of L'Arche, as Vanier kept saying, was that it transformed the lives of those without disabilities as much as those with them. Volunteers, he observed, formed by their cultures to be articulate, self confident, and successful, discovered that they created relationships of love and friendship with those at the bottom of the ladder of society, the most vulnerable and weak.

Vanier, who had a heart attack in 2017, continued living in Trosly-Breuil. More than anyone else he changed Catholic perception of how to take care of severely disabled people, in many different countries, while having to discover the dark side of his much respected and well loved co-founder of L'Arche.

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