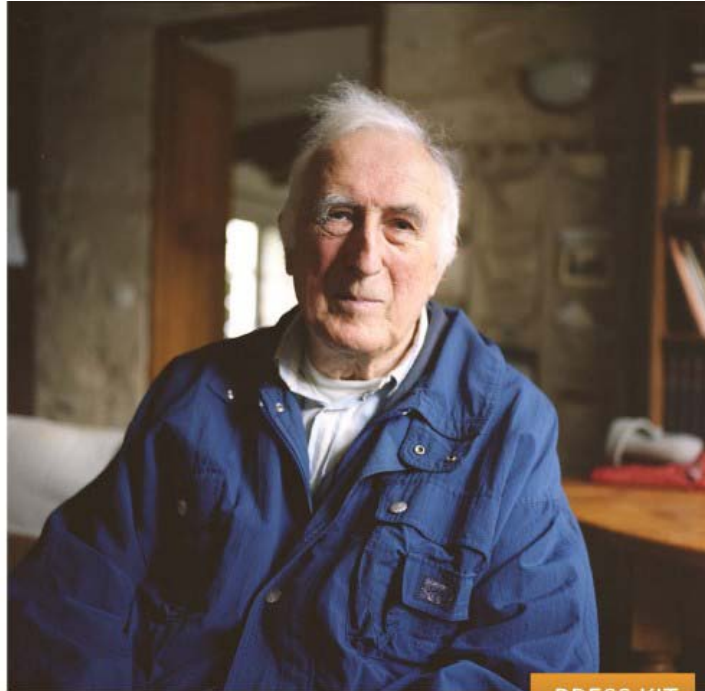


Jean Vanier



THE MAN, HIS MESSAGE, HIS WORK

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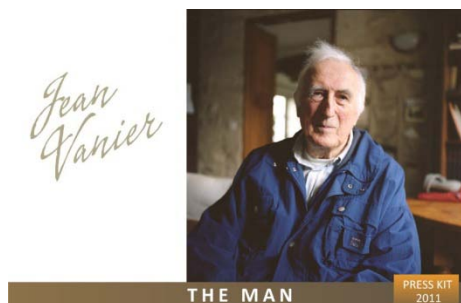
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Jean Vanier

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# Jean Vanier

## Profile

Jean Vanier, Ph.D. is a philosopher, writer, religious and moral leader and the founder of two major international community-based organizations, L'Arche, and Faith & Light, that exist for people with intellectual disabilities. The 135 L'Arche communities in 33 countries and 1,600 Faith & Light communities in 80 countries are living laboratories of human transformation. In and outside of these organizations, he has spent more than four decades as a deeply radical advocate for the poor and the weak in our society.

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While the progressive disability movement speaks mainly about tolerance, rights and normalization, Jean Vanier has shaped a distinct way of thinking that builds on those minimum standards of a civil society while inspiring us to transcend them. He invites us to recognize the profound gifts and lessons that people who have been rejected by society can offer when they are properly supported and included.

Jean Vanier's leadership, writing and practical works cross religious and cultural boundaries. He is a theologian and philosopher who is fully engaged with the ordinariness of everyday life and from whom people from all cultures sense a deep and honest empathy for how hard it is to be, and to do, good in a complicated world. As a practitioner he is a witness to the transforming qualities of love, vulnerability, forgiveness and simplicity: spiritual qualities that are seldom heralded today.

Where modernity calls us to privilege personal mastery, progress and doing big things, Vanier's experience of living with people with profound impairment and his spiritual reflection on this experience, lead him to focus on being with and for others, especially disadvantaged others: to cultivating sincere presence to others' desires, being attentive to the beauty in all of our ordinariness, and being of meaningful service to others. The growth of L'Arche and Faith & Light show how powerful these insights are when executed well.

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## Early Years

Jean Vanier was born to a prominent Canadian family. His father was a highly decorated veteran of World War I, lawyer, diplomat and later Governor General of Canada. Vanier was born in 1928 and received a broad education in English and French first in Canada, and then England and France where his father was posted as a diplomat. Vanier and his family fled Paris just before the Nazi occupation. He spent much of the War at an English naval academy, preparing for a career as a naval officer.



In early 1945, Vanier was visiting Paris where his father was Canadian Ambassador; there he went with his mother to assist concentration camp survivor survivors. The emaciated victims, their faces twisted with fear and anguish, were a profoundly moving encounter with a wounded humanity, an encounter he has never forgotten. Shortly thereafter, at age seventeen, with World War II still raging, he joined the Royal Navy and later transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy.

In 1950, feeling a strong inner spiritual calling to do “something else,” he resigned his naval commission. He trained as a theologian and philosopher, completing his Doctorate on Aristotle. After a short and very successful period teaching at the University of Toronto, Vanier left academia in 1964 to continue to be true to his inner, spiritual quest.

# Brief Chronology

1928 Canadian, born in Geneva; son of the late Governor General of Canada George Vanier and Pauline Vanier. After George Vanier's death in 1967, Madame Vanier moved to the original L'Arche community in Trosly France where she lived until her death in 1991 at 93.

1941 Entered Dartmouth Naval College in England at age 13.

1945 Entered Royal Navy England. Transferred to Royal Canadian Navy in 1948 and appointed to the carrier "Magnificent"

1950 Felt called to leave the Navy and became a student of philosophy and theology in Paris, earning a Doctor of Philosophy degree at the Institut Catholique. His thesis was on Aristotle.

1963 Taught philosophy at University of St. Michael's College, University of Toronto

1964 Founded L'Arche with Fr. Thomas Phillippe in Trosly, France. He rented a small home and welcomed Raphael Simi and Phillip Seux, two men with a developmental disability who had been living in an institution to live with him. Today there are over 135 L'Arche communities in 30 countries, including 27 in Canada. Father Thomas died in 1993.

1968 Gave the first "Faith and Sharing" retreat at Marylake in King, Ontario, bringing together lay people, religious and people with a disability. Since then there have been hundreds of Faith and Sharing retreats given in across North America by various people.

1971 Founded, with Marie Helene Mathieu, Faith and Light: an organization which brings together on a monthly basis people with a developmental disability, their family and friends. Today there are 1800 Faith and Light groups in 80 countries.

1971 Organized and led the first Faith and Light Pilgrimage to Lourdes for 12,000 people, including 4,000 people with a disability. Every ten years since then there has been a major pilgrimage to Lourdes or Rome.

1970's Began traveling extensively throughout the world to give talks, lectures, retreats, and to establish and support L'Arche and Faith and Light communities. This continues to this day, with a special interest in speaking with young people.

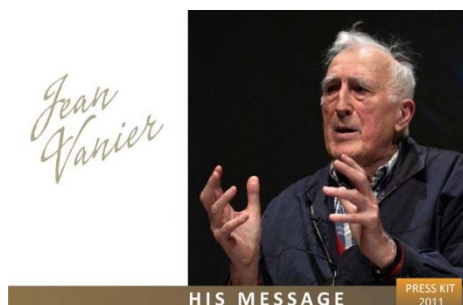
1981 Stepped down from the day to day responsibility for the original L'Arche Community in Trosly, France and for the International Federation of L'Arche, allowing others to take over.

1983 Delivered the major address to the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver

- 1987 At the invitation of the Pope, participated in the Synod of the Laity in Rome
- 1998 Addressed the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches in Geneva
- 1998 Invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury to address the all the Bishops of the Anglican Communion at the Lambeth Conference
- 1998 Delivered the Massey Lecture in Convocation Hall in Toronto. The complete Massey Lectures were subsequently broadcast across Canada on CBC radio. The lecture series entitled "Becoming Human" was also published and was a national best seller for many weeks.
- 2011 A tireless worker, Jean continues to carry a demanding schedule of speaking engagements, book projects and personal encounters, closer to his home in Trosly. He always embraces the opportunity to speak to young people.

## Selected Awards

Kennedy Foundation Award, Washington D.C. USA  
Companion, Order of Canada  
Grand Officer, National Order of Quebec  
La Legion d'Honneur, France  
Prize of the Polish Senate  
Beacon Humanitarian Prize, U.K.  
Humanitarian Award, University of Notre Dame, USA  
Pope Paul VI International Prize, 1997, given by Pope John Paul II  
Rabbi Gunther Plaut Humanitarian Award, Canada  
International Peace Prize, Community of Christ Church, USA  
Gadium et Spes Award, International Knights of Columbus  
Blessed are the Peacemakers Award, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, USA, 2006  
Globe & Mail, 2008 Nation Builder Award, Canada



## Jean Vanier in the media

### The deep value of imperfection

*In a world obsessed with mastery and control, Jean Vanier demonstrates the deep value of imperfection.*

Jean Vanier helps us to see that often all of our striving for mastery and control are as much about wanting to hide our fear of their opposite – that we might be as imperfect and fallible as everyone else. He argues that if we can accept that imperfection is intrinsic to being human, we will be liberated of the weighty burden of always trying to measure up to what someone defines as good or normal. Instead of our effort going to hide our imperfection, we can invest in thinking about how we might encourage greater humility around appreciating each other's imperfections as an important part of the diverse human ecosystem, while never abandoning the effort to grow and change to serve others better. Together with many people with and without impairment, these ideals have come to life in the L'Arche and Faith and Light communities around the world.

He names weakness as a gift and an opportunity; a force that draws people closer & calls out the best in them. We must therefore learn to live with the imperfection in us and others, and not be overcome with anguish or shame for it.

## Between caring for others and caring about them

*Lifelong disability advocate distinguishes between caring for others and caring about them.*

Jean Vanier has spent most of his life living and working in solidarity with people who live with intellectual and developmental impairments in and outside of the L'Arche and Faith & Light communities that he founded. If he has learned one thing in this time, it is that very little lasting personal or social change can result unless the two people in a caring relationship can establish a basis for commonality and mutuality. In today's modern medical system, we often accomplish the 'caring for others' with such procedural efficiency that we neglect to leave time for support workers and medical professionals to 'care about' the people that they are supporting. Vanier's belief is that if you want the effects of the care and support to last, then we must also constellate and inspire the healer within the person receiving care.

As a practitioner, his life work demonstrates the simple yet transforming qualities of love, vulnerability, forgiveness and presence for both parties in a care relationship. The high level of well-being of people with developmental disability in his communities points to the power of their model that love and appreciation of difference are the fundamental basis from which people can then move forward in personal & skills development.

## Overemphasis on Difference blinds us to Our Common Humanity

Although Jean Vanier has spent most of his life among people whose labels suggest that their physical and intellectual capacities fall much short of his, he insists that he has received the education of his lifetime in their company. He believes that most of the time, our instinct is to erect protective barriers between ourselves and those who we perceive as different from us, especially if their difference is devalued or stigmatized. While this is understandable, it has the unintended effect of closing us off from learning to be in front of, and learn from, difference in a way that is fruitful and life-giving. He tells many stories of times when he too felt uncomfortable with the differences of disability but how once he learned to simply stay with someone, he also learned of the deep ways in which his imagination was charged and his mind opened by those same differences. The best way to reduce the harmful exclusion that so many people, disabled and not, experience today, would be to support people through these initially awkward relations and see how their imagination and compassion for diverse ways of being grows as their relation unfolds.

We must accept disability as just one among many ways that humans live with imperfections in our minds and bodies, in order to re-humanize those living with impairment and draw them back into the circle of inclusion.

"It is the human heart and its need for communion that weakens the walls of ideology and prejudice. It leads us from closedness to openness, from illusion of superiority to vulnerability and humility." (B.H: 63)

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## Legislating compassion does not work

*Rights are not enough says Vanier: Legislating compassion does not work*

Lifelong disability advocate's insights become more salient as the years go by. During the heady period of deinstitutionalization and normalization for people with intellectual disability, Jean Vanier was one of the few people who held that simply transferring people from institutions to community homes would not be enough unless we could also change the public's hearts and minds about the value of these people to our society. Fifty years on, we have seen many changes in the disability field, but it remains the case that in spite of closing institutions and legislating more rights, the general public still feels a deep ambivalence towards disability and in particular intellectual disability. Vanier has experienced the stigma and suffering that are experienced by those with disability first-hand in the communities of L'Arche and Faith & Light that he founded and has lived in for over four decades. In spite of many years of disability rights legislation in Canada, the US and western Europe, there continues to be long waiting lists for these and other communities suggesting that it remains very difficult for people with intellectual disability to live in the wider community on their own. Vanier's insight has always been that you cannot legislate compassion towards a group of people: the important and lasting work has to do with crafting a better representation for the public such that helps them learn how to imagine disability in a new, more positive way.

## A Prism for Compassion

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*Vanier's ideas and Communities like a Prism for Compassion*

Almost without exception, young people who go to spend a few years of their lives in one the many L'Arche or Faith & Light communities formed by Jean Vanier, emerge to tell of how their entire worldview has been transformed through their time there. These communities, which are deeply rooted in the philosophy and spiritual insights of Vanier, seem to act as a kind of prism for those who live or volunteer there; like light transformed and refracted through a prism, people report that their mind is opened, and their imaginations galvanized, through this new perspective on difference, disability, and being a fallible human like everyone else. You could argue that people emerge from these communities as peacemakers of a sort: they have learned about how to not only tolerate but to appreciate difference, how to be present to others' needs even when those are confusing, and how to work with others in a spirit of respect and mutuality, and how to forgive. While most of these people go to L'Arche hoping to give of themselves to make a difference, they often report the surprising but welcome effect that these motives are funneled into a more generative kind of compassion through the prism of Vanier's thoughts in that he helps them to separate charity from justice, and self-interest from service in gentle but clear ways.

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## Selected Invitations and Speaking Engagements



Empire Club of Canada, 1971  
Saida University, Lebanon, 1980  
General Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1983  
Invitation by Pope Shenouda III of the Coptic Orthodox Church, 1983  
Harvard Divinity School, 1988  
Moscow Institute of Philosophy, 1989  
Orthodox Institute of Theology, Bucharest 1992  
Harvard University, Boston: "From Brokenness to Community" 1992  
Word Congress of Ecclesial Movements, Rome 1998 "The Spirituality of l'Arche"  
Address to 800 Anglican Bishops at Lambeth Conference, 1998 "The Call to Holiness"  
Canadian Broadcasting Corporation – Massey Lectures, 1998 "Becoming Human"  
"Journey to Personal and Social Transformation" 2006, Ottawa, with Dr. Balfour Mount  
Templeton Foundation, Humble Approach Initiative Symposium, France, 2007  
Duke Divinity School; "Living Gently in a Violent World", with Stanley Hauerwas, 2008  
Address to the 49th International Eucharistic Congress, Quebec City, Canada, 2008  
Blackfriars Priory, Oxford, "The Long Road to Freedom", January 2011  
Unesco, Paris, public talk "Thirst for Peace", February 2011

# Bibliography

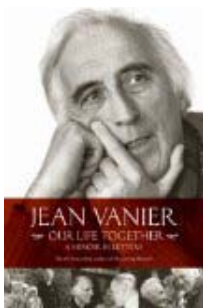
## Some Published Works

### JEAN VANIER: ESSENTIAL WRITINGS (2008)



In this collection of essays, Vanier emphasizes the great discovery of this life: “that we are healed by the poor and the weak, that we are transformed by them if we enter into relationship with them, that the weak and the vulnerable have a gift to give to our world. They call us together, in unity and peace, to build community.” This book is about transformation, where a larger vision for the world, a vision of community life, and a vision of each heart of each person are all linked one to the other.

### OUR LIFE TOGETHER (2007)

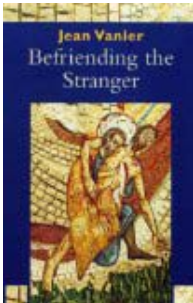


Our Life Together gathers significant letters from four decades of Vanier's correspondence, beginning in 1964, the year he founded the first l'Arche community. In a meditative style, Vanier reflects on world events, his travels, his own journey through his faith and his deep desire for interfaith dialogue and peace. These letters reveal a man of tremendous insight and compassion, a leader whose example can inspire us all to do great things.

Life within a l'Arche community offers a valuable alternative to the world outside, because it has a way of enriching, strengthening and giving direction to the lives of community members. Whether in l'Arche for a short or long time, those witnessing community life first hand feel that their lives have taken a different direction – perhaps a deeper understanding of what it is to be human and experience belonging. In this book, the journey of l'Arche answers an important question about what gives l'Arche its particular quality. The very identity of l'Arche is based on relationship and how people with different gifts live together. The first element in relationship, writes Vanier, is that relationship at l'Arche centres on the body – eating meals together, dressing, bathing, touching – just physically caring for people and being attentive to the body, to medical care, revealing to one another in concrete ways that there is love, home and family. Personally and collectively a 'communion of heart' is lived out, where the body is offered, broken, blest and shared.

L'Arche was founded and grew at a time, in the 1960's, '70's and early '80's, when people were searching for better answers, for liberation, for greater freedom for themselves and for society. People are still searching for answers to conflict, war and discrimination. This is why the vision of l'Arche as a place of growth, communion and peace continues to be so important – its message of hope is timeless, universal and transforming.

### **BEFRIENDING THE STRANGER (2006)**

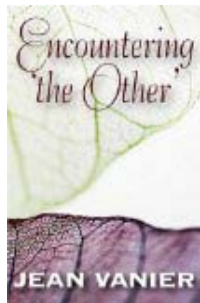


Rather than challenging us to “do good” to the stranger, and have compassion for the needy, Vanier encourages us to enter into friendship. Through his friends at l'Arche, Vanier discovered that to love people is not first of all to *do* things for them but to *reveal* something to them. It is to reveal that they have a value, that they are beautiful and precious. We can only do this by recognizing the weakness, helplessness and need for forgiveness within ourselves. In order to come before our compassionate God, we need to learn how to be weak, and it is the poor who can minister to us and help us to accept our poverty. Thus Vanier says that we must necessarily move beyond the effort to “do good.” Rather we must move to a place of humility where we can allow the poor to do good to us. In this way, Vanier invites us to walk with the needy as friends, as companions because we need them, and to live in our need of them is to know deep communion with God and the world.

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### **ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER (2005)**



The reflections in this book come from talks that Jean Vanier gave at a conference in June 2004. The conference gathered people from many religious backgrounds and nationalities to encounter difference and to explore and celebrate that difference. A fundamental principle of encountering another in peace is a belief that each person is important. Even if you cannot speak, writes Vanier, even if you cannot walk, even if you've been abandoned, you have a gift to give the other. What makes this work particularly meaningful is the communication and mutual trust that Vanier draws attention to: we must discover how to enter into each other's story so that there is dialogue and mutual trust.

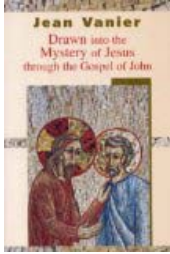
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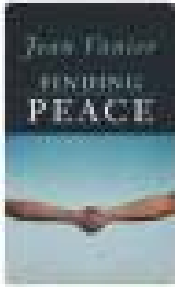
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### **DRAWN INTO THE MYSTERY OF JESUS THROUGH THE GOSPEL OF JOHN (2004)**



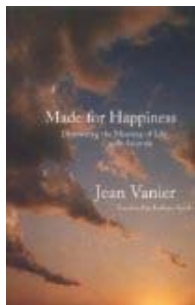
Jean Vanier celebrates the gospel of John in this meditative work. His writing is personal, inspiring, and challenging. It calls all Christians to encounter the fullness of the life lived in close communion with God. Vanier writes: “These insights that I share in this book come from the life of Jesus in me...They also flow from my life with people who are weak and who have taught me to welcome Jesus from the place of poverty in me.” This book educated, guides and invites us into a closer relationship with Jesus.

### **FINDING PEACE (2003)**



One of the deepest human desires, Vanier writes, is our need to live in peace. He asks, “We yearn for peace, but what is it exactly? How do we find it, and how can we bring peace to our lives and our communities?” In this book, Vanier reflects on recent world events, identifying the sources of conflict and fear within and among individuals, communities, and nations that thwart us in our quest for peace. Peace is not just the work of governments or armies or diplomats, he argues, but the task of each one of us. We can all become makers of peace. We can do our part. And though it’s easy to be a lover of peace and much more difficult to be a worker of peace, Vanier shows us that ordinary people, unknown and unrecognized, are transforming our world little by little, finding peace in our neighbourhoods and lighting the way to change.

### **MADE FOR HAPPINESS: DISCOVERING THE MEANING OF LIFE WITH ARISTOTLE (2002)**



Vanier starts by pointing out that happiness, whatever else people may say, is the greatest concern of our life. In other words, to be happy, to know happiness is the great desire of every man and woman. In this book, Vanier shows that Aristotle is one of the great witnesses to this quest for happiness.

As a vital activity, happiness touches on important moral question for today: “Is human life merely a matter of being successful, of doing one’s work and performing one’s civic and familial duties well? Is human happiness resting in the awareness that we have lived successfully, have been awarded honour, and are surrounded by our family and friends? Where, in that case do celebrations and possessions belong? Isn’t happiness for some people today more readily associated with exciting activities and moments of exaltation and enthusiasm?”

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In answer to these questions, Vanier explains that if he had to devise a moral philosophy for our time that was accessible to everyone he would start with three points: First, every human being, regardless of his or her limitation, culture or religion, is important and valuable and should be respected. Second, the worst ill is disdain of another person, which can lead to oppression and suppression of human life. Third, in order to progress towards the fullness of life that is inscribed in his or her being every person, at some time or the other need others – needs relationship.

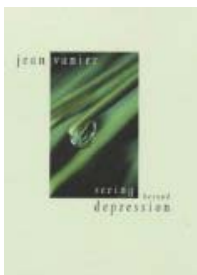
Addressing both the value and short coming of Aristotelian ethics, Vanier suggests that a person should not be defined according to his or her capacity for reason, but rather his or her capacity for relationship. Vanier stresses “capacity” for relationship and not relationship itself. In this way, he offers a more complete vision of what it means to be “a person,” and how we can know happiness.

### **I WALK WITH JESUS (2002)**



This book is a follow up to the first one, I meet Jesus. It explains more in detail how Jesus invites us to live, to follow him, to be disciples, his friends in today’s world. The book begins with the famous story: two disciples are on their way to Emmaus. They are discouraged when Jesus meets them. He walks with them, and their hearts come alive. This book reveals to us the presence of Jesus as we journey through life. We too may be discouraged and afraid. At times like these, we can take comfort that Jesus is with us.

### **SEEING BEYOND DEPRESSION (2001)**



This brief and elegant volume is full of hope. Vanier explores depression as a wounding of the heart that sends individuals into a deep abyss of anguish, apathy, loneliness, and despair. It is an illness we cannot treat ourselves. When we are depressed, we have to rely on the kindness of others, especially those friends who are in a heart-to-heart relationship with us. Vanier is convinced that it is important to put words to the pain of depression and to have faith in the sun that is shining behind the dark clouds. But perhaps the best medicine is relying upon a network of friends who love and accept us. Vanier concludes: "Depression is a painful reality, a crisis, but at the same time crisis can bring us to greater freedom if we discover how to live with it and how to move towards healing."

*Jean Vanier*

## BECOMING HUMAN (1999)



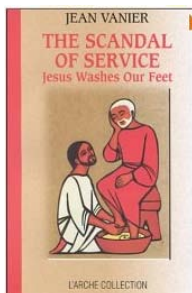
This book is about the liberation of the human heart. In this provocative work, Jean Vanier shares his profoundly human vision for transformation – for creating a common good that radically changes our communities, our relationships, and ourselves. “Becoming Human” invites us into freedom from the tentacles of chaos and loneliness, and from those fears that provoke us to exclude and reject others. It is a freedom that opens us up and leads us to the discovery of our common humanity amid difference.

Vanier writes that this book is not essentially about the formation and organization of society. Neither is it political in scope. But he does articulate the difference between open societies and closed societies: if we commit ourselves to the making of a society in which we are concerned only with our own rights, then that society must become more and more closed in on itself. We do not feel any responsibility toward others, there is no reason for us to work harmoniously toward the common good. On the other hand, if we allow ourselves to open up to others, and become concerned with their conditions, then the society in which we live changes and becomes more open.

In this pivotal work, Vanier clearly shows how we can live in peace despite our many differences. This book has inspired many people to rethink their perceptions and become more involved in their communities, and in their attitudes toward people who have disabilities. It has been central to discussions, retreats, workshops, research and teaching. Vanier shows how, through genuine encounters, we can resolve conflict and see difference as fruitful. Through his work at l’Arche, Vanier is a powerful advocate for the weaker, more vulnerable members of society. They have been his teachers, he writes, and it is his hope that he can reveal a bit about what he has learned, and is still learning about helping others to discover our common humanity.

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## THE SCANDAL OF SERVICE: JESUS WASHES OUR FEET (1998)



In this brief meditation, Vanier ponders the many levels of meaning in Jesus' act of washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. In this humble gesture, Vanier finds an attitude of service which Jesus wanted to pass on to his disciples. His prayer and actions from heart reveal a yearning for deep communion with friends. As servant leader, he descends the ladder, rather than ascends, making himself open and vulnerable to others. This is the opposite of society and corporate standards where one seeks to be in power

*Jean Vanier*

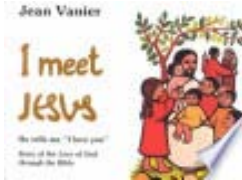
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and control. For Vanier, the act of footwashing is a way of following Jesus. It is a moment of graced humility, guiding us into a daily application of the true meaning of our call to Christ like service.

### **I MEET JESUS: HE TELLS ME “I LOVE YOU”: STORY OF THE LOVE OF GOD THROUGH THE BIBLE - (1998 – SECOND EDITION)**



With simply written text and illustrations, this book tells the story of the Love of God through the Bible. One can stop and spend time with just one picture – one that speaks to the heart and gives peace. Vanier invites us to be part of the family of God in a warm, friendly and prayerful manner.

### **IMAGES OF LOVE, WORDS OF HOPE (1997)**



This book is based on the thirteen part television series called “Images of Love, Words of Hope: Jean Vanier in Conversation.” In an age and time when there is much confusion, discouragement and little direction, Vanier’s vision and insights on the human condition are deeply valuable. “The mystery of God,” writes Vanier, “is that He does not come into our world of power; He comes into our littleness and weakness.” Vanier’s message of love and hope is simple: We can walk together along the road of pain, but also the road of joy and peace. Together we find strength and compassion to create of this world a place where there is greater peace.

### **OUR JOURNEY HOME: REDISCOVERING A COMMON HUMANITY BEYOND OUR DIFFERENCE (1997)**



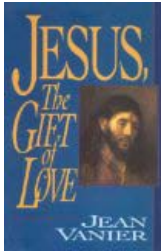
Drawing on thirty years since the founding of the l'Arche communities, Vanier describes the beauty and holiness of life and the need to overcome the various divisions that separate us from one another. Vanier’s work is a call to unity founded on the covenant of love to which God is calling all community members. This calling implies welcome and respect for differences. Unity at l’Arche presupposes that the most vulnerable in each community is at the centre, paradoxically holding the community together. In this way each community is in solidarity with one another. Vanier’s message is clear: The communities of l’Arche want to be in solidarity with the poor of the world, and with all those who take part in the struggle for justice.

*Jean Vanier*

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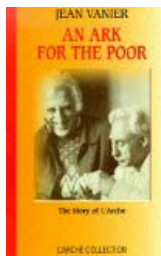
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## JESUS THE GIFT OF LOVE (1996)



Vanier captures the beauty, power and holiness of Jesus. But more importantly, the simplicity of his writing makes the man Jesus come alive in all his humanity, revealing his immense goodness and love for everyone he meets. This book is the story of Jesus as it is told in the four Gospels, brought together into one meditation, giving a clear portrait of Jesus as he was and as he lived, a clear vision of his message. The author writes that the Gospels are there not just to lead us to belief, the belief that he is living in us today and in the Church, but to teach us how to live and to act in our broken world today. Through *Jesus the Gift of Love*, Vanier offers us his gift of seeing deeply into the heart of the Gospels.

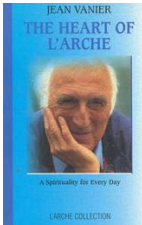
## AN ARK FOR THE POOR: THE STORY OF L'ARCHE (1995)



In this book, l'Arche's founder Jean Vanier, tells the story of the community's first thirty years: its foundation and growth, its joys and sorrows. Rather than list dates and places, Vanier chronicles the transformation that occurs when the poorest and the weakest among us find a haven of love and safety to carry them through the storms of life. Vanier writes, "It is the story, especially of the beauty and fragility of people with mental handicaps. In and through the simple, humble gestures of daily living, it continues to be written, day after day. Our people help us rediscover the importance of these little gestures."

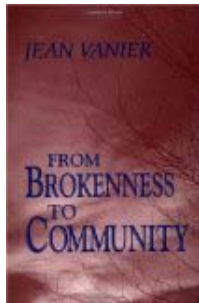
Through this seminal work, the story of l'Arche is about an education that leads to a life of becoming human. Although this is not a political book, in its own narrative style there are social and political implications. The task of any society is to make room for the largest number of people to live well, and this story of l'Arche clearly shows how l'Arche is a place of justice where all may grow well in the various aspects of life.

## THE HEART OF L'ARCHE: A SPIRITUALITY FOR EVERYDAY (1995)



With simplicity and conviction, Jean Vanier shows how a life shared with people who have disabilities calls us to selflessness and risk. In response to a call from God, he moved to a tiny French village, bought a small stone house, and invited two men with disabilities to live with him. Living with these two men, he discovered his own "disabilities of the heart." He discovered that love and forgiveness did not come easily for him, and that anger did. The vulnerability that is so much part of their lives reveals our own limits and forces us to ask questions that can lead us to profound liberation.

## FROM BROKENNESS TO COMMUNITY (1992)



The text in this book originates as two lectures given by Jean Vanier as part of the Wit Lecture series at Harvard University in 1988. He speaks eloquently of the lessons he has learned from l'Arche. He speaks of his own healing and his own need for people. He speaks of the power of belonging and how it satisfies the deepest needs in people. Vanier does not romanticize community. For him, community is a place of struggle, conflict and confrontation. Community is a place where the ego dies, a place of surrender. However it is also a place of celebration, joy and ultimately of human fulfillment. For Vanier, community is a place where we encounter God: God is present in the poverty and wounds of our hearts. God is not just present in the capacity to heal but rather in the need to be healed.

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## COMMUNITY AND GROWTH (1989)



This Vanier classic is a brilliant series of 'starting points for reflection' on the nature and meaning of community. For example, Vanier writes that our communities should be signs of joy and celebration. If we are accepted with our limitations as well as our abilities, our communities gradually become places of liberation, fruitfulness and fecundity.

Writing in a deeply compassionate way, Vanier says that a community grows like a child. "Each of us is on a journey – the journey of life. Each one of us is a pilgrim on the road. The period of human growth from the time we are infants in our mother's womb to the day of our death, is both very long and very short. And this growth is set between two frailties – the weakness of the tiny child and that of the person who is dying." Community therefore is

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founded on frailty. Wisely, Vanier calls us to be in touch with our vulnerabilities as individuals and as a community.

A community is also found on the trust its member have for each other, and for the process of growth. He speaks of the “gift” and the “anti-gift” within community. There are people who come as ‘saviours’. They have the intelligence to understand and sometime exploit the failings of community. They are attractive; they talk well. They tend to want to do their own thing and prove their points. If a person comes into community with this state of mind, it will be a disaster for them and the community: anti-gift.

The right way to come into community is to feel at ease there, ready to serve and be respectful of structure and traditions. A project or a new idea has to grow in collaboration with others and not as a way of proving anyone’s capability. Availability for service is one of the most marvelous gifts that we can find in community. The gift of availability, writes Vanier, can be transmitted from one person to another like a fire of love. It brings a community to life.

Thus, Vanier’s insights are most helpful to all service providers because they provide an orientation as to how a person is to show up and live community - safely, ethically, and respectfully.

## THE BROKEN BODY (1988)

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The central question asked here is this: How can we discover the source of wholeness, healing and hope amidst a broken and suffering world? Jean Vanier examines the roots of brokenness within the Jewish and Christian traditions and the meaning of the Good News of Jesus for our world. The Broken Body is written for all who wish to follow Jesus on the path to wholeness. Vanier calls the readers to come closer to people who suffer. He offers hope and encouragement, and the assurance that peace and joy can be found but only by first accepting the reality of suffering and the cross in one’s own life and in the lives of others. This book is about the good news: in every parish, in every home, in every heart that welcomes a wounded person, there is the quiet presence of Jesus, consoling, loving, announcing the good news.

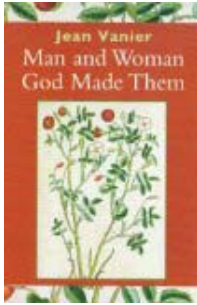
*Jean Vanier*

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## MAN AND WOMAN HE MADE THEM (1985)



In a new and fully revised edition of a classical text, Jean Vanier examines the significance and sources of human sexuality. Drawing on his years of experience of Christian community life with and for people with disabilities, he explores the implications of the relationship of man and woman from a Christian and community standpoint.

When Vanier speaks of the cry for love within a person who has disabilities, he draws the wider parallel of that same search within every man and woman; the fragility and vulnerability of each person at the level of the heart and in the search for relationship. An intimate and searching book, *Man and Woman God Made Them* contains a wealth of insight into the meaning and source of human sexuality. Vanier writes, “Education for emotional and sexual life means helping someone to have a sense of others, to be able to listen, to love and to have compassion and tenderness and, not least, to become responsible. True sexual education awakens the heart, and helps someone more towards a mature affectivity.”

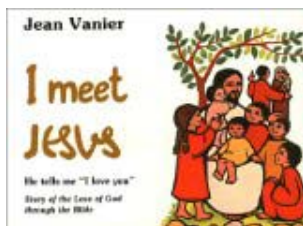
## THE CHALLENGE OF L'ARCHE (1982)



Many people have come together to articulate the challenge of l'Arche, sharing from their personal experience of living together in truth, joy, pain and love. Amid the humdrum of daily life, the struggle of l'Arche is a struggle for liberation, writes Vanier, the liberation of persons with disabilities, who have been oppressed by the rejection of society, and on the other, of those who live with them. The process of liberation, although never fully complete, is lived through a covenant of love.

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## I MEET JESUS (1981 - FIRST EDITION)



“I meet Jesus” proclaims the Good News through simple texts written by Jean Vanier and his friends at l'Arche, accompanied by beautiful illustration drawn by a little sister of Jesus. This book speaks of Jesus and his message of love. It is written especially to help us meet Jesus in a personal way. The book is often used at l'Arche during prayer time around the dinner table. Community members take turns opening to their favourite page and sharing the meditation with lighted candle. All are able to access Jesus through the simplicity of the messages: “Jesus calls you to

Jean Vanier

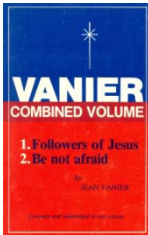
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follow him so that you may do something beautiful with your life and bear much fruit. The world needs you, the Church needs you, Jesus need s you, they need your love and your light.”

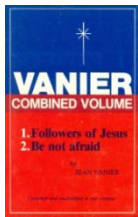
### **FOLLOWERS OF JESUS (1976)**



As followers of Jesus, Vanier writes, “tonight, tomorrow and the next morning, we must put ourselves in the perspective of refinding Jesus.” When we are rich, when we have a name, when we have friends, or when we are members of respected groups we are never really oppressed. On the other hand there are many without work, with no security, living off meager wages, living day by day in unbearable situations of fear and anxiety, with children sick or other dependents.

We know these situations. Each of us have met them: they are in the cities, they are all around us. But Vanier points out that what is frightening is that the disciples of Jesus are so frequently in comfort. He asks two questions: On which side of the road is Jesus? On which side of the road are his disciples? In Followers of Jesus, Vanier invites us to listen to those on the margins and be transformed by them.

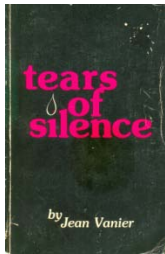
### **BE NOT AFRAID (1975)**



Vanier brings to life the Beatitudes by saying that we must contemplate Jesus as He lived and, above all follow Him because we cannot be called disciples of Jesus Christ if we do not. And to follow Him is to put our hand in His hands, our steps in His steps. It is to take the same road and to stay on it. It is to let fear fall away, putting our confidence in him, because his is the healer, the One who comes to bring us life and liberate us from ourselves. Because Jesus comes to heal us from

our egoism, aggressiveness and anguish, Vanier writes that we can face our fears, and accept ourselves as we are, without being afraid.

## TEARS OF SILENCE (1974)



Using word and image, Vanier writes from his experience in Calcutta, India. Our lives, he writes, are fleeting moments in which are found the seeds of eternal peace, unity and love as well as the seeds of war, dissension and indifference. The provoking question he raises is this: when will we rise and awaken to the choice before each of us, to water and give light to one or the other of these two kinds of seeds? This book is dedicated to all those of the House of the Dying in Calcutta (now called Kolkata). It is dedicated, he writes, to the faces shown in the book, faces and people who represent you and me, and all those who are fearful, and all those who aspire to universal peace and solidarity.

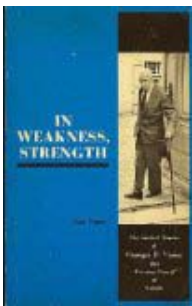
## ERUPTION TO HOPE (1971)



“Sharing” is the theme of this book. “Eruption to hope” comes out of a collection of talks and poems given to international groups, businessmen and educator. It is of vital interest to individuals as well. Vanier believes that our civilization will erupt in ruin unless we *share*. If we share, then good will and love will give way to an “eruption of hope”. An interiority of hope is the cause and effect of the young person discovering a true personal morality, writes Vanier, a morality of love which surges from the inner being and flows like a source of living water. It is this morality or spirituality which gives real interior liberty and eases all fear.

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## IN WEAKNESS STRENGTH: THE SPIRITUAL SOURCES OF GEORGES P. VANIER, 19TH GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF CANADA (1970)



Georges P. Vanier, Jean Vanier’s father made a strong impression on his son. After Georges’ death, Jean Vanier wrote this biography encapsulating his father’s spiritual life. For Georges, love was the “central aspect of human faith and God,” and this idea has also been his son’s overarching theological and philosophical basis. In his life, Georges suffered greatly from an amputated leg resulting from a war injury, and in Georges’ biography Jean wrote that pain was the foundation of Georges’ spiritual life. He believed that pain and weakness were the clearest roots to communion with God. Jean Vanier draws inspiration from his father’s life to articulate the spiritual meaning we feel in pain, dependence and frailty.

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## BOOKS INSPIRED BY JEAN VANIER'S WORK

### **The Paradox of Disability:**

**Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences**

H.S. Reinders, ed., (Eerdmans Press, 2010)

### **Theology, Disability, and Spiritual Transformation: Learning from the Communities of L'Arche**

M. Hryniuk, (Cambria Press, 2010)

### **L'Arche: A Unique and Multiple Spirituality**

Christian Salenson, (L'Arche en France, 2009)

### **Living L'Arche: Stories of Compassion, Love, and Disability**

D.S. Reimer & K.S. Reimer, (Liturgical Press, 2009)

### **Jean Vanier: Essential Writings**

C. Whitney-Brown, (Orbis Books, 2008)

### **Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness**

Swinton, Hauerwas, & Vanier, (InterVarsity Press, 2008)

### **Walking on a Rolling Deck: Life on the Ark**

K.C. Berken, (Liturgical Press, 2008)

### **Enough Room for Joy: The Early Days of L'Arche**

B. Clarke, SJ, (Novalis Publishing, 2006) (Paulist Press, 1974)

### **The Miracle, the Message, the Story: Jean Vanier and L'Arche**

K. Spink (Dartman, Longman & Todd, 2005) (Paulist Press, 2006)

### **My Life Together: L'Arche Communities and the Challenge of Unity**

H. Wilson, (Dartman, Longman & Todd, 2004)

### **Encounter with Mystery: Reflections on L'Arche and Living with Disability**

F. Young, (Dartman, Longman & Todd, 1997)

### **Body Broken, Body Blessed**

S. Mosteller (HarperCollins Publishers, 1997)

### **A Network of Friends: The Letters of Jean Vanier to Friends and Communities of L'Arche**

J. Sumarah, ed., (Lancelot Press, 3 volumes: 1992-1994-1996)

### **A Blessed Weakness: Spirit of Jean Vanier and L'Arche**

M. Downey, (HarperCollins Publishers, 1989)

*Jean  
Vanier*

# JEAN VANIER

## IN HIS OWN WORDS



### On Personal Transformation

(from The Heart of l'Arche, 1985)

*As I touched the fragility and pain of people with mental handicaps, and as their trust in me grew, new springs of tenderness welled up in me. I loved them, and was happy with them. They awakened part of my being that had been under-developed, dormant. Through them, a new world began to open up for me, not the world of efficiency, competition, success and power, but the world of the heart, of vulnerability and communion. They were leading me on a path towards healing and wholeness.*

*To be a friend to the poor is demanding. They anchor us in the reality of pain; they make it impossible for us to escape into ideas or dreams. Their cry for solidarity obliges us to make choices, to deepen our spiritual lives and to put love at the heart of our daily lives. It transforms us.*



## On Ecumenism and Interfaith

(from Our Life Together, 2007)

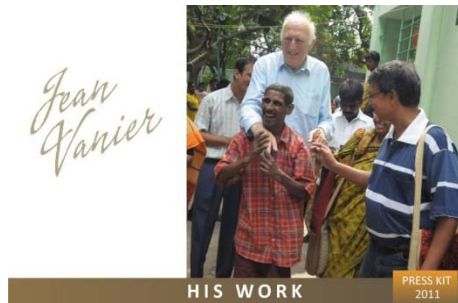
*The more l'Arche grew and the more I travelled, the more I came to see and feel not just poverty in all its forms, but also the pain of the divisions and separations among Christians, and then between Christians and other religions.*

*l'Arche was founded in the Catholic tradition, and.... It took time for me and for l'Arche to recognize the gift of ecumenism, ... and to adapt accordingly... Little by little we discovered that to live the gift of ecumenism did not mean simply inviting Anglicans and Protestants to our Catholic Masses and celebrations but instead giving them more space to live, celebrate and nourish their own traditions - the Catholic faith at l'Arche has become just one tradition amongst others. And so it was when we moved to non-Christian countries.*

*...Finding unity with people of different religions is even more difficult: the walls between religions are greater than the walls between churches. Yet we all belong to a common humanity; we are brothers and sisters, born in the image of God, made to know and love God. This is obvious that when we welcome a man like Gurunathan, who had been rejected and badly treated for his disabilities, into one of our Indian communities in order to help him grow and find peace, we welcome also his icon of Ganesh, the Hindu god of beginnings, obstacles, of intellect and wisdom. With me and with l'Arche there had to be a renunciation of ideology and an embrace of practicality: what is important to Gurunathan is for him to find out who he is and for us to help him grow more fully as a human person. It's the same when we welcome Muslims and help them attend their local mosque.*

*... In our homes people of different faiths have discovered a place which is profoundly human, a place where all are encouraged to deepen and live their own faith and where everyone can grow to greater love... It's much the same for all those at l'Arche who are secular, who come without faith, but then discover here that they believe in life, they believe in growth, they believe in people - their time in the community becomes a discovery in belief...*

*...the L'Arche Federation of 131 communities in thirty-four countries didn't arise by avoiding painful questions of faith behind quiet, polite tolerance. It couldn't have grown behind walls of religious protectionism, and it wouldn't have flourished in a cocktail of faiths or syncretism. It could only have grown as it did: through openness, respect, trust in what is just and right, the naivete to make mistakes, love and 'touching the roots,' with each of us going deeper to find the essential in his or her own faith. We in l'Arche have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go.*



## The Roots of L'Arche and Faith & Light

Throughout the history of humanity, in every corner of the globe, people with disabilities have been cast aside from their rightful place in their communities. Their place has universally been the last place, a place of intolerable pain. Their history has been filled with rejection, isolation, grief and loss. In many cultures their existence has been seen as a sign of punishment from god, and so a source of great shame.

In the face of such norms, parents, families and communities whose children are born with a disability may, understandably, ask themselves “What did we do wrong?” “How will we cope with caring for such a child, and what will others say about us and about the child?” There is anguish in these questions. These special children have often been hidden from view, institutionalized, separated from their families, or abandoned, deprived of and denied their basic human dignity. The families have often been similarly treated. Together they have been the universal objects of derision, scorn and even hate.

It is easy to forget this history, especially given the global trend to de-institutionalization of the past 50 years. Moreover, it is all too easy to ignore the reality that such conditions still exist in many places of the world today.

## A Warehouse of Human Misery

This history of rejection and shame was certainly the reality which Jean Vanier met when in 1964 he was invited by his friend and mentor Philippe Thomas, to visit the small French village of Trosly-Breuil. Père Thomas was the chaplain of a small institution in the village, housing men with intellectual disabilities. These men were marched around the village in formation, twice a day, and otherwise kept under lock and key. Père Thomas, touched by his personal contact with these men, invited Jean to visit the local psychiatric hospital, where many others were living in far worse conditions. What existed in that hospital was not unique to France, but was replicated many times over around the world.

Initially anxious about what he would talk about with the men there, Jean was moved beyond words by his first visit to the psychiatric hospital of Clermont. There was something terribly unjust and inhuman in what he saw there. It was in this warehouse of human misery that Vanier found the meaning and focus he had been seeking; the beginning of his lifelong struggle against the forces of exclusion. This struggle would prove to be as the man: authentic, faithful, just, peaceful, passionate and ever practical.

## Unlocking the door of a whole new world

Jean Vanier, son of privilege, naval officer, philosophy professor and spiritual seeker, thus invited two men with intellectual disabilities, Raphael and Philippe, who had been living at that hospital, to share their lives with him. His invitation to them unknowingly unlocked the door to a whole new world.

A table, some food, laughter, songs and orange peels battles were the needed conditions to bring these three men closer together. To evolve, L'Arche needed to be place where each one felt equal and cherished, a place where the joy of living in mutual friendships would gradually break down the emotional toll that years of inequality, prejudice and rejection had wrought. The atmosphere was unprecedented, contagious and astonishing to the neighbours and visiting friends. It became a place of belonging where each and everyone could be themselves and enjoy life with others.



Jean became also intimately acquainted with the vulnerability and fragility of his new companions, both physical and emotional, a result of the rejection and suffering they had endured. He also became aware of his own blockages and limitations, and of his own need for friendship. Slowly the teacher became the student. He was accepted by them as Jean, not as officer, professor or philosopher. Together this unlikely trio formed the first community. They named their home L'Arche, in French, the Ark, a symbolic message that "we're all in the same boat". This name hinted early at the lessons that Jean was soon to learn about mutual vulnerability.

## All Aboard!

Jean was a terrible cook and they needed a lot of help! Villagers were generous in sharing what they could, and gradually people Jean wrote to in Canada and Britain came to see for themselves what he was up to. In the summers he returned to Canada and gave talks about his new life, including to university students. Some of these, inspired by the striking congruence between Jean's belief and what he was living, came to stay and work. Two of these were Steve and Ann Newroth who returned to Canada to start the first L'Arche in Canada, Daybreak, in Richmond Hill. Mira who longed to return to her native India, went there with Gabrielle, who had met Jean in Montreal. Out of their mutual exploration and a later trip of Jean and Gabrielle to India, the first L'Arche in India, Asha Niketan Bangalore, was born.

So it was with each community. The personal thirst which people brought with them to L'Arche found purpose and outlet and communities soon sprang up in UK, France, Europe, Canada, India, and Africa, Denmark, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Japan, Ukraine, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Syria, Egypt, Argentina and Bangladesh. This remarkable growth is well documented in Jean's book of letters to the communities, *Our Life Together*.

## An Unlikely Pilgrimage

The birth of Faith and Light was equally extraordinary. A family with two sons with severe disabilities, Loïc and Thadée, took them to Lourdes, traditionally a pilgrimage site of consolation and healing for the sick and disabled. The family was told that the boys could not eat in the hotel dining room with the other guests because they might disturb them! In response to the family's story, Marie Helene Matthieu and Jean Vanier organized families with disabilities to travel together to Lourdes. At Easter in 1971, twelve thousand people arrived from fifteen countries! It was suggested, given the positive response, that the little groups which journeyed there together, keep meeting together once home, for mutual support. Thus was Faith and Light born. In 2011, with more than 1,600 communities in 80 countries, F & L celebrates 40th years since that first pilgrimage, with multiple pilgrimages taking place all over the world over two years.

This growth of L'Arche and Faith & Light has been remarkable in several ways. It is growth through relationship; an organic, unplanned growth, at least initially. It is growth which is both inspired and sustained by personal transformation through mutually supportive relationship. These cannot be planned! It is growth in response to real need, but also in response to deep thirst, often for a different way of being, of understanding, of living in community, of searching for the truth or for God. It is remarkable in that no-one set out to promote this growth, no-one envisaged it and no consultants were directing its growth. This growth has been about fragility, mutual dependence and trust. It is growth that surpasses understanding or expectations.

## A University of the Heart

All around the world are many, many thousands of individuals, often young people, who have been profoundly touched by time spent in L'Arche or in Faith and Light. They too have become students of vulnerable men and women who revealed to them a new vision of life, and a new sense of togetherness. Often they return home, bringing this new vision into their future, spreading the lessons of l'Arche. With the closing of institutions, other organisations such as PLAN or Tyze have successfully inherited Jean's vision. They have built circles of support around members of our society living with disability. This had allowed people who otherwise would never have met because of their differences or fears, to create new ways of living together, focused on the most vulnerable members, source of unity.

*Jean  
Vanier*

## Facing the Struggle Ahead

The social stigma that prevailed in France and around the world in 1964, vis a vis men and women living with disabilities, is still very present in many places. In fact, isolation and segregation of 'different people' is still justified by the need to 'protect them'. In countries struck by war, ecological disaster or great poverty, men and women living with intellectual disabilities are often excluded, even among the excluded! Even in developed countries where disability rights have been acquired and are socially accepted, the struggle to belong and take a rightful place as a full member of society is still a long way off for most people living with an intellectual disability.

Jean Vanier's struggle, started in the small village of Trosly in 1964, continues today. The road to justice and peace demands a lifetime commitment. Entering old age, at 83, the fervor of the founder is still visible in his serene lucidity, and he is more convinced than ever that those who are powerless and vulnerable attract what is most beautiful and most luminous in those who are stronger.

