

## *Jean Vanier and L'Arche as a Witness of Merciful Love*

### ABSTRACT

Jean Vanier is the founder of two major international community-based organizations for people with intellectual disabilities: the L'Arche Communities and the "Faith & Light" movement. He is a great Catholic and a teacher of merciful love. His life is a message to the world that each person is an infinite value for who they are, not for what they can do, and that each person is unique and sacred, no matter of their health condition, disability or fragility. Each person is created in God's image and each one has an inner beauty, a capacity to love and to be loved, and possesses inherent qualities of belonging, bonding, friendship and spirituality. Persons with intellectual disabilities are a gift for the society. Thanks to the testimony of his life, Jean Vanier has developed the international network of L'Arche Communities all over the world. The communities are based on family-like residential communities, where people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together in the spirit of faith, dignity of every human being, understanding, love and joy. The L'Arche homes and communities are rooted in the ideas of "living with," and not just "doing for" those with mental disabilities. Weakness carries a secret power within, it can open up the hearts to God's grace. Our contemporary world strongly needs the weak, as they evangelize us, transform us and help us to be more human. They

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help us discover that the good news of Jesus is announced not to those who serve the poor, but to those who are themselves poor and need God's merciful love and forgiveness.

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A change in attitude and increased social awareness regarding the present elimination of people with disabilities from society must be initiated in the confirmation of the ontological, inviolable value and dignity of the disabled, regardless of the extent to which they have lost their vital functions, mental abilities or consciousness. Even the most ill, unconscious or disabled human being has the same value as an Olympic champion, Miss World or president of state. All human beings deserve the category of "someone;" they are "somebody," persons by nature. Thus, they deserve complete, untouchable human dignity and rights. Regardless of the degree of health loss, they have their own personal, spiritual interior, although it might be concealed due to their behaviour or dementia (Chudy, 1988b).

Persons with disability are too often perceived solely as objects of social care, recipients or beneficiaries of various institutions or charities, and altogether as those who demand and cost a lot, are a burden to the state budget, local societies and the family. It is commonly not recognised, however, what a great blessing and honour their presence among us may be when we share our lives with them. An elderly person, a person with disability or psychiatric illness, independent of their psycho-physical state, has great inner gifts. They have a significant role to play in the world and the Church, not because of their activity or productivity, but rather thanks to their sense of the sacred sphere, their deep insights and reflections on themselves and life, their sincere search for the answers to the most difficult questions on the sense

and aim of the last phase of their lives (e.g. meditation, prayer), which is often a time of intense spiritual maturing.

In a world that strives for superficial, ephemeral values and meaningless success, persons with disability trigger the most existential questions – how to live a life so that it is not wasted, what is it all for, where am I heading, what next? Deteriorating health provokes a transformation in life values, from “to have “ to “to be,” to valuing the human being not for what he or she possesses, achieves or adds, but for the sole fact of his or her “being.” As human beings, they have unquestionable value, and their life is worth living and priceless to the last breath (Domagała-Zyśk, 2006). An elderly, chronically ill or disabled person through their need for care invites the other person into his or her life, and thus helps this person develop the most human qualities of the heart, the so-called “awareness of the heart” – writes J. Vanier, the creator of family communities of life for persons with and without mental retardation called “L’Arche” (The Ark) (Vanier 1985).

Jean Vanier, one of the great Catholic men of our time, is one of the foremost pro-life advocates of the dignity of all people, “a most remarkable man, who lives and works among ‘people of the heart’ (Bosch, Vanier, 2015). He is a philosopher, writer, religious and moral leader. He has been called: “Mother Teresa in trousers,” “man of mercy”, “prophet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”, “human sign of the times”, “great interpreter of the culture of solidarity”, “the ideal pedagogue”, “a man of action and a contemplative”. Vanier is the founder of two major international community-based organizations founded for people with intellectual disabilities: L’Arche Communities and the “Foi et Lumière” movement (Faith & Light). He has become internationally recognized for his profound reflections on social inclusion, mercy, love, peace, forgiveness and what it means to be human. He is one of the world’s great Catholic men and a teacher of merciful love.

## UNDERSTANDING MERCIFUL LOVE

*Merciful love* is a term used in the second encyclical of Pope John Paul II "Dives in Misericordia" (Rich in Mercy) and promulgated on November 30, 1980. It combines two concepts: love and mercy. John Paul II explained that if mercy is treated as good done unto others unilaterally, it is not an act of love. It is an act of love only when it is in a mutual relation, with an awareness that whoever gives also receives (1 Cor 4:7). Such an act of mercy he called merciful love.

Mercy cannot oppose justice, but merciful love is "greater," "deeper," "more powerful" than justice, because it is first and more fundamental. "Love guarantees justice, and justice ultimately serves love." (John Paul II 1980). Authentic mercy does not merely distribute good according to justice or entitlement, but it is gracious love, without a distance between the giver and the taker, as both of them are equal and contribute mutually within the relationship. The one who is healed and the one who is healing constantly change places. In a deep relationship with a lonely or suffering person we may discover that the one we came to heal becomes our healer, and it is us who is being healed. In other words – one receives more than one is able to give.

In the Papal Bulla "Misericordiae vultus" for the Year of Mercy (11.04.2015) Pope Francis noted that Divine Mercy is not an abstract idea but the most significant property of God, through which He expresses His fatherly and motherly love to the world and the human being. Merciful love is love in its fullness. It comes from God and is visible in acts of His presence, such as human compassion, tenderness and forgiveness. It is a sign of God's omnipotence; it is a power that overcomes everything, fills the heart with love and comforts with forgiveness.

Acts of merciful love also reveal the greatness of the human being. Merciful and compassionate love is an ideal of life and a criterion of the credibility of faith. All Christians are called to

live the mercy that they originally received from God. The most evident expression of merciful love is withdrawing from judging and evaluating others, abandoning grief, anger, jealousy, envy, forgiving insults and offence, generous sharing with others, showing love and affection. Christians should be especially sensitive to the poverty of brothers and sisters deprived of dignity, provide them attention, support and solidarity, as well as create a sense of closeness, brotherhood and friendship.

The biblical understanding of merciful love relates to two Hebrew words: *hesed* and *rahāmim*. *Hesed* means generous graciousness, compassion, goodwill and amiability, to which one is bound by ties of blood, covenant, internal responsibility and to which one remains true. The word *rahāmim* on the other hand is derived from *reheh*, which means “the mother’s womb,” and so love of the greatest level of intimacy, devotion, dispositionality and sensitivity ((Sekściński, 2016). Merciful love in the sense of *rahāmim* is focused on guaranteeing the other a sense of security, a safe haven in one’s heart, caring for their needs, dispositional care, complete devotion, maintaining continuous contact and close connection. The heart is treated by the other as a child in the mother’s womb – with motherly affection, caring, complete tenderness and warmth, patience and understanding, faithful and not revoking its life-giving powers. At the same time merciful love is undeserved, disinterested, completely free, derived from the “imperative of the heart” and not from another need or calculation, ready for sacrifice and heroism (Kornas-Biela, 2016).

#### JEAN VANIER AS A WITNESS OF MERCIFUL LOVE

Jean Vanier is an example of a person who has been a witness to such merciful love. Jean Vanier is Canadian, son of the late Governor General of Canada, George Vanier and Pauline Vanier, born on September 10, 1928 in Geneva. Vanier and his family fled Paris

just before the Nazi occupation. From 1945 to 1950 he served in the Royal Navy of Britain and later transferred to the Royal Navy of Canada. In 1950, Jean Vanier gave up navy work, because he felt a strong inner spiritual calling to do “something else.” From 1950 to 1962, he lived in a small community, L’Eau Vive, led by the French Dominican Thomas Philippe. In 1962 he completed a Ph.D. in philosophy at L’Institut Catholique de Paris, writing his dissertation on Aristotle. In 1963, he taught philosophy at St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto (Kornas-Biela, 2012).

Influenced by Fr. Thomas Phillippe’s work with intellectually disabled men and having visited a number of institutions, asylums, and psychiatric hospitals, Vanier bought a small house and invited two intellectually disabled men – Raphael and Philippe – into his home on August 4, 1964 in Trosly-Breuil, north of Paris, where he still lives on the grounds of the original L’Arche community. He called the home L’Arche, the Ark, as in Noah’s Ark, a symbol of refuge, diversity, and hope. Similar communities began to form rapidly. L’Arche creates communities of peace where people with mental disability and those wishing to share life with them live, work and pray together.

Today L’Arche is a worldwide community of people with disabilities who live together with those who care for them. Currently there are more than 140 ecumenical communities around the world in 35 countries, where ‘assistants’ live together with their charges: 5,000 members, including approximately 2,300 individuals with mental disability, in addition to 1,316 individuals in workshops (Spink, 2008).

L’Arche Foundation has grown slowly in Poland. In 1981 Śledziejowice community was founded; 1994 – in Poznan, in 1999 – the community in Wrocław, and since 2009, another community has been developing – in Warsaw. Currently L’Arche Community has 4 communities in Poland, 5 houses with fulltime care, 1 Occupational Therapy Workshop, and 1 self-help home. The foundation supports 67 persons with intellectual disability. An-

nually, it cooperates with approximately one hundred volunteers. To this day, more than 550 assistants have inhabited Polish L'Arche communities. There is a long waiting list to inhabit a L'Arche home.

From the very beginning, L'Arche Foundation has grown through the formation of life communities with the conviction expressed in the L'Arche Charter<sup>1</sup>, that while the Foundation is not able to reach all those needing it with assistance and solve the social issues connected with guaranteeing disabled individuals a dignified life, but through its small communities it lays down the gauntlet to society to treat these people as a gift and duty for themselves, as only then can a truly humane society exist.

In 1971, Jean Vanier together with Marie-Hélène Mathieu took part in a pilgrimage of intellectually disabled individuals and their families to Lourdes. This pilgrimage was the inspiration to establish a new movement in the Church Association International "Foi et Lumière" (Faith & Light) that counts about 1,300 communities of disabled individuals, their families and friends. This association was officially approved in 1973 by Pope Paul VI as an international lay association connected with the Catholic Church. Foi et Lumière gathers intellectually disabled individuals and their families as well as nondisabled friends, usually young who are flexible timewise, living in the same parish, neighborhood or city. In addition to regular social gatherings these communities have various activities, for example, vacation camps, pilgrimages, trips, prayer and formational meetings<sup>2</sup>. There are currently about 800 "Foi et Lumière" communities in 80 countries. In Poland the first Foi & Lumière communities were initiated in 1978 in Wro-

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<sup>1</sup> The L'Arche Charter is the basic document that all communities of the International L'Arche Federation are obliged to, a type of statute, expressing the goal, character and spirituality of the communities.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wiaraiswiatlo.pl/>, access: 28.07.2013.

claw and Warsaw. Currently, 105 communities are active in four provinces<sup>3</sup>.

#### THE L'ARCHE COMMUNITIES AS A PLACE FOR MERCIFUL LOVE IN ACTION

The L'Arche communities are based on communal living, work, relaxation and celebration of intellectually disabled individuals and their guardians, called assistants. The latter are usually young persons who decide to live together in one house with disabled persons and share their everyday joys and sorrows. Life at the L'Arche community is rooted in simple things and relies on performing very mundane tasks and routine activities that enable the house to function effectively and satisfy the needs of its inhabitants. "These little things are often perceived as meaningless and worthless. But they all may become expressions of love that help to create a warm atmosphere where the communion of hearts develops. This way the life of the community becomes a school of love." (Vanier, 1996). All of its members are tools of "love in the small things" for each other.

L'Arche is thus not a place of philanthropy, charity, psychological assistance or institutional education. The communities are based on family-like residential communities, where people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together in the spirit of faith, dignity of every human being, understanding, love and joy. The L'Arche homes and communities are rooted in the ideas of "living with" – not just "doing for" those with mental disabilities, listening to them, welcoming them, sharing life in the spirit of the

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<sup>3</sup> The Polish Northern Province includes 15 communities, Polish Southern Province – 37 communities, Polish Western Province – 29 communities, and Polish Central-Eastern Province – 24 communities; <http://www.wiaraiswiatlo.pl/Dostep>: 08.08.2013.



dignity of every human being, faith, understanding, compassion, love and joy. At a L'Arche home people live in an atmosphere of trust, security and mutual affection. They are valued, accepted and supported in real and warm relationships.

The L'Arche community focuses on seven aspects of love necessary for the transformation of the heart in those who are profoundly lonely and stigmatized with disability: 1. Revealing their beauty; 2. Understanding; 3. Communication; 4. Celebrating them; 5. Empowering them; 6. Supporting mutual belonging; 7. Forgiveness (Vanier 1998/2008).

In L'Arche communities, merciful love, which is revealed in the form of concrete acts of love, is not "some abstract idea, but a concrete fact" revealed in daily life. It is the realization of merciful love in the biblical understanding – as *rahāmim*. Just as God's fatherly (Ps 103:13) and motherly love (Is 49:15; Is 66:13) flow from God's interior, so a mutually merciful attitude is rooted in the fact that each tries to carry the other in his/her psychosocial-spiritual womb. The womb of the loving heart gives birth to relationship, healing proximity, curing goodness, supporting sympathy, stirs in the other forgiveness and responsibility.

A mother's love toward her unborn child (*rahāmim*) being the model for the deepest source of mutual relations between inhabitants of the L'Arche community inclines mutual relations to be impregnated with goodness, cordiality, hope and trust in the future, faith in the resources of the capabilities of the disabled individual that have not yet been revealed, the latent force for positive development. The fulfillment of merciful love in interpersonal relationships in L'Arche best show the characteristics of the mother's heart that are: graciousness, charity, magnanimity, sacrifice to the point of heroism, assistance, sympathy, mercy and compassion. It is revealed however in concrete actions, in words and gestures of acceptance, a listening approach, understanding, empathizing, desire to participate in the disabled individual's life,

give them our trust and support. Daily life reveals the goodness and sensitivity of God.

L'Arche offers a place for every person, regardless of their competences, and everyone experiences that they need love and mercy, but also are able to give love and mercy; everyone experiences that they need others and are needed by others. The center of life in L'Arche is the human being, especially the weak and in need – not L'Arche's leader, structure or rules of functioning. All members are united with bonds of solidarity, friendship, love, affection and care. The totality of life in the community is to serve the development of the human being, fulfilling human needs, especially the need to love and be loved, develop one's potential, find one's place among others and help discover the meaning and purpose of life. It is not possible to reach true humanness in a solitary state. At L'Arche one may discover this through mutual dependency, in weakness and in learning through belonging.

The idea of life at L'Arche is based on the rules of family life as a place of covenant, hope, shelter, rescue and optimal development of its every member (Kornas-Biela, 2014). The poor reveal to those who come to be with them how to live compassionately on a heart level. They lead him/her from generosity to compassion. The support of the weaker community members by the stronger members, and at the same time their willingness to face the truth of their own weakness that needs support, love and mercy, are actual fruits of personal development of the L'Arche members. Weakness carries within it a secret power – it is able to open up hearts to God's grace. One who is weaker may call forth the powers of love in the one who is stronger. Weak people help us to be more human, to discover that the good news of Jesus is announced not to those who serve the poor, but to those who themselves are poor and need God's merciful love and forgiveness. It is the weak that are privileged for Divine Mercy. It is they who evangelize us. A gradual transformation takes place in the

hearts of those who come to live with them that awakens the ability to accept and give merciful love (Vanier 1999).

The most significant features of a properly functioning family are the basis of the L'Arche communities, e.g. the gift of time and presence, selfless giving, striving for unity, the right to be weak or even occasionally nasty, apologizing and forgiving, compassion and help, understanding, bonds of love, common celebrations. Community life includes frequent special time devoted to reconciliation and forgiveness, to clear the atmosphere on a regular basis and not accumulate resentment, as suppressed anger or grudges against others destroy unity, openness and trust; they cause isolation, lack of honesty and conflicts of a scale that is disproportional to the original cause.

Forgiveness, acceptance of weakness and poverty, and daily clearing of one's heart to be continuously reborn, opening up to others, trust, a deep sense of community, and a sense of security brings inner peace, unity and joy (Vanier 1985). J. Vanier wrote of this this way: „Forgiveness is the glue that holds things together; is a source of unity; is a quality of love that brings unity from discord. Forgiveness is acceptance of one's own brokenness, yours and mine. Forgiveness is the release of unrealistic expectations of other people, and the desire that they be other than whom they are. Forgiveness is the freeing of others for them to be themselves, not giving them reasons to feel guilty. Forgiveness is help given to people so that they might grow, bear fruit, and discover their own beauty” (Vanier 2006).

Due to the deep message that a disabled individual bears as well as his/her ability to bring out the best of humanity in others, he or she is a gift to the world, treading down competence, rivalry, individual success, utilitarianism and worldly values (Domagała-Zyśk, 2013). As C. Whitney-Brown wrote: “Vanier's life offers one example of a new way of living. For him, life's work is not simply internal growth or accepting one's humanness. We each have something to offer. The fundamental principle of peace is a belief

that each person is important' writes Vanier. 'Even if you cannot speak, even if you cannot walk, even if you've been abandoned, you have a gift to give'" (Whitney-Brown, 2008, s. 22).

## CONCLUSIONS

The life of Jean Vanier is a message to the world that each person has an infinite value in who they are, not in what they can do, and that each person is unique and sacred, no matter their health condition, disability or fragility. Each person is created in God's image and each one has an inner beauty, a capacity to love and to be loved, and possesses inherent qualities of belonging, bonding, friendship and spirituality.

Service of an individual with disability on behalf of merciful love in the framework of L'Arche is an input to building the culture of respect for life and a civilization of love. From the Christian point of view even an individual touched by the heaviest deformation bears in himself the indelible picture of God, a seal of His creative power, affirmation of the Creator of his or her existence. Every day of human life in every form is worth experiencing, because every life comes from God and is dependent on His sustaining and completing action, being destined for resurrection from the dead (Kornas-Biela 2001).

Persons with intellectual disabilities are a gift to society (Chudy, 1988a). Weakness bears a secret power to open hearts up to God's grace. Our contemporary world strongly needs the weak, as they evangelize us, transform us and help us to be more human. They help us discover that the good news of Jesus is announced not to those who serve the poor, but to those who are themselves poor and need God's merciful love and forgiveness.

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