

Remarks of Jean Vanier upon receiving the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom award
July 7, 2013

I would like to thank you Bishop Amos because you have done something very beautiful. You have shone a spot light upon the vision and the realization of the vision of l'Arche. I was only the beginner of L'Arche... I dare say I remain a beginner, maybe not a founder but just a beginner.

L'Arche exists and exists all over the world because of the words of Paul: God has chosen the weak and the foolish to confound, to shame the so called intelligent and strong.

Parker Parmer says that the danger of our society is to see people and children as an emptiness that should be filled rather than as a seeds of wisdom hidden in each and everyone, that we are called to listen and receive humbly.

If I began l'Arche as a work of justice and of truth in the name of Jesus to save two men from the violence of an institution, my nearly 50 years here in l'Arche have made me discover the wisdom of love of tenderness, the wisdom of simplicity , the wisdom of goodness and of fun in people who are weak and fragile. They have taught me, so much more than any book. They have revealed and helped me welcome my own weaknesses. They have transformed me as I began to live relationships of mutual friendship with them. They have brought me to discover that our societies are upside down. So many individuals are climbing ladders of promotion, seeking victory, frequently addicted to violence, rather than living relationships of tenderness with people who are weak and in need.

Jesus calls us to live the beatitude, a wonderful beatitude, of eating, not with those of our group or our clan which give security and comfort but with the poor, the lame, the disabled and the blind: those who are on the margin of society. Eating at the same table in biblical language means becoming friends.

Peace comes not when we say or believe that each and every person in the vast human family is precious and important but when we begin to leave the security and comfort of our own clan and group, in order to meet and become friends with those who are different and who belong to another clan or group or culture.

I went to Chili, some years ago, and on the road from the airport to the city my driver at one moment said to me, "On the left side of the road are all the slum areas of Santiago and on the right all the rich houses, protected by police and military." And he added, "Nobody crosses this road. Everybody is frightened."

To cross the road to meet people who are different and belong to another culture, and to become their friend is to take a risk, it is the risk of peace.

I took this risk to leave a normal and conventional road when I begun l'Arche, encouraged by a holy priest. I had no plan; my idea was just live together, eat together, work together, have fun together and pray together.

Over the years l'Arche has been led by the beautiful, gentle and tender hand of God. So many wonderful men and women from different cultures, churches and religions, or without religion, seeking new ways of peace, have come to share their lives with those who are weak and fragile and have been transformed by them. They have discovered the wisdom hidden in the hearts of those who are weak and they have grown in love and in wisdom.

So it is that today our community in Belfast stands as a sign of unity between the two cultures of Northern Island. Our communities in the US, Canada and in UK and elsewhere stand as a sign of unity between people of different churches. Our little community in Bethlehem stands as a sign of unity between Christians and Muslims as they share their lives together. All our communities stand as a sign of the oneness of our human family. It is the weak and the poor who call us together to be a sign of peace.

It is true, to live our life together with those who have been humiliated and hurt, to grow in a love that Paul defines as patience, service, to believe all, to hope all, endure all and to accept all, we need to find a spirituality of love and of respect for each and every person; a spirituality that flows from the heart of God through our churches, religions and human wisdom. It is the message of Jesus, of Mahatma Gandhi and many others who call us to work for unity and peace.

Bishop Amos many of those to whom you awarded this prize before me were heroes for peace. Some were imprisoned for their courage and determination for peace some were assassinated. How is it you turned to us? We are a strange and crazy bunch in l'Arche.

The road of peace which we have learnt in l'Arche is a very simple one. You see we are not very austere or stressed, struggling to be heroes. We eat wonderfully, we drink merrily, of course coca cola, orange jus and now again wine and beer, moderately, we sing loudly and frequently out of tune, and we dance wildly and we play as much as possible. Feast days, birthdays are all occasions for parties and for fun, we pray with all our heart but not long hours. We do put our trust in God who is watching over us. Of course we do work in our workshops and therapies can be serious and be hard work. Each person is called to grow in inner peace and wisdom and of course we all grow to old age as time comes. There are sometimes heavy days when the wind blows strong and we feel we are floundering but at the last moment the gentle hand of God saves us.

The heart of l'Arche is to rejoice and to celebrate unity. We would like to be little signs of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love. For that we must all become like little children. Maybe that is our secret. Our secret too is that we want to live what Jesus asks us to live, wash each other feet as He did the night before he died.