

Remarks at the Pacem in Terris Award Ceremony
August 25, 2013
Davenport, Iowa

I need to begin with some brief thank you's:

- To Barb Arland-Fye for the lovely series of articles and the interview with Jean Vanier in the *Catholic Messenger*. I learned quite a bit!
- To the members of the Pacem in Terris Coalition for selecting Jean Vanier for your Peace and Freedom Award, and to Bishop Amos and Barb for traveling those thousands of miles to Trosly-Breuil to give the award to Jean in his home. It sounds like you had a good time!
- I lastly want to thank everyone who came today – including a number from other L'Arche communities in the region – but also those of you who perhaps don't know a lot about L'Arche, but who have been touched by what you have read in Barb's articles or elsewhere, and perhaps by challenge and suffering in your own lives. Thank you for being here.

I've been asked:

- to say a few words about L'Arche, and then
- to talk about how the life and work of Jean Vanier inspire the life of work of L'Arche in the Unites States.

What is L'Arche?

First off, the name: L'Arche is French for “the ark” – as in Noah’s ark, the boat that sheltered people and animals, saving them from the flood those many years ago. What is L'Arche today? Are we a home? A workshop? A good service agency? We are certainly those things, but more importantly – as our Identity Statement says:

*“We are **people**, with and without intellectual disabilities, **sharing life in communities** belonging to an **International Federation**. **Mutual relationships and trust in Good** are at the heart of our journey together. We **celebrate the unique value of every person and recognize our need for one another.**”*

The last I checked, there are about 144 L'Arche communities in about 35 countries around the world. In the United States, we have 18 L'Arche communities in places as diverse as Seattle, Mobile (Alabama), Kansas City, Washington, DC and Clinton, Iowa.

How many of you have been to a L'Arche community? If you have had the chance to visit or spend time in a L'Arche community, I believe that you will leave having experienced people sharing in the dailyness of life – eating, working, playing, resting and praying – not as clients and staff, but as friends and companions. If you hang around long enough, you might also notice how this way of sharing life can affect you. You might find yourself... slowing down...more present to others... more able to accept weakness – in others and in yourself, and ... feeling that you are loved not for what you do, but for who you are.

So, how does the life and work of Jean Vanier inspire the life and work of L'Arche in the United States?

I first want to comment on how we are inspired personally, and then share a bit about how Jean Vanier's life and work inspires L'Arche USA organizationally.

I think that one reason Jean inspires us is because we recognize that he is a person – like so many of us – who is **searching**.

I first met Jean on a footpath on a college campus in Quebec City. I was attending an international L'Arche meeting, and all the other participants were already in the hall. (As usual, I was running a little late.) I was approaching the hall from one direction; Jean was approaching from the other. We met in the intersection of these paths, with my heart pounding. (What should I say to Jean Vanier??) Not a man for small talk, Jean leaned downward, put his arm around my shoulder, and asked me simply: *Do you love Jesus?*

L'Arche, for Jean, has been a pathway into the heart of Jesus. Jean was searching for Jesus those many ago when he visited his mentor, Father Thomas, in the village of Trosly. What I believe has inspired and touched so many of us about Jean's life is that he has remained faithful to his initial call, and has found Jesus through his relationships with Raphael and Philippe and so many others who too often live on the edges of our society. In a world where speed and noise and flashing headlines can overwhelm our senses, Jean's life inspires us because he – a philosopher and a son of privilege – has lived his search for Jesus with such simplicity and humility.

Today, people called to L'Arche may – like Jean– be searching for a way to explore their faith. Others may be searching for acceptance, for friendship, or simply to serve others for a while. We hope that, through true friendship with people different from themselves, they come to find in L'Arche that they are loved and that they belong. They belong and have a place not just in their L'Arche community, but also in the world around them.

A quick story about belonging: A few years ago, I drove a couple of hours to visit one of our communities. I hadn't been there for many months, and arrived just in time for Friday worship. The small chapel was packed, but I managed to spot a seat next to Ricky D, a man with a disability. Ricky gave me a sideward, squinty glance and said "Oh, hi. I've been saving this place for you." I'm really quite certain that Ricky had no idea that I was coming. But, of course, I felt very special in that moment. And, as I got to know him better, I understood that Ricky has made many, many people feel that they have a place in his very big heart.

So, how is L'Arche in the U.S. inspired organizationally by Jean's life and work?

On so many levels, but here are three...

- **Jean was a "beginner."** The conditions for people with disabilities in the U.S. have changed a lot over the past 50 years since L'Arche began – thankfully, mostly for the better. And, it takes a bit more planning and structure to begin a L'Arche community today. Nevertheless, L'Arche USA is committed to finding the ways and resources to respond to the cry that remains urgent in this country for loving homes and lasting friendship for people with intellectual disabilities.

- **Jean is a learner, and a teacher.** Jean Vanier has given many talks and written many books over the years about what he has learned through his life with L'Arche and our sister organization, Faith and Light. (I recommend them to you.) One thing that Jean has revealed pretty openly is that L'Arche is not perfect. But, L'Arche has taught Jean and so many others about the transformative gift of sharing life with people who are different – people who are not so skilled in hiding their vulnerabilities. For this reason, L'Arche USA focuses much of our work on recruiting motivated people to this life, and providing retreats, trainings and other support to deepen and sustain their commitment.
- **Jean has a global vision:** While L'Arche began in a small village in rural France, Jean Vanier has always been concerned about our larger world. He has always seen L'Arche as being linked to other important movements for peace and human rights. L'Arche USA must also look outside of ourselves more intentionally to add our voices to others – be it for expanding access to health care for the poor, for celebrating the gifts of people with disabilities for our world, or for inter-religious understanding. Our communities will celebrate the 50th anniversary of L'Arche next year, and we intend to take this opportunity to step out in wonderful new ways.

Thank you again to the Pacem in Terris Coalition for honoring Jean Vanier and L'Arche with this award. Blessings on the important work you do for peace and justice here in the Quad Cities.