

By Msgr. Marvin Mottet

There are many things that could be said about the history of the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award. After a few initial remarks, I will limit myself to this year's award honoring Jean Vanier and the L'Arche movement. Father Jack Smith, the late professor of history at St. Ambrose, first brought up the idea of this award based on this wonderful (Pacem in Terris) encyclical at a board meeting of the Catholic Interracial Council (CIC). Charles Toney was president of the CIC. Both are deceased. I was called the "Chaplain," but was doing a lot of the background organizing for CIC.

This event honoring Jean Vanier and the L'Arche movement would not be taking place were it not for Sister Marjorie Wisor, OSF, a Clinton Franciscan. Sr. Marjorie, a French teacher at Mount St. Clare College in Clinton, Iowa, met Vanier and the L'Arche movement in her studies in France. Personally, I had never heard of Vanier or the L'Arche movement until Sr. Marjorie visited us at the Social Action Department. Four of us, Sr. Marjorie, Sister Concetta Bendicente, PHJC, Father Larry Brafman and I, decided to drive to Toronto, Canada, to visit Vanier while he was in Canada. We prayed all the way for wisdom and courage in starting a L'Arche home.

Originally, the first L'Arche home was planned for Davenport. We were interested in a beautiful older home on Kirkwood Avenue, today's site of the Bix run. We had been discussing this plan with the Scott County Board of Supervisors. One particular supervisor strongly opposed this plan and it died for lack of support. We felt that this particular supervisor was opposed to doing business with the Catholic Church, even though it was intended to help people in need.

Meanwhile, a Jewish couple that had been deeply involved with the Civil Rights Movement and CIC had decided to retire and move to the East Coast. They donated all their beautiful furniture to be used in the new L'Arche homes that were planned.

Since Sr. Marjorie and her community were in Clinton, we decided to move our plans to Clinton. We were very puzzled at this time about the turn of events. We had prayed hard and planned for the house in Davenport. We thought that we had a confirmation and an answer to our prayers. Now, I understand what God was doing: "writing straight with crooked lines." It turned out that Clinton was the best place for L'Arche. It had the full support of the Clinton Franciscans and ecumenical support from other denominations as well. At the same time, we at Social Action were starting Project Renewal, a program to assist some of the poorest families and children along the railroad tracks in west Davenport.

At about the same time, we had obtained a documentary on Vanier and L'Arche. We invited all the social workers in town to come and view the documentary at St. Vincent's Center. My impression was that they were totally mystified by the whole thing, especially Vanier's spirituality. "Why on earth would we want to do a thing like that?"

Later, I began to understand God's ways. Clinton was the perfect place for L'Arche and Davenport was the perfect place for Project Renewal. Both were badly needed, but in different places. Both have had a great history and both have had a great impact.

The last time that Clinton L'Arche was here at St. Ambrose to be honored, I gave most of the credit to Sr. Marjorie. I thought she gave too much credit to me. That just proves that it was God's work and not our own.