



Letter from Jean Vanier

Trosly, November 2008

Dear friends,

I feel humbled and grateful at all the cards, letters, mails, gifts, calls... (and pots of jam) wishing me well and offering prayers as I passed the gate into my 80 years. This letter, as you can see is a collective "thank you". I would have liked to write to each one of you and to each community, personally, but you can imagine I cannot! I must say I feel held, loved, warmed, strengthened by this hidden – yet not so hidden – gentle cloud of communion. It is like the cloud of the unknowing in which God is hidden and revealed. The celebration here in Trosly on 22 of September was like a beautiful fireworks of love, of thanksgiving, of laughter, of prayers. It was quiet as a sinking sun with a red glow, but it was bouncy and dancing as children flying on trapezes. How to describe all that I lived these days: a cry of thanks...

And I have just returned from Kolkata which was a marvellous experience. How can I describe this last international meeting where all our 135 communities were represented. It was audacious and yet deeply realistic to have it in India where our Indian communities have been struggling, growing and blossoming since 1970. We saw and touched the beauty and poverty of Kolkata; the city was lit up by millions of little lamps celebrating a hindu pilgrimage. We, in L'Arche, we lived the joy of meeting each other, praying together, listening to our growth and the vision of tomorrow: to be more committed to our weaker and vulnerable brothers and sisters so that their voices may be heard and their value seen and respected in our world; and begin a reflection on our commitment to truth, to God, to L'Arche and to our people.



Jean is « sent off into his eighties »

To conclude the week I was sent off into my eighties and my retirement with a long procession headed by a local brass band, there were nine home made elephants, and finally I brought up the rear sitting with Kashi and Peter de Cruz in a horse drawn carriage. And then all chaos broke out as all danced and sang, and sandal wood powder came over people like a cloud. Yes, Jean-Christophe and Christine are leading our vulnerable communities, made up of vulnerable people so wisely and beautifully and with trust in God, in a world that wants to manifest power. Thank God for them and for God who is protecting and guiding L'Arche.



With Christopher, Asha Niketan Bangalore

On the Friday we all made a pilgrimage to a house in Kolkata where Mahatma Gandhi in 1946 had fasted in order that horrible riots that had broken out in Kolkata, stop. It was a pilgrimage of and for peace. I have been touched by his life and by his capacity to love the enemy. Always to see the "good" in the enemy, for each one is a child of God and to believe that even those who appear "the worst" and the most cruel can change. For Gandhi this love is the power that rose up within him and is called to rise up within us all.

After Kolkata: Lourdes, where 200 delegates from many communities of Faith and Light from all over the world, came together. I was there only two days. A new constitution was voted, a president of the board

(Henri Major) an international coordinator (Ghislain du Chéné) were elected. Life is full in our communities around the world; our delegates were full of life. It was such a joy to be with Marie-Hélène and with so many people to whom I feel bonded to, in love and in the same vision. Yes thank God for protecting and guiding Faith and Light.

Some of you may be surprised if not shocked to discover that even after the good and wise words of my last letter you see and hear that I am travelling here and there – more there, than here. That does not eradicate the intention of quietness, presence and prayer ... but you will see that as of December things will be quieter!

While I was in the monastery of Orval - that quieter month of August where every year I take time to be with Jesus, to rest, to read, to walk in the woods - I did begin to write this letter. Here it is...

I must say that I feel happy and blessed by God. Things are changing for me.

Before I had a lot of energy, now much less. My legs get tired quickly. I walk more slowly and then stop to sit down and rest. And of course early to bed and later to rise, and, o yes, a sleep after lunch. Before my prayers were more active and I could kneel and stand at the appropriate times during the Eucharist. Now I stay seated.

In conversations I try to understand what is being said and no longer need to say my bit and have the last word. Everything has become slower. As there is less to do, there are times when I can just sit and breathe and watch and listen.

A few days ago I watched some swallows in their nest. Poor things, they seemed rather cramped, their nest was too small for growing adolescent swallows. One would fly off and then come back. Was it mother swallow or just a visitor? In the Gospel of Luke (cf 7.18 ss) we see that at one moment John the Baptist in prison goes through a period of anguish and doubt. Was his cousin Jesus really the one that was to come: the Messiah? So he sends messengers to check with Jesus: "Are you the one, or should we expect another?" Jesus answers: "Tell John that the blind see, the lame walk, and the good news is announced to the poor". That is the sign that the Messiah is present; that is the sign of God's work.



With Christine and Jean-Christophe



Pilgrimage with Gandhi

I watched these swallows with joy and wonderment. Before, when I had a lot of energy, maybe I would not have stopped to contemplate swallows having fun in their too small a nest. I had to go from one place to another. Busy.

As I looked at the heads of these adolescent swallows peeping over the wall of their nest, I thought of Jesus and his words about the birds of the air not worried about food and clothes and the morrow (Matt 6, 25) Now, I have time so stop and watch and rejoice in the beauty of creation. All things in the hands of Jesus.

Now, at times, I sit in my chair - a comfortable one – an I put my hand in the hand of Jesus. Smile at Him, he

smiles back. Just a gentle presence. His heart in mine, and mine in his. Nothing glorious, nothing mystical, no great sentiments, no words. I cannot say that I have said my prayers, no rosary no psalm recited, nothing accomplished. I am just there with Jesus and I like being there with him, it is fun. It is ail so simple and gentle and restful.

At other times - not so restful – I feel lonely and empty inside. Nothing to do. It is not so easy then to sit there and wait. Waiting for what? I do not know. My prayer then becomes a little cry. The last words of the Bible become mine "Come Lord Jesus come" (Apoc 22,20) It is not the cry for the final meeting, just a cry of

loneliness, of emptiness. Waiting for a moment of peace, waiting for Jesus. If I can repeat over and over again "Come Lord Jesus come a little moment of peace come. The cry becomes a presence. I am discovering new ways of prayer flowing from life, from my lack of energy, from my very weakness.

I like to meet people and listen to them. However my eyes and ears are not yet those of innocence: to see first of all the beauty in others, not what is negative, their wounded humanity; not to judge when I have a log in my own eyes (and ears) (Math 7,1). I would like to have eyes and ears of kindness and gentleness which contemplate in the heart of each one a presence of God. I still have a mighty long way to go for my eyes and ears to be transformed. Only Jesus can do that. Of course I have to make a few efforts to help him on this work of transformation.



« Chaos broke out as all danced and sang »

I rejoice living in my community - in my home - with men and women who are vulnerable. They have had many years of pain, loneliness and rejection before coming to L'Arche. Their weakness and their cry attracted me to this life, for I believe that they are precious to God. They have helped me so much to be with God gently and peacefully. As my life draws closer to the end I discover more and more that those who are poor and weak and vulnerable are a presence of God. They have transformed me. Now I am growing weaker, didn't Jesus reveal to Paul "My strength is made manifest through your weakness". So I will discover that I too am precious to God not for what I do, or have done, but for who I am: a child of the Father

My prayer today is that the many, many people with disabilities throughout our world who are in the streets and locked up in institutions or lonely and that their parents may find a L'Arche or a Faith and Light community or other forms of community. So many are in deep suffering and anguish, they are waiting for a community that will help discover this beauty and value and their place in our world.

My love to each one of you.

Jean Vanier

Please send your email address to secretariat.jv@larche.org if you wish to receive this letter by email. You may also subscribe to this letter on the website www.jean-vanier.org.

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