

## The Broken Vanier



I have known Jean Vanier for almost 50 years. The blind spot, the dark side of his personality, is unknown to me. For me he became a friend, an inspirer and guide.

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After the Norwegian newspaper Vårt Land published the news that Jean Vanier, the founder of l'Arche and co-founder of the movement Faith and Light, is accused of sexual abuse of six women, it was consoling to receive a warm and comforting greeting "from a nun":

*"We are praying. It is so unspeakably sad and painful. but as we say: all the good God did through him lives on. And we must remember that blind spots are found in the personality of most of us, and that we often do not know how it will reveal itself. But none of us can free ourselves from sin and shame. We must all beg for God's mercy."*

**Regular times for praying.** Today, Ash Wednesday 2020, my thoughts return to Trosly-Breuil, a village outside Paris, to where I came as a 20-year-old, to learn French, I thought, but as I was to learn revealed itself to be something quite different. The first time I was there for a couple of months. I belonged to the l'Arche house, the first house Jean Vanier founded, where adults with disabilities and others lived together. At this time Jean Vanier also belonged to this house community, so I ate all meals with him and the others in the community. We also had regular daily prayer together, simple prayers with a candle and an icon on the table.

After the meals I often wandered along the main street in the village with Jean. Sometimes we talked, sometimes we walked together in silence, I to the workshop where I worked and he to his office.

In the morning, when I came to l'Oratoire, the small chapel in the village, Jean always sat there, in prayer. He was always present at daily mass, unless he was away travelling.



*Jean Vanier received the Templeton prize in 2018.  
He died the year after.*

**Wounds and weakness.** These are the pictures and experiences which will never leave me, people with disabilities participating in the community and in the church, and praying and singing with their own voice. This community affected me greatly: it has shown me the way to God and later to the Catholic Church.

One of the Bible texts Jean Vanier loved to meditate over was Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well. Numerous times I have heard him meditate over this text. His interpretation and understanding of the text touched me and my life.

I hope Jean is now sitting at the well where the Samaritan woman sat, together with Jesus, and that Jesus will ask him for something to drink. Perhaps Jean will answer: How can you ask me for something to drink?  
Most likely Jesus will carefully and gently touch his wounds and his weakness.

**Not to romanticise.** He shared his weaknesses with us, how he could be impatient and hard, and that he had a lot of aggression inside himself. He shared this with us on the retreats he led. But the darkness which is now revealed I have never experienced in the 50 years I have known him. This he could not share with anyone. Perhaps the loving look from Jesus now helps him to acknowledge this.

This is not an attempt to romanticise. I am shocked to discover this, for me, unknown dark side in him. In the report which l'Arche has newly published it is confirmed that Jean Vanier is accused of sexual abuse of six adult women who have previously worked in l'Arche, a community of people some with disabilities, sharing their lives, living and working together.

The leaders of international l'Arche, Stephan Posner and Stacy Cates Carney, write the following in a letter dated 22.02.2020:

*"We are shocked by these discoveries and unreservedly condemn these actions, which are in total contradiction with the values Jean Vanier otherwise stood for. They are incompatible with the basic rules of respect and dignity of persons, and contrary to the fundamental principles on which L'Arche is based.*

**To meet in love.** It has become clearer to me that he also was a broken man, who allowed himself to be misled and who bore a darkness which he did not manage to share with anyone, and in this way let it come into the light. I hope and pray that Jean's need and imperfection and God's mercy will meet in love.

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