

Trosly, May 2007

Dear Friends,

First of all I would like to tell you about what we have been living here in Trosly as Jacqueline, Barbara and Claire move into a new phase of greater fragility and with the sudden death of Patrick Mathias.

Jacqueline was Père Thomas' secretary before L'Arche; I have known her since 1950 when I joined Père Thomas in "l'Eau Vive". She has been here since the beginning, fixing up and decorating all our houses in Trosly, Cuise and Pierrefords with competence and creativity. She has truly been a support and a source of grace for me. Today, at 81, and after five years with Parkinson disease, she is obliged to use a wheel chair and has great difficulty expressing herself. She decided to go to a home for the elderly about 10 km from Trosly where she suffers sometimes from the way she is treated. But she is able to come regularly to Trosly for meals at La Ferme, to participate in the Eucharist and in retreat weekends.

Due to her cancer and a very strong chemo, Barbara is going through a difficult moment of great fatigue and has trouble walking. Barbara arrived in Trosly in 1965 and has been my secretary, my "memory" and support since 1967. It is beautiful to see her courage and perseverance. Claire has had a new bout with cancer which has obliged her to begin a new treatment and to leave her role as coordinator of all the communities of L'Arche in L'Oise. That has touched me and all of us deeply. She continues to be with her foyer Massabielle and to be full of life and hope! All of this has called forth many gestures of kindness and support and solidarity within the community and throughout the wider family of L'Arche.

I also need to write about the sudden death of Patrick Mathias, our psychiatrist for the last 25 years. He had a heart attack on April 24th. Patrick was in fact more than a psychiatrist for us; he was a friend. Whenever one of our people was in deep pain, he brought new light. He was a man of amazing goodness, understanding what it means to be human. He had such a capacity to give life and consolation. Pierrot said that he was like Père Thomas: "after being with him you felt so much better". Patrick loved life: his family, his animals; he had deep respect for each person whatever their situation or suffering. In many ways I learned from him how to be more human, more Christian. He was a teacher of humanity. He did not share our Christian faith but was a sign and a presence of God in our community. I believe that Jesus, the Word who became flesh, came to teach us how to live more humanly; how to love in truth. Patrick taught us to be more human. He was a man of tenderness. At his funeral we read a few lines of a text he wrote:

"Tenderness is a way of life, where gentleness and kindness remind us how different it is from sentimentalism or romanticism and that it requires maturity. With tenderness there is no more protective carapace: we expose ourselves and risk being hurt at any moment..... How to widen the "we" in order to create a humanity where each person is a brother, a father, a mother... each one like us. The "we" both affirms the separation as well as the bonding. It is a continual search for communication... Tenderness brings a sense of relaxation or well being, a softening of our defences. It is like a hinge or a pivot. It tempers the changes, tensions and lack of coherence in our lives and brings together desire and love. It is a sign of complementarity. To be adult is to be tender, to be fragile, like everyone else".

I have had the opportunity to meet Stanley Hauerwas twice during these past months, once at a conference in Aberdeen University and then at a meeting in Trosly. Time magazine named him the most important theologian today in the United States. In Paris, at the “Institut Catholique” he also gave a talk on L’Arche as a place of the revelation of God’s tenderness. I am amazed to see how theologians in the United States are working on questions around the theology of people marked by disability or vulnerability: the mystery Paul reveals when he gives us the words of Jesus to him: “My strength is manifested in your weakness” (2 Cor). Stanley Hauerwas truly has something to tell us about the deep meaning of L’Arche. And isn’t it amazing to see how Patrick’s and Stanley’s vision coincide?

Shortly after Easter, I also had the joy of making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with 35 elders in l’Arche: to walk in the steps of Jesus. It was also a time of retreat, a time for each one of us to listen to Jesus’ words calling us to rediscover and deepen the mystery of l’Arche: to be open and welcoming to the weakest and the most vulnerable at the heart of the Church and of humanity. It was truly a time of grace. And all this was taking place in this land of conflict and oppression, just as during the time of Jesus. We listened to the personal testimonies of Jews and Palestinians, recognizing that today there is a strong current in Israeli society which opposes more and more the oppressive and brutal actions of their government. There is a group called “women in black” who demonstrate each week against the oppression, journalist like Amira Haas and Gideon Levy who are speaking out. I must admit I find it very hurtful personally when I am accused of being antisemitic because of my criticism of what Israel is doing. I love the beauty of the Jewish people, but I can well understand the anger of Biblical prophets who were infuriated and cried out their anger against what their leaders were doing! Obviously, the terrorist actions of Palestinians are also horrible and must be condemned. The people of Israel and of Palestine both live in fear. But the answer is not in the building of a wall and planting Jewish settlements in Palestinian territory. It is in the respect for international law and real search together for justice through dialogue and help from the international community. The situation -as in Iraq -is so fragile. Everyone is so vulnerable.

And if I spoke of Barbara, Claire, Jacqueline and Patrick it is because their fragility is a reminder of the fragility of each one of us.

The international situation is fragile. The balance of our earth is fragile. The gap between the rich and poor is widening and everywhere we find conflicts and seeds of war. Each one of us is so fragile. We were born in weakness and after a brief time of strength we move again into fragility; our hearts remain fragile and vulnerable. The communities of l’Arche and of Faith and Light remain fragile They depend on men and women who are open and vulnerable to hearing the cry of the weak and to commits themselves to live in friendship with them like brothers and sisters. Our communities are places where love and life are freely given. Governments can proclaim laws, the UN can write a Charter for people marked by disability but law can never replace authentic love and the tenderness that come from a personnel commitment.

During the pilgrimage – retreat I spoke about the first beatitude of: “lack”, when we are lacking something. When we are in need, either we close up in ourselves, in our sadness or in our hardness of heart or else we open up to a relationship in order to ask for help. We humbly turn towards others and towards Jesus. Isn’t it weakness that links people together? The “I need you” is at the heart of community. It is not structures that can create communities which are alive, open and loving (although adequate structures should help this to be so).

Community is created by *people*, by *each person* who comes freely, motivated by their faith in people and by their love that creates and maintains community life. The lack of assistants or lack of funds creates places where we need to ask for help. I love to say “Come! Come and celebrate life with us and to celebrate it with those who are weak and vulnerable”. And especially during this time of Pentecost we cry out “Come Holy Spirit! Fill our hearts with your love”. I discover more and more the weakness and vulnerability of God. How the All Powerful One becomes powerless in front of our human freedom. God suggests, invites, offers and knocks at the doors of our hearts, but never forces the door open. God has such a deep respect for each one of us. God and the poor wait patiently for us to respond.. We can deny his existence. We can turn our backs on God, we can turn away from others, from love. God waits to give us a new strength, the strength of the Holy Spirit. I discover more and more the patience and vulnerability of God and I love him more and more.

JeanVanier