

- Orval, August 2013 -

Letter of Jean

Dear friends,

When we arrived here at Orval (Odile drove me) there were no swallows. I expect they were waiting somewhere between Africa and here for a bit of warm air. And then without warning they zoomed in... and now they are dancing around the clock tower, swirling around in the air, diving towards the pond, dipping in and taking up a gulp of refreshing water and then darting off into the air, whizzing around, nearly bumping into each other. And then suddenly, as if a bell had rung, they disappear, each to their nest where no earthly eyes can spot them. A night of rest. How beautiful they are, free, yes free.

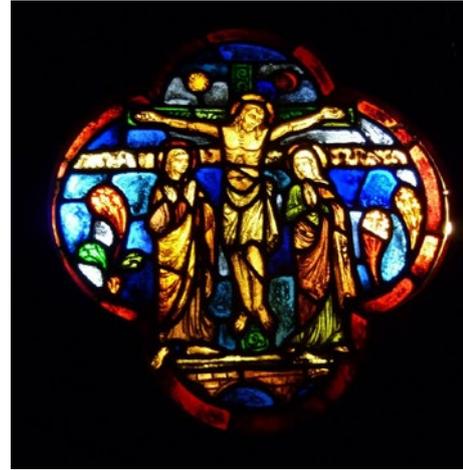
And so, here I am after nearly a week. I feel at home - quiet and rested. Rejoicing in the singing of the monks, now more numerous around their good Father, Abbé Lode. It is a joy to have times of prayer with them and then times of prayer alone.

Notre Dame
d'Orval



I am not sure I know how to pray but I am there, I want to be there with Jesus: me looking at him and him looking at me.

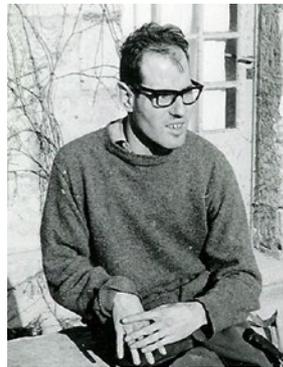
No words, just there. Sometimes I doze off, maybe now and again I slumber through prayer. Is it prayer, does it matter? Other times, thoughts pop in and out of my head. Not very interesting. Then my mind stills again and a moment of quietude returns to my soul. Maybe to pray is to sit and wait, waiting for a meeting with God who comes when we neither know the day, nor the hour. Prayer, for me, is to rest in that meeting. It is to welcome God in my heart. Prayer has become for me an immense thanksgiving. A big thank you to God.



Stained glass from Orval



Raphaël Simi



Philippe Seux



Jean, Pierrot Crépieux, Pierrot Grelet,
Philippe Seux

A thank you for creation (the swallows and all) and a thank you for the jubilee year that we are entering, 50 years of L'Arche and also 40 years of Faith and Light.

What an unexpected gift! I still can't believe it. Those crazy, crazy beginnings with Raphael and Philippe in the dilapidated house in Trosly. No plans for the future, only to love each person and each day as it comes. Welcoming each new event and reacting to it hopefully with a little wisdom and common sense. And so people came, encouraged by the wonderful, holy Père Thomas who was there praying for the community as it began. People arrived, help arrived, money arrived. Jacques, then Pierrot, then Lucien came. We got a little bit crowded. Henry came and Louis the architect came to help. And so it went on. Because it was clear that I could not do it on my own, more people came to help. It is always like that, where there is emptiness and a need people come to fill the need and so we grew.



First home of L'Arche at Trosly

Behind all that, there was the mysterious hand and heart of God.

For God had a plan for L'Arche and Faith and Light which little by little became known and needs to become better known still, over the coming years... Yes, thank you, my God and thank you to so many who will receive this letter, and to those who will not as well as to those who will hear of it in the contemplation of all things in the heart of God.

For L'Arche and Faith and Light, I really believe, are the work of God calling each one of us, so that those who have, for too long, been seen as useless or less than human, and sometimes have even been exterminated, may find their rightful place in the world, in the churches and in all religions. Their beauty is their littleness and their greatness is a cry, a revelation of tenderness at the heart of creation.

By their very being they bring hope to our world and to each of us, if we could all, with and without responsibilities, but respond to their cry. In their hearts is a secret wisdom, the wisdom of tenderness, the wisdom of love, of communion, of hearts, the wisdom of laughter and of dancing, even the wisdom of folly, of breaking through the culture of normality and of what is «correct» into a new freedom. Yes, my prayer flows from this immense thanks for the humble hands of God who has called us forth so gently. Yes, it is all so beautiful that I stand or sit or kneel in awe. «God has dispersed the proud in their hearts and removed the powerful from their thrones, and he has lifted up those that are humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.» This is the song of Mary, (in Luke 3): it is the song of us all. I am still sad that so many in our churches and outside do not really understand or do not want understand that to live with people with disabilities can really change people and lead them to God. They can become a sacrament, just as every meeting can become a sacrament if our hearts are open.



With Faith and Light



Members of L'Arche Queretaro and L'Arche Daybreak communities
Photo : Warren Pot

Iarrived here a little tired,
as the year in Trosly had been full.

Not much travelling, many retreats given at La Ferme. So many times words seemed to flow from my center in spite of fatigue and a certain inner poverty. It is such a gift to speak of Jesus, to announce the Gospel of John in French and in English. People seem to be touched and their hearts opened. I feel humbled by this gift. My health has been good on the whole; yes, a touch of fatigue but what can I expect as I get to 85. My arrhythmic heart continues joyfully on its way and my legs are sometimes a bit wobbly. They too seem to be getting tired - I feel that tiredness as I walk in the woods here in Orval.

Over the year, Odile has been a magnificent help in a hundred and one ways - doctor's appointments, social security and all sorts of things around Lazarus house. She does her best to get me walking as much as possible and doing a few exercises, not to mention driving me when necessary.



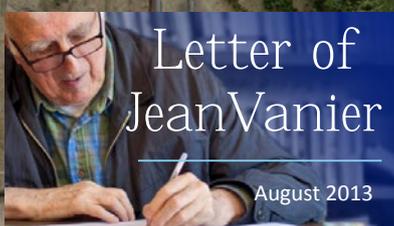
I feel it such a privilege to be in my community in Trosly after nearly 50 years and to be helped by so many wonderful people.

Christine Mc Grievy is our leader (after 13 years as being vice international coordinator of L'Arche). She has such wisdom and such marvelous energy. The community is being more and more led by those with evident disabilities: Christine sees to that. They are the heart and life of the community.

Pope Francis (what a gift he is) has mentioned a number of times the importance of a culture of meetings. I feel that this is the heart of all my talks and my life: to meet Jesus, to meet people and to see each one as a gift of God. I still have a lot to learn, to discover how humility is the center of love. Pray that I may discover this humility.

As I end this letter there is talk of the Americans, the French and the British intervening actively in Syria to punish the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian army. Are they - are we all - heading towards a great international conflict? My God, my God. Must we go on killing each other? Where is hope in our broken world? Isn't it in little communities which open their hearts to the weak and the rejected? Those who are weak awaken the hearts of the strong, and the strong give security to the weak. Together we can become a sign of unity and of peace.

My new book, Signs of the Times-Seven paths of Hope for a Troubled World, will be coming out at the end of September. I hope you'll enjoy it. The publisher is Darton Longman and Todd in England.



To this letter, I am attaching the little talk I gave as I received the «Pacem in Ter- ris» prize in July.

This prize, awarded by Bishop Amos of the United States, had previously been given to many prestigious peace leaders (Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Archbishop Helder Camara, Mother Teresa, Hildegard Goss-Mayr and others).

I was astonished amazed and delighted that this prize should be given to L'Arche through me. We are truly, and want to be truly, places of peace and a sign to our world.

Thank you - each one of you - for your wishes for my 85th birthday.



Pascal Denardo, Barb Arland-Fye, Bishop Amos
Photo: Robert Laskowiecki

I feel united with all of you,

Jean

