



Letter from Jean Vanier

Trosly, May 2008

Dear friends,

Here I am in Kenya. You may well ask, "Why has my pilgrimage brought me to this African country which went through a lot of turmoil recently"? Well, it's a long story! For me it began in Bangalore when I gave a retreat in October 2006. At this retreat there was a young Italian priest named Father Gabriele. Here is his story. He is a parish priest in the diocese of Nyahururu, Kenya. One day 10 years ago when visiting a family whose home he had been asked to bless, he heard a noise. In response, he opened a cupboard door to find Thomas hidden there, a boy with a severe disability. The family was embarrassed and ashamed at having such a child. It was out of this encounter that the community which came to be known as Saint Martins was born. This strange and unexpected meeting aroused the curiosity of Father Gabriele.



Kenya

"Are there other people with disabilities in the parish?" He spoke to the other priests and ministers and it seemed that 5 or 6 such people were identified in the immediate area. He then called together a group of people, volunteers from the area, to see what could be done to answer the most serious needs. This group of volunteers went from doorway to doorway. Within a year or more they discovered, over quite a large area (more or less 40 km x 40 km), about 2,000 people with disabilities, the vast majority hidden away in back rooms. They also discovered orphaned children, many of whom had been looking after their parents and relatives dying of AIDs, and were themselves HIV+. Gradually other miseries were also discovered: abandoned widows, young boys becoming delinquent in the streets, abused girls and women and so on.

As all these miseries and needs became known, local people came forward, to help those in pain. Of course the volunteers, filled with good will and the desire to serve, were inexperienced. It became apparent over time that motivation can dwindle and fade, and the question became how to help maintain the level of commitment? Formation sessions, both professional and spiritual, were needed. All the churches in the area were contacted. Gradually over a thousand volunteers have come forward to be trained and committed. So was born a vast movement, radically ecumenical, bringing life to people in need and also transforming those who felt called to serve.

You can imagine that I wanted to see and touch the totality of this African realization, a movement of compassion and competence serving the needs of people in a large area, working hand in hand with churches and local government (not always very present). Just imagine!.... the volunteers going into villages, meeting all the mothers with severely disabled children, helping them and their neighbours to share amongst themselves, empowering them to come together to share, to pray together, giving them support, and helping them to find professional resources when necessary.

I am accompanied by Martha Bala, who had met Father Gabriele in Bangalore and who had been head of our community in Calcutta during



Jean and Father Gabriele

the 70s. We were able to see and touch this amazing work born in the Spirit and inspired and guided by the spirit which is spreading over this whole area. We came to see the reality, and to meet the people. We rejoiced in a special way to meet Andrew and all the L'Arche community from Kampala. They had traveled, 39 of them, for 14 hours in a rented bus to be with us, first in Nairobi where I gave a retreat at Tangaza University, and then here in Nyahururu. For me it was a great joy to be with our community, overflowing with celebration and love. Grace flowed from the presence of Dorothy and Maimuna in their wheel beds which carried their twisted bodies and radiant faces.

It has been a full and beautiful time giving the retreat this week to all the volunteers of St Martins, but also to many of the people of the area, mothers, fathers and young people, 300 in all. At different moments during the week when I was not giving a talk, we were able to leave the retreat centre to visit various locales where Saint Martins operates.

The first morning in Nyahururu we met with the leaders of Saint Martins, and listened to their witness. We were in amazement and thanksgiving to God for all that the Holy Spirit is accomplishing through all these men and women of different Christian churches so deeply united in love. This unity radiates through all that is being done there. We attended a special mass in a hall of Saint Martins, where mothers with disabled children from the surrounding area had been invited to attend for the day, and many had traveled long distances to be there.

The HIV+ orphan boys and girls were there as well, in special T-shirts for the occasion, and performed a beautiful dance for everyone, with candles which they held high as they sang. Later that week we visited these same children in their home, Thalita Kum, where they again sang and danced for us, and where we were able to interact with them a little more. We were very moved by their joy and their beauty. HIV+ children are brought to this home when they are first identified as sick and abandoned. There they are given nutritious food, and for those who require, appropriate medications. When they are well and strong enough, Saint Martins places them with individual families.



Jean with Dorothy and Maimuna



A HIV+ child welcomed by Saint Martins'

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.

Here, through Saint Martins, a wonderful work of God is rising up, revealing that when the poverty and deep needs of people are uncovered and manifested, many rise up as volunteers to give support, and enter into a relationship of friendship with those in need. This is a revelation of what is church, as the different churches unite in compassion to serve the broken body of Christ.

I am a pilgrim. We are all pilgrims. My life has been a pilgrimage. Soon I will be going through the gate of my 80th birthday. I feel excited. What is that gate opening up for me? A new life?

Many of you know Jacqueline. She was the secretary of Père Thomas and I knew her at l'Eau Vive in 1950. When I started L'Arche she was there helping Père Thomas. She helped us to furnish, decorate, sometimes buy and redo houses. She was a precious presence to many. Now she has Parkinson's disease. We could not keep her in the community because of all the care she needed. She has a room in a nearby home for old people, but people go frequently to bring her to the Farm at L'Arche, to live the Eucharist with us. I am deeply touched by her; she is in a wheelchair, has great difficulty speaking and we have difficulty understanding her when she does speak. However, through all that she is radiant, and there is a beautiful peace that shines through her weakness. She has become a presence of love.

I hope and pray that when the moment of greater weakness comes for me, that I can laugh and rejoice and be happy with what will be given to me. Shakespeare in King Lear says through aging...we will be like birds in a cage (a weakening body)

"So we'll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,- who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;- and take upon's the mystery of things, as if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out, in a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones, that cbb and flow by th'moon." (Lear V. iii 8-19)



**Jacqueline d'Halluin and
Père Thomas**

It is a gentle time for me as I come to the end of this period of my life, where in the future I will travel less, and no more visit communities. I had dreamt of going to Vietnam and China, I had dreamt of returning to the Ivory Coast to visit our community, and see and share again with N'Goran and others. I had dreamt of returning to Haiti, and to our communities in Latin America – I had been prevented from going there with Nadine a year or so ago because of sickness.

My dream now is to live in my community, in my home, to live a simple life in Trosly. I will try to live what I have preached for so many years, hoping to be a support and not a burden to my community, trying to deepen my relationship with Jesus and with my brothers and sisters. I will continue, as long as I can, to give retreats at the Farm, the little spiritual center at the heart of L'Arche. My joy is to announce Jesus and the love of God, to announce the presence of God in those who are the most vulnerable and to announce also the humility and the vulnerability of God.

So I am a pilgrim wanting to live well the last stage of my life not as a loss of activities but of gaining a new way to live. I am also realizing how L'Arche and all our communities are like pilgrims. Pilgrims are heading for a holy place, and their hearts want to be holy. The pilgrimage is filled with the unexpected: surprise meetings with beautiful people, accidents, sore feet and blisters, horrible weather (raining or too hot) and all the rest. There is no real security except pilgrims know where they are going: the holy place. They are not always sure they will find the necessary food and a place to sleep.

Certainly, all of our communities would love to have stability, a large group of well trained people, ardent in spirituality, focused in a prayerful life, recognized and valued by local authorities, convinced of the vision of the weak, who will heal the strong, secure financially, and so on, and so on.

The reality is not like that. Our communities are pilgrim communities. We are not even sure who are or are not members of our communities, because membership is more of a spirit than a law. We never have enough assistants, so few are prepared to stay a long time in our homes. We have a beautiful vision, a vision to be like the yeast in the bread of society, and where the weak heal the strong. We are continually shaken by unexpected events, strong winds which make people topple over, but also extraordinary events when we can almost see the long hand of God protecting us and holding those who are the weakest and the most vulnerable. L'Arche and Faith and Light are not like well constructed, well known monuments, glorious cathedrals, prestigious universities, efficient hospitals; all fixed, stable, on firm ground. We are but little homes filled with happy prayerful celebrating people whose fragility is marked on their bodies, minds and spirits, and with assistants and friends who believe in a spirit of love and of tenderness. Yes we are a pilgrim people, holding a vision and walking daily to a promised land of love. However, lets face it, there are many cultural and historic factors in our modern world which render difficult the living out of the vision. Yet L'Arche and Faith and Light are born of God, and God will watch over us.

I have just finished reading a remarkable book about the theology of disability. It is called "Vulnerable Communion" (Brazos Press) and is written by Thomas Reynolds who teaches theology at Emmanuel College in Toronto. I cannot recommend it enough. For some it can be difficult reading for it is dense. But it is filled with light and a clear and strong vision, which is the vision of L'Arche and Faith and Light.

For some of you it will soon be holiday time (for others it will soon be winter) Holiday time is holy days. I will be in my monastery in Belgium. Time to rest, to pray, to read, to walk, to listen to the birds, to listen to the gentle music of God. I will be in communion with you – be it holy days or winter days (days of stress...), let us pray for each other and for all in our world who are suffering of loneliness and despair.

Peace, peace, peace.

Jean Vanier