



Trosly, May 2011

Dear friends,

It is springtime, it is springtime! The sun is warming us up, the birds are singing, and lo and behold, after the snow drops, come violets, little marguerites, daffodils, crocuses and thousands of other little flowers. And then the flower-show on the fruit trees. By my door, there is a little trained apple tree, full, literally full of flowers: it is resplendent with flowers, a veritable explosion of flowers to promise fine fruit, come the summer. And then there is the vine. After the meeting at Ottrot, where all the communities of L'Arche in France gathered in 1996, they gave me a little stick of wood. Apparently, it was a vine. I planted it, unsure both of myself and the stick of wood. And then in April 1997, when this stick of wood appeared totally dead, there appeared on it a tiny green shoot, which turned into a single leaf, and then many leaves shot out all over the place, and then came the grapes. This little stick of a vine became a great vine, which – several days ago – brought forth a little bud. Yes, it is springtime.

At the time of my last letter, life here was full of snow. For the whole month of December, there were icy roads and the cold would penetrate everywhere. Now the cold is forgotten, and life is there. Allow me to quote a poem of Christian Bobin: *“I have the secret, I hold the secret at the tips of my fingers as one holds a fragile butterfly between two pinched fingers. Above all, it is vital not to squeeze, not to push, not to speak too much about it. The secret is that the heart of those who die explodes with joy.”* After the suffering of winter, there is spring. Yes, there is an explosion of joy for those who make the passage from death towards life, but for those on the earth who see their friends passing on, it is a moment of suffering.

We are at this moment, in a season of Lent, which will end in the death of Jesus. Jesus and his message are not wanted. He came to propose a way of communion and of peace to a world darkened by competition and division, by hatred and by war.

With his death and resurrection a very little way of peace appeared and was entrusted to some people to proclaim that we are not called to competition but to love. Yes, God wants us to be a new force, a new spirit to reveal love.

For sure, in our times there are terrible tragedies: Haiti, Pakistan, Ivory Coast, Japan, Libya, and so many other places not spoken about as well as all the hearts murdered in each of our countries. We humans are fragile. Our world is fragile. At the same time, in all these places of suffering, there are so many gestures of love and of courage. At the foot of the cross of Jesus there was his mother. When Jesus was living a terrible humiliation, abandoned by his friends, there was one person close by him. She was saying to him, *“I love you, I have confidence in you.”* She was supporting him with her love. L'Arche, like Faith and Light, is being born at a moment of history when a lot of people with a disability are being aborted before their birth. At this very moment God had to inspire places, not just for their occupation but to reveal that these are wonderful human people, who have a gift to offer to others. And if we enter into relationship with them, they have a power to

transform our hearts. Out of the greatest tragedy - their death - are born places which declare their value and their beauty. God is watching over our wounded humanity.

Sometimes I hear people saying that now I am 82, I can take a break, since I no longer have any responsibilities. In fact, my life now is taking on an even more profound meaning. I can live the essential, which is not to “do for” but to “live with” the weakest people.

When I left the Navy in 1950, I almost joined a little community called “Friendship House” at the heart of Harlem, the black district of New York. Thomas Merton had spoken about it in his autobiography. I visited this community when my ship – an aircraft carrier – docked in New York, at Easter 1950. Somehow, I had an intuition that for me, to live like a disciple of Jesus would be to live with the excluded and the poor. In the same way, I had also been touched by the “Catholic Worker” communities founded by Dorothy Day in the United States, where the people on the streets are given food and accommodation in a spirit of fraternity, the spirit of the Gospel. I had also been very touched and inspired by the life of Charles de Foucauld and the Little Sisters and Brothers of Jesus: small communities where a few people lived together in humility and simplicity in rough, poor districts, towns and villages, not wanting to convert people, nor even to bring them economic aid but simply to reveal to them that someone loves them and respects them and that they are beautiful and beloved of God.

As you know, in the event I did not go and join the community in Harlem, but rather Eau Vive, founded by Pere Thomas. My bond with him resulted in my coming to Trosly and beginning to live with Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, whom I took out of a depressing institution in the region of Paris, where there were too many people and a lot of violence. I had become aware that people with a disability were among the most oppressed people, abused and often shut away in their homes or institutions. In welcoming them, I fulfilled the dream that I had in 1950 to live with people with excluded people, so that their dignity could be recognised.



Raphael Simi, Jean Vanier et Philippe Seux

For years I had a role of leadership within my community, as well as for L'Arche International and for Faith and Light. Today, I have no specific role of responsibility, but of course I have always been linked to a foyer where I take my meals. I have always wanted to be a friend and brother to each member of the community and of other communities. I have wanted to be with my brothers and sisters to pray, to eat and to celebrate together. Today, this aspect of living and eating with excluded people (which Jesus calls a beatitude, Luke 14) has become the heart of my life.

I feel more and more convinced that God has chosen the weakest, the most foolish, the most abused to confound the powerful and the intellectuals. Their simplicity, their hearts, often more obviously open than their intellectual abilities, their deep thirst for a relationship, seem to make them free more personally to God who is love and relationship. This loving God feels comfortable with them.

Isaiah, (57.15) said in the name of God *“I make my home in high and holy places, but my home is also with what is poor and lost.”* Psalm 113 says *“out of the dust, God raises the poor, and the needy he lifts from the dunghill.”* Often, in their rivalry, the strong exclude and crush the weak. God is with the weak. My joy is to be there with them, celebrating life.

Life in my foyer is fairly simple: apart from the meals and the prayer, I love to do the washing up with everyone. I should say that everything comes out so hot from the dishwasher that it is already pretty dry; therefore, my service – performed while sitting down – is neither tiring nor demanding. It is however a moment of joy and

laughter. Patrick is not very efficient, and neither is Eric, but we have fun together.

My life here at Trosly, when there is no retreat to give at La Ferme, is rather relaxed. In the morning, I meet people, after lunch I take a nap, before receiving visitors in the afternoon, then the Eucharist followed by supper at the Val, and of course drying the cups and plates, and then prayer together. Most of the time, we are 20 at the meals. And of course, I have moments of silence with Jesus.

I confess that these days, I do feel myself to be a bit of a 'dinosaur'. Most assistants and often people with disabilities have mobile phones. As for myself, I am accustomed to stationary telephones. But I have gradually managed to get used to mobile phones: I used to think that everyone in the street had gone bonkers, talking to themselves, but I eventually discovered that they were speaking to their friends via these little gadgets. Next, I discovered that this little machine is also a camera, television, computer with Google and calendar, and I was completely flabbergasted. How is that possible?

I am told that on average, the French watch TV for 3 hours and 20 minutes each day. Now, there are certainly a lot of interesting things on TV but there is also a lot of fantasy and violence. The danger is that TV does not help our human maturing. Maturing is not just a matter of 'enduring' reality, but of accepting it, welcoming it, and then responding, not out of aggression or depression, nor yet by escaping into virtual reality, illusion or ideology, but with wisdom, the wisdom of understanding, goodness and truth. To be true. Of course, truth and wisdom do not express themselves only through rational discourse but also through all forms of art and culture. Yes, I do feel myself a bit 'out of synch' with our modern world. That said, I am happy to laugh in my foyer and the leaders are very good with me: I believe that I don't trouble them too much, and they accept me turning up with guests. I love living community and relationship in the real, not in virtual reality! And I am so happy with the leaders of L'Arche and Faith and Light across the world.

John Paul II speaks of his vision of the church (in place of 'church' I insert the word 'L'Arche'): *"it is the home and school of communion: such is the great challenge which presents itself to us in the millennium just starting, so we wish to be faithful to the plan of God, and respond to the demands and deep expectations of the world... a spirituality of communion means being attentive to one's brother, to share his joys and his sufferings, to see what he desires, and to respond to his needs, to offer him friendship, deep and true. A spirituality of communion is above all, also the capacity to see what is positive in the other person, to welcome that and to value it as a gift of God, a gift for oneself. In the end it is about knowing how to give one's brother a place, while carrying the burdens of one another."*

Yes, in this final stage of my life, I would like to live this communion and work to spread it in my community. When I asked Patrick Mathias (the former psychiatrist at Trosly) what was human maturity, he responded, 'tenderness'. Is not L'Arche, like Faith and Light, called to be a place of tenderness and of communion, and in that way to be a small sign in the world?



Charles de Foucauld
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For me, that is the Gospel. Jesus, before his public life lived a hidden life at Nazareth for around 30 years, working with Joseph and living with him and Mary, being present to people and above all to the poor of the village. Jesus was also attracted by the family life of Martha and Mary and Lazarus in Bethany (John 11) centred on communion with Lazarus, the weak one. Charles de Foucauld was drawn to a simple life with simple people of the Muslim faith, not to change them or convert them but to reveal to them that they were precious and beloved of God. In these, the poorest people, Charles de Foucauld found a hidden presence of God.

Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, in working for the unity of men and women in India and the United States, were supported a lot by their Indian and black people so that each person could be recognised in his dignity. In a society where the

weakest people are pushed to the edge because they disturb us, (in spite of some real progress in welcoming them) and where they are often aborted before their birth, I do not feel that I am called to create a big demonstration on the streets of Paris to recognise their dignity, but just to live with them and through that to be a sign that these are wonderful people who have a lot to give to our societies if one really desires to enter into relationship with them. Through our lives at L'Arche and at Faith and Light, through the joy which radiates from our communities, beyond our sufferings and difficulties, we can show an alternative way of being, where celebration, joy in working, eating and praying together, and where the communion and tenderness among us lead many to change their view of the weakest people and discover a new way of living.

It is Easter 2011! This is a big anniversary for Faith and Light: 40 years since the great pilgrimage in 1971 when 12,000 pilgrims went to Lourdes to pray and celebrate in the hope of changing the way that the weakest people were regarded. And now, there are 1690 little communities of Faith and Light in 80 countries. Marie-Helene Mathieu is in the process of concluding a marvellous book on the history of Faith and Light, above all on how Faith and Light (like L'Arche) has been guided since its origin by the tender hand of God who is close to the poor. Thank you to all the communities of Faith and Light which sent me little cards, so that we might celebrate this beautiful anniversary together.

A joyful celebration of a renewal of life!

Jean