

The Beginnings at
L'ARCHE

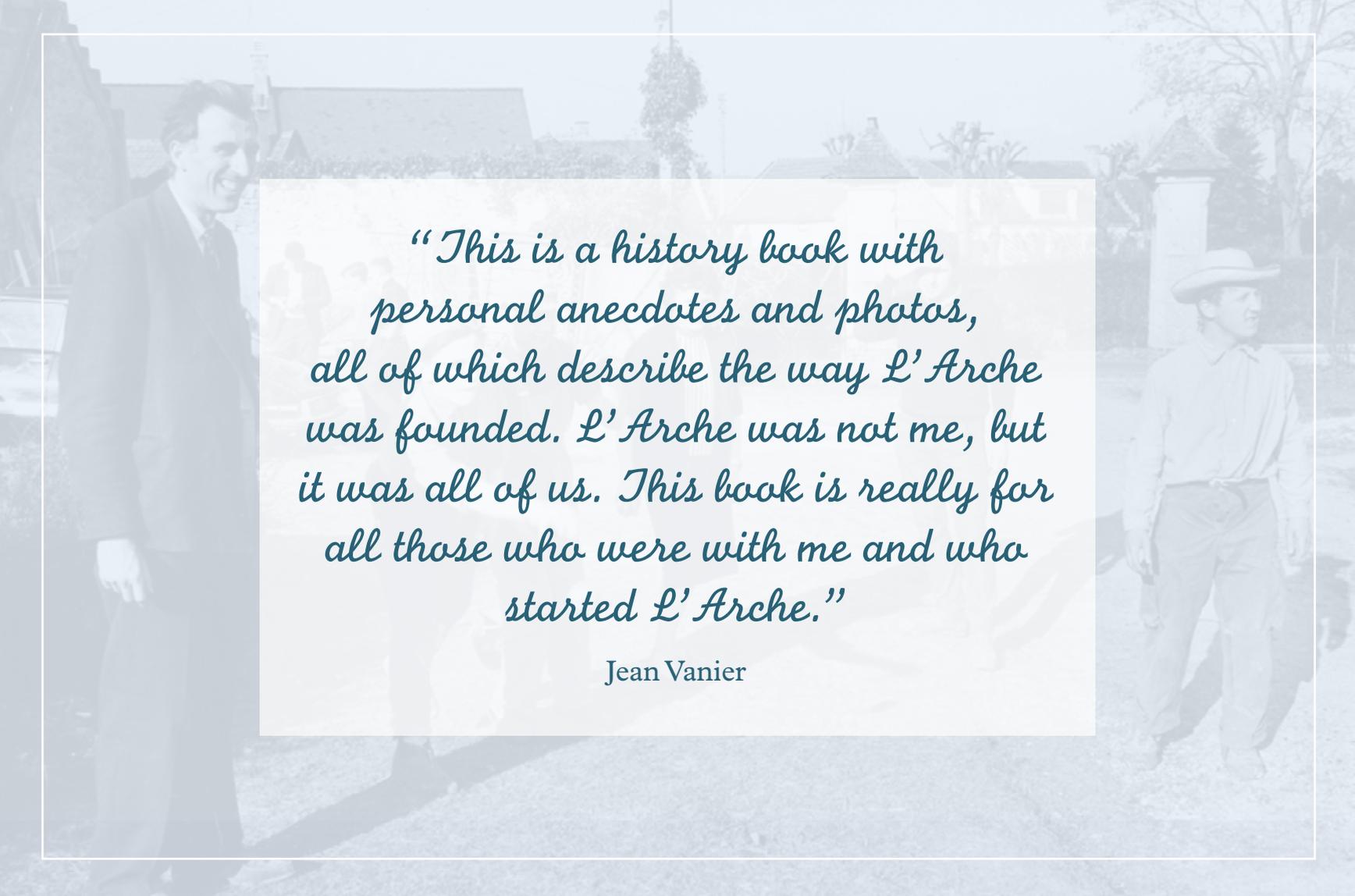
*Recollections of the first years
in Trosly, 1964-1968*

The Beginnings of L'Arche

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in Trosly, 1964-1968*



ASSOCIATION
JEAN VANIER 



“This is a history book with personal anecdotes and photos, all of which describe the way L’Arche was founded. L’Arche was not me, but it was all of us. This book is really for all those who were with me and who started L’Arche.”

Jean Vanier

Introduction

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of L'Arche, [L'Arche Canada](#) and the [Jean Vanier Association](#) have collaborated in the publication of this historical narrative in many voices, which tell the story of the founding of L'Arche. There are personal accounts by men and women who were present from the very first moments. These interview excerpts are presented chronologically, and in a way that preserves as much as possible the oral style of the accounts.

The beginnings of L'Arche are intertwined with the person of Jean Vanier and of all those who trusted him in committing themselves to this incredible adventure, starting with Raphaël Simi et Philippe Seux. The accounts which have been gathered here and illustrated with many photos, give us a personal and living glimpse of the foun-

ation. In remembering the roots of L'Arche, these accounts celebrate a way of life and demonstrate the new reality discovered by Jean Vanier: encounters with people with intellectual disabilities transform us!

The place which each one occupies in this history is unique. That is why it is a great loss that not all those who were present at the time of the foundation speak here on these pages. To remedy this gap, we are continuing to work on the transcription of personal accounts and on the recording of interviews with those who were present at the beginning, where this is still possible.

This work owes a large debt of gratitude to Jean de La Selle who for the past 20 years has recorded about 50 personal interviews of many of those present at the beginnings of L'Arche. He is a passionate

historian, and has also meticulously scanned thousands of photos, gathered from the albums of the first homes of L'Arche in Trosly. Many thanks to Jean de La Selle who himself is part of this history, having joined the community of Trosly in 1972, when L'Arche was only 8 years old!

Our goal in the coming months is to complete the oral archives which have been thus established, but for this, we need your help. Please contact us (isabelle.aumont@assojeanvanier.org) if you are able and willing to enrich these archives

of the foundation of L'Arche with your story, or if you have suggestions for improving this project or contributing to it. Perhaps you have photos from the origins of L'Arche in Trosly, documents, or accounts which might complement our sources?

Hollee Card
L'Arche Canada
and
Isabelle Aumont
Association Jean Vanier

Credits

We warmly thank :

- All the people whose oral accounts appear in this publication
- The anonymous benefactor who financed the transcription process.

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1.

1960: The Val Fleuri, Trosly

Nathalie Orlinski: Everyone knew each other in the village. Everyone greeted each other in the street, and since everyone had a garden, chickens and rabbits too, there was a lot of talk about those as well. Of course, there was no television then! There were only two telephones in the whole village ...two! When I arrived in Trosly, there was only one car.

Kathryn Spink: In 1960 [Dr. Préaut](#), with the help of a [Mr. Prat](#), had begun a home and works-

hop for intellectually disabled young men, known as the Val Fleuri, in the village of Trosly-Breuil. Mr. Prat was himself the father of a boy with an intellectual disability. Reluctant to put his son into a psychiatric hospital, and concerned for his future, he had been persuaded by Dr Préaut to use the inheritance intended for his son to open a home to help not only his own boy but others as well.

Nathalie Orlinski: Mr Prat bought the château, which would eventually become the [Val Fleuri](#). At first we didn't know who it was for, but we later learned that it was for disabled people. There was no particular reaction in the village to this, because there were not a lot of disabled people there. There was also a workshop. They worked, and walked around the village, but always accompanied by a supervisor. The whole group went walking together, two by two, always in the group.

Marc Vommeurs came to visit us, even before L'Arche started. Amazing that he came!

Marc Vommeurs: I arrived in Trosly one year after the opening of the Val Fleuri – July 13,



Val Fleuri and the workshops (right) ↖



Monsieur Prat ↖



Dr Préaut ↖

1960 at three in the afternoon – in 1961 on July 2, at ten to one in the afternoon. When I arrived at the Val, I was 18 years old. I came from the Haute Savoie.

There was one bedroom with four beds, one with two beds, and three with only one bed. I had a single room.

I worked in the workshop, where we did sub-contract work, for 14 years. We made archive boxes for a factory in Beauvais, and black plugs which we put into boxes. We started at 8 sharp every morning. We walked together to the workshop, single file. We had to get up at 7, to be ready for our work at 8.

We worked hard. Each morning between 10 and 10:30, we had a half hour break. After lunch we started promptly at 2 and worked until 4 when we had another half hour break. Work finished for the day at 6. After work, we took a shower to wash ourselves and generally get cleaned up. At meal-time we took turns taking the meal upstairs to the Director, at noon and in the evening. The first Director was Mr. Horsley and later it was Wathier. There was also Miss Gévaudan, as well as Joseph

Calvez, and Alain Bonnefoy...I knew them all.

We were not allowed to go out, we were basically locked in. If someone wanted to go out, he had to ask permission from the supervisors. It was truly like being locked up in a cage. We weren't allowed to go on pilgrimages; we couldn't do anything.

We were given a token pay of 4 francs 50 centimes. That represented 4 francs for the work, and 50 centimes for good behaviour.

On Saturday, we went to the cinema or [some other excursion](#). Joseph Calvez took us to visit the Château of Versailles! But, after the weekend, it was right back to work. We had little time to relax or breathe.

Sundays we rested, and we did not go out. We were allowed to get up later, at whatever time we wanted. Still, we had to stay together, not like it is now!

At the beginning there were maybe about 30 of us. There was a dormitory at the building called "L'Accueil (Reception)". In the same building there was also the bedroom of an assistant, Marie-Noëlle Lepère, who was the daughter of Mrs.



Val Fleuri 1962: outing to Paris ↵



Val Fleuri 1962: outing to Dieppe ↵

Lepère. Mrs Lepère was at one time the Director, and she was also a pianist. Her husband, Lucien, played the violin.

At that time the phone numbers were not as they are now. Here, it was #2 at Trosly, and there was only one line. "Hello, this is the #2 at Trosly"! It was quite something!

The workshops were also located at the "Reception", and there was the garage as well. Also there was the bedroom of another assistant, Mr. Pierre Capelle.

Mr. Prat was the one who welcomed me. From time to time he invited me to have lunch with him. The others who were at the Val then were Pierrot Grellet, Jean-Claude Lepottier, Jean-Claude Lefebvre, Daniel Kaldoni, and Jean-Abdalla.

I also knew Dr Préaut. He came to the Val sometimes. He was the father-in-law of Paule Préaut.

At the beginning, we didn't have any money, so somebody came to the Val to cut our hair. We didn't pay them.



Fr. Thomas ↵

2. Fall 1963: *Fr. Thomas arrives in Trosly*

Marc Vommeurs: Fr. Thomas arrived in 1963, 2 years after me. He came to eat at the Val from time to time, and he stayed at Mrs. Roland's house. She lent him her house before Miss Gsell gave him the place which would become the chapel, on the Place des Fêtes.

Sometimes when **Fr. Thomas** was there on Sundays, we went to mass at Annel, near Longueil, because there was no chapel in Trosly. Later, there was a chapel at the Places des Fêtes. There, we were too squished!

Kathryn Spink: Between 1952 and 1963 Fr. Thomas had from time to time spent time with Dr. Préaut at the school for delinquents the doctor had founded, about 10 kilometres from Trosly-Breuil. The two men had come to know each other well and in 1962, in his capacity as chairman of the Board of Directors, Dr Préaut invited Fr. Thomas to come as chaplain to the old village château and stables that were now the Val Fleuri and its workshops. (...)

He accepted the invitation, arriving in Trosly-Breuil shortly before Christmas 1963.

Jacqueline d'Halluin: Fr. Thomas had been asked by Mr. Prat to come and be a presence in the house he had founded for Jean-Pierre, his disabled son. People in the village were not too keen on a priest coming to live there. The people of the village talked among themselves, pointing out that in Trosly there was no church! In fact, the church for Trosly was in Breuil, one kilometer away. The villagers said "we don't need a priest, we go into the forest." "To go into the forest" was another way of saying that there were one or two suicides a year....one went into the forest and disappeared. Many of the houses in the vil-

lage belonged to old people; there were very few children in the streets. There was a baker, a butcher, a cooperative, but three cafes! There were three houses which belonged to people who lived in Paris. The Val Fleuri was a house established by Mr. Prat. Twice a week the villagers saw the 30 men, accompanied by a supervisor in a white blouse, on an outing. Otherwise the gate was always locked. Twice a week they went out to the forest and came back an hour or two later to the Val Fleuri. The atmosphere in the village was very different than it is today. Orléans St. was almost without cars. In the morning a herd of 15 cows went up the street to graze in the cemetery, leaving their droppings behind, which were quickly picked up and used in the gardens. It was wise to wait in the courtyards until they had passed! The return of the cows in the evening was slow and almost ceremonial. There was no way to park!

Kathryn Spink: A priest was not to impose his presence, or that of the Sacraments. Instead, he [Fr. Thomas] sought a place to live in the village where those who wanted the Eucharist could have ready access to it. He found two rooms off the village square, the Place des fêtes, one of which was to become a chapel. In the corner that would later become a sacristy, he had a bed, a desk and the few possessions he needed to live. There was no electricity. When it was cold Dr. Préaut's son would bring him wood from the forest to burn, and when it rained the water poured in through the leaking ceilings of his dilapidated rooms. (...)

Anxious to refurbish, not so much the room where he was living but the small chapel that was to house the Blessed Sacrament, Fr. Thomas set about doing it himself. He borrowed tools and enlisted the help of some good friends, among them Jean Vanier.

3.

Christmas 1963: Jean Vanier visits Fr. Thomas in Trosly

Kathryn Spink: Fr. Thomas invited Jean to help repair the dilapidated chapel to receive and welcome Jesus in the Eucharist, in much the same way as he sought to enable Jean to welcome Jesus from the place of poverty within him. (...)

Jean Vanier helped his spiritual father set himself up in his simple lodgings, and Fr. Thomas — feeling that there was a vocation there for the ex-naval officer who in his mid-thirties was still uncertain of what he was going to do in life — sug-

gested in his gentle way that there was something special to be done among disabled people. Jean Vanier, for his part, found himself self-conscious and a little apprehensive amongst Fr. Thomas' new friends, men who were weak and powerless. He was deeply impressed by what the priest had learnt of the spiritual openness of disabled people and of their place in the heart of God. In December 1963 he was present at a theatrical production put on in the large hall of the Val Fleuri. In those days there were men in the home who were violent and noisy. His first encounters with them left him both touched and fearful. He enjoyed the production but, by his own admission, did not feel fully at ease.

Jean Vanier (Story of L'Arche): I went to visit Fr. Thomas around Christmas, 1963. I was deeply impressed by the men who had become Fr. Thomas' friends. He had sensed their spiritual openness and their place in God's heart. Each one had so much life, had suffered so profoundly and thirsted so deeply for friendship. Within each gesture and each word were the questions “Will you come back?” “Do you love me?” Their cry of pain and their thirst for love touched me deeply.



Jean and Fr. Thomas in the Chapel ↵

Fr. Thomas, in his gentle way, suggested that maybe I could begin “something”. It was, in fact, a very opportune moment. There was a great need for homes and workshops for people with intellectual disabilities, and the French government was ready to give the necessary financial support.

In January 1964, I went to Toronto, Canada, to teach moral philosophy > at St. Michael's College. I loved teaching but, at the same time, I did not feel that Jesus wanted me to stay there.



4.

“To do something....”

Jean Vanier (Story of L'Arche): When I returned to France, I went back to see Fr. Thomas: the same gentle hint, the same question. Without having any big vision (that's not my way), it seemed quite clear that Jesus wanted me to do something. I was, and am still, quite naïve. I didn't ask too many questions. I was open and available; I wanted to follow Jesus and live the way of the gospel.

Kathryn Spink: Some months later, on his next visit to France and Fr. Thomas, there was the same gentle hint, the same question: was there something special to be done among people with

disabilities? Encouraged by Fr. Thomas and by Dr Préaut, he went to see the person in charge of people with disabilities in the Oise area, who confirmed what by this time was shaping itself into the resolve 'to do something'. In the late spring of 1964 he began visiting different centres for people with intellectual disabilities. He was overwhelmed by what he found, especially in the asylum of St Jean-les-deux-Jumeaux south of Paris, where some 80 intellectually disabled men lived together in two dormitories in chaotic and violent conditions. Forbidding concrete walls surrounded buildings constructed of sombre cement blocks. The occupants had no work. They ate together in a vast refectory and otherwise spent their days going round in circles.

Jean Vanier: I had the support of a psychiatrist, Dr. Préaut, who both Fr. Thomas and I knew well. Dr. Préaut had a lot of influence with local authorities, which opened many doors for us. To buy a house it was necessary to have an association, and thus to have legal status. It was then that we would be recognized as a placement home, an extension of the Val Fleuri. At that time the whole

question of welcoming people with an intellectual disability was huge, as there were no institutions, no homes, and very few workshops. Thus our efforts to start something were very well received by the authorities. With a few friends, **we bought a house**, and so everything was more or less in place to begin.

I must say that I didn't have much money! Friends loaned me money. The house was not expensive; in fact if I remember correctly I bought it for 50,000 francs. It was an empty house, with a little garden that was full of weeds. I bought some beds from the community of Emmaus, as well as some dishes and a few other necessities. Everything was rather primitive! To take a shower, one could go to the Val Fleuri. Fr. Thomas was the chaplain there. The village bordered on the forest of Compiègne, and in the village, there were almost no cars. The farmer, Mr. Dupont, had a horse and cart. The telephone was in the cafe next door, and was an old phone with a crank. You had to wait for the operator who did not always respond very quickly. There were two cafes in the village, which were mostly used by villagers as a place to drown their sorrows.

Jacqueline d'Halluin: Many of the houses did not have indoor plumbing then, and managed with just a covered pit in the garden. We emptied the chamber pots in a nearby garden which belonged to us. The farm which belonged to Mr. Dupont, on the site where La Ferme currently sits, was a frequent meeting place as villagers went there to buy milk and cheese.

Louis Pretty: **[photo]** The first thing that I want to tell you is about how I met Jean and how I then found myself at L'Arche. I met him at the beginning of June 1964. We had supper together in a Paris cafe, and he explained to me, and the others in the cafe, his plans for the project he was about to embark on, but which had not yet started. That was a Friday evening and he told me he was going to Trosly-Breuil that Sunday to see a house. As he knew I was an architect, he said to me: "I would appreciate it if you could come to see the house with me, and tell me what you think." So, that's what I did! We visited the house, which was old and abandoned. It was to become the first L'Arche home, in Trosly-Breuil. The house had been sitting empty for several years. There was no



Purchase of a house in Trosly-Breuil ↵

bathroom, no toilet, no heating, no insulation and the roof leaked more or less everywhere. The floor was of terra cotta tiles, placed directly on the bare earth. There was a single tap in the kitchen and no other finishings. The walls were of porous white stone, without any plaster covering. It was almost impossible to walk in the garden, which was a wasteland, filled with nettles about a meter and a half high. On the other hand, the structure of the house was solid, built in the beautiful style of the original Norman village, with gables of that style >. It was a beautiful village. In discussing all that with Jean, he asked me if I would stay and do some sketches for the renovation, so I did! Jean lent me his room in Paris because he was going to be away for a while, and so I stayed there about a month. He found someone he knew who had a drafting table which I used, and when I was finished, I left.

Louis Pretty (Letter July 21th, 1964): When I wrote to you last time I was just about to meet Jean Vanier. He really is a wonderful person, extremely humble and deeply human, with a tremendous love and respect for underprivileged people. He is creating a home very much in the same spirit



The house with its characteristic gables



Louis Pretty was an architect ↵



The garden lying fallow ↵

as “Le Foyer de Charité” in Montreal. He intends to start a small community, where people who for different reasons cannot live independently in our world of today, can find a certain amount of happiness. The exact manner in which the community will function is not yet worked out, and will evolve as time and experience dictate.

He intends to make this a home of welcome for people over 16 years old with an intellectual disability that are interned in institutions and shut out of a society to which they are unable to adapt, for older people who have no one to take care of them, and for a certain number of incurable bed-ridden people.

The main idea is to allow these people to discover their well-being and fulfilment in helping each other, to begin listening to them

Jean is working very closely with a well-known psychoanalyst, and a Dominican priest, Fr. Thomas Philippe, who is quite an extraordinary person. Nearby are the monks of Ourscamp who are very interested in helping the poorest and in accompanying people outside the monastery. They seem to have a very positive attitude.

Jean Vanier, for this project, has bought a fairly

large piece of property in a small Norman village called Trosly, near Compiègne. Since “L’Arche”, as the community is to be called, is very poor and is starting with nothing, a great deal has to be done in stages, as conditions permit. On the property there is an old house in very poor shape, badly in need of repair.

When I first met Jean Vanier I was struck by the tremendous faith he has in Providence. Right away he made me feel, in a very simply yet completely sincere way that he needed me to start the construction of his project. This was just what I needed because I was beginning to feel very useless and getting tired of wandering about. We therefore agreed that I would help him at least until September.

I started to work on the plans for the project on July 5th. For the last two weeks I have been drawing up the plans to renovate the existing house in order to make it inhabitable. This house will constitute the first of series of small pavilions to house various people. Jean Vanier has been extremely good to me. He has even arranged for me to stay with an uncle of his, when I am in Paris.

Kathryn Spink: In 1964, some 40 years prior to writing these words, in the scarcely definable but sure conviction that this was what Jesus wanted of him, Jean Vanier bought an unassuming stone house in Trosly-Breuil, an often cloud-hung village on the edge of the Compiègne forest just north of Paris. He then invited three broken, rejected people to leave the institution where they had been living 'in dis-grace' and make their home with him. This naïve but irreversible step was one born, by his own account, of a desire to 'be good' and 'do good' to people with disabilities. He had no idea at that time that those people would 'do good' to him. Yet what began as an act of compassion towards the suffering that had profoundly moved him led to the very concrete discovery of the riches of the biblically poor. It was an invitation which enabled him and L'Arche (the Ark), the community that grew out of it, to touch in a special way upon the mystery of the person with disabilities and so to enter more deeply into relationship with Jesus.

Madame Martin, the directress of St Jean-les-deux-Jumeaux, the asylum Jean Vanier had visited near Paris, was an extraordinary woman. By pac-

king 80 people into a former convent where she was only supposed to care for 40, she had created a very closed and disturbed institution. At the time Jean felt himself too ignorant to be unduly critical but later he described it as repellent in the absence of any real attempt to achieve the well-being of its inmates. Yet Madame Martin was also possessed of a certain generosity of spirit. She gave the young man advice which, despite the fact that she herself was a woman, was to not have women assistants live with disabled men! She also supported him in his venture. Eventually it was she who suggested which three men he should invite to live with him from amongst the many he had identified as crying out for love and relationship. It was decided that Jean Vanier would move into the small foyer on 4 August and on 5 August she would bring these three, [Raphaël](#), [Philippe](#) and Dany to join him in time for lunch. The initial invitation was for a month's holiday, and if all went well they would be asked at the end of the month whether they would like to remain permanently.

When it came to deciding what the small community should be called, [Jacqueline d'Halluin](#) was asked to make up a list of biblical names. When



Raphaël Simi ↵



Philippe Seux ↵

Jean Vanier read it he chose 'L'Arche', the French word for both 'ark' and 'arch', without a moment's hesitation. In fact it was so self-evident that with hindsight he would say that it was more a question of sensing that 'it had been chosen'. A letter he wrote to his parents on 2 June 1964 said that the project he was starting would be called 'L'Arche' after Noah's Ark "because it is the name of the work that takes in all the little animals to save them and which floats on living waters! It is also the Ark of the Covenant: Mary, Mater Misericordiae, who holds out her arms to embrace all the suffering of the world.

Antoinette Maurice: I truly believe that if L'Arche exists today it is thanks to Jean Vanier, but also in part to Jacqueline, who was present as a support for Jean — a discreet support. She refurbished many houses, the first of which was L'Arche. She even went with Jean to Emmaus to get the first furniture for the home.



5.

Opening of L'Arche: August 4-5

Kathryn Spink: Other necessities were lent or given. By the time the day of welcome arrived, the furnishings in the little house included a small statue of the Virgin Mary, which would remain in what was to become known as the 'Foyer de L'Arche', and a dining table. Madame Martin brought with her a celebratory meal for the newcomers and the welcoming party, which included Fr. Thomas, Dr and Mrs. Préaut and others whose help Jean Vanier had recognised he would need.

Jean Vanier: Mrs. Martin arrived on August 5th with Raphaël, Philippe and Dany. There was

a meal with Dr. Préaut, who was the President of the Val Fleuri Association, the centre where Fr. Thomas was the chaplain. Legally speaking, the new community of L'Arche was a foster home, an extension of the Val Fleuri. In those days there were very few facilities available, and the authorities were looking for creative new solutions.

Jean Vanier: Mrs Martin came with her accountant. There were also Dr. And Mrs. Préaut, Fr. Thomas, and Jacqueline d'Halluin, the secretary of Fr. Thomas; I was there with Jean-Louis Coïc, Dany, **Raphaël and Philippe**. Coïc — it is a Breton name — knew Fr. Thomas who had asked him if he would give me a hand. He cooked fish really well. However I don't think that Jean-Louis liked the lifestyle, and he left as soon as he possibly could!

Kathryn Spink: Afterwards, however, the guests all left and he found that he was alone with his three new companions.

'I was completely lost especially with Dany. He couldn't hear and he couldn't speak. It was crazy taking him. I should never have been asked



Raphaël in front of L'Arche ↵



Philippe ↵

to remove him from his highly closed institution to a free situation.' In a state of total insecurity, Dany began to hallucinate. He ran out into the quiet streets of Trosly-Breuil and made menacing gestures at the uncomprehending passers-by. The night of August 5th-6 was a memorable one for Jean. Failing to find the electricity meter, although there was one in the house as he was to discover a few days later, he and his companions spent the first night in darkness and turmoil with Dany constantly on the move and Jean Vanier unable to get any rest in his bed up in the loft. The walls

of the little house were sound but the interior left much to be desired. There was no lavatory, only a bucket.

Next morning the practical side of him recognised that it was impossible for Dany to stay. From the telephone in the village cafe he called Madame Martin and with great sadness asked her to come and collect him. From that very first founding night Jean Vanier experienced the need to make choices, and suffering; his own suffering and sense of failure and the suffering of the men who had come to live with him.

6. *The Early Days*

Philippe Seux: He took me out of a center where I had been placed by social workers. It had really been desolate there: There was no village nearby, there was no way of communicating with the outside world, and we were always inside surrounded by four walls. When he took me out of there, I felt so relieved: ‘pewh’!

When I came to L'Arche, there was no electricity, none. We used candles for lighting, it was fun! There were no toilets or showers, but I felt like I was exploding with joy — pewh! — I was so happy to be there. Previously, for me, it had been no life at all: all day long, sitting in a room. There was nothing to do, we never went out,

and we were bored stiff, there was no life. I even cried. I was not at all comfortable there. Little by little, at L'Arche we settled down and things were sorted out.

Jacqueline d'Halluin: How did we live those first days at L'Arche? Our day began early, at mass with Fr. Thomas. Jean drove some in a small car, and then we returned to the house to grind the coffee and peel the apples which had been given to us. We had furniture that we had bought at Emmaus. One day, when I was in Compiègne, I passed by the flea market and I saw a statue of the Virgin Mary which appealed to me. This is the statue of Mary which now guards the village. She overlooks the Place des Fêtes, sitting above the little chapel which Fr. Thomas had created. I would have loved to buy Saint Joseph too, but I didn't have enough money in my wallet. Saint Joseph was left behind that day!

Antoinette Maurice: I first heard about Jean Vanier in June of 1964 through Christiane Edé; she was a social worker, like me, in Compiègne. She said to me: “I have met someone who is either



The Virgin of the Place des Fêtes (2013) ↵



Christiane Edé (left) and Louis Pretty ↖

a saint or crazy!” So, at the beginning, almost from the very first day, Christiane took me with her to Trosly. I went along with Christiane during the month of August, and then afterward I went on my own.

Thus I had contact with L’Arche from the very beginning, in August 1964.

I believe I wanted to get to know Jean, and to learn what he would do with the little L’Arche house. I remember arriving by car one day that August. Jean Vanier said to Raphaël and Philippe “Go, go, get into the car!”. He then proceeded to encourage both of them, neither of whom I knew, into the car. But we didn’t know each other! So there we were in the car together! What would we do? Go for a drive in the forest? First of all, that did not interest either of them at all. Furthermore, neither of them would be able to walk once we got there. So we left Trosly with no idea of where we were going. I started driving without knowing where to go. Then I said to myself “we are going to visit my friend Anne-Marie Baudoux!” We arrived at Mrs. Baudoux’s house, where she was with her children, and she said: “Wonderful! Come on

in, and let’s have tea!” So we had tea with Mrs. Baudoux, I took Raphaël and Philippe home, and she became a friend of L’Arche.

That is how Jean began L’Arche, with people who came to know L’Arche by chance. I was deeply touched that day by Raphaël and Philippe: both by their joy at being welcomed into a family, and also by their suffering at having been so rarely thus invited.

Louis Pretty: On returning to Paris, as I got off the train at the Gare du Lyon, who do I bump into, to my great surprise, but Jean Vanier! It was a complete coincidence as he had no idea where I had been or what I was doing. When I got off the train it was as if he was waiting for me, yet he was as surprised to see me as I was to see him. He had come to meet a friend who was supposed to arrive but never did. In the end, we had supper together. It might have been in August? He told me that he had bought the house and had moved into it as it was, with Raphaël and Philippe. I thought to myself that he must be completely crazy, to move into that place as it was. He said to me “Maybe

you could come to see, and give me some advice?”

So I went for the weekend, and I met Fr. Thomas. He was an amazing man. In the end, I stayed a year and a half! In other words, it all started because I was an architect.

Louis Pretty (Letter 1964): Jean had opened L'Arche on the 4th of August, welcoming right from the beginning Philippe and Raphaël, two intellectually disabled and crippled boys.

When I returned to Paris on August 10th, things being a little slow as far as the construction was concerned, L'Arche needed a cook more than an architect! I therefore became a cook for two weeks. I was very lucky in that nobody was difficult to please and there was no criticism of my lack of experience.

This was a very good experience for me, apart from the cooking, because I was able to get to know my two assistants, **Philippe and Raphaël**, much better. It is very important to understand that both men, as well as those who arrived later, need to feel that they are part of the house, and that they contribute to running the house. It is hard to realize until you have really seen it, how

much these people need to feel that they are useful, and that they can serve some purpose and help other people as well.

It takes most part of the day just to prepare the meals for 6 or 7 people, because first of all the menu needs to be prepared in such a way that they can do it even if it takes a great deal more time. Secondly you must account for the fact that they are sometimes a little restless and that they need to do some other kind of activity and that you cannot predict when that will be. However it is extremely easy to work with them, since they are ready to give you their complete friendship immediately, as well as having confidence in you. I think that there is a great deal to learn from these people. The only thing that counts for them is how you act toward them and towards other people. After my two weeks of thinking and talking, it was certainly a good change to be placed right back into reality. Working with them, you really realize that big ideas and theories have very little value in themselves.

I have now gone back to work in Paris for 3 days a week but have kept my job here as a cook during the week ends.



Raphaël ↖



Philippe and Louis ↖

Kathryn Spink: For some years Jean had been living on a shoestring, subsidized by cheques from his father and parcels of clothing and food from his mother. With very limited funds, he and Louis Pretty hired a small truck and bought some second-hand furniture from Abbé Pierre's Emmaus Community.

Louis Pretty: In the beginning there was no furniture, there was nothing at all. Some friends of Jean in Paris offered us some old furniture. But to get the furniture, we had to move other furniture for them from their country house, to replace what we were taking. So we played at being movers! Jean rented a truck and we drove from place to place to get the furniture. It was a lot of work!

Louis Pretty: There was someone who was very important at the beginning: Miss Edé. She was a social worker in Compiègne. Thank goodness she was there, because she was able to put us in touch with doctors, social workers, and psychologists. She introduced us to a large number of people. This was especially important as Jean didn't have any experience in this area. So each

time that we faced a complicated problem, we telephoned Miss Edé, who would come around to see us. In the end, she was very taken with L'Arche, and she came almost every week to see how things were going.

Antoinette Maurice: What struck me most and attracted me, was the life they lived together. Philippe did not walk well; he couldn't go upstairs. As there was only one bedroom downstairs, it became his. Everyone else went upstairs. There was a miller's ladder to get upstairs. There were not really bedrooms up there, but an attic in which the beds were separated one from another with thin curtains. This living together really touched me and is still fundamental to what L'Arche is today.

That year, 1964, there was a big apple harvest and so there were many apples in the village. They made lots of apple jam, apple sauce, etc.

Jacqueline d'Halluin: To the villagers, the Val Fleuri was a house of crazy people. This was not how L'Arche was viewed, as it was really homey. Fr. Thomas found a group of people who wanted to help. Mrs. Bertrand, who lived very

close to L'Arche, made a big pot of soup which she left each evening at the door of the house.

When Fr. Thomas moved to Trosly, he first lived into Mrs. Roland's house; she had moved to live with her children in Breuil. She left her house for Fr. Thomas, I think around Christmas of 1963. *Miss Gsell* >, who had been a nurse during the war, had a large house with many rooms, on the Place des Fêtes. She had long wished for a priest in the village, and invited Fr. Thomas to take over a small place which belonged to her.

Antoinette Maurice: Sr Marie-Mad (Sister Marie-Madeleine) met Jean Vanier several months before L'Arche began. Jean had asked her to pray for L'Arche from its beginnings. Jean welcomed Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux on a weekday. The following Sunday Jean went with Raphaël and Philippe to visit Sr Marie-Mad. She had made them an amazing cake topped with a multicolored rainbow — I don't know how she did it!

Jean Vanier (Letter of 22-08-64): On the fourth of August our little community settled in Trosly-Breuil, and on the fifth of August (the feast day of



Madeleine Gsell

Our Lady of Snows) our first two “boys” arrived, driven by Mme Martin, from an institution. Dr. Préaut, Fr. Thomas, some friends and I were there to welcome them. We want to love one another as Christ taught us: gently, humbly and mercifully. Love is the distinctive feature of the message of the Gospels. During the next few weeks we are going to organize the house and prepare things so that we can receive more boys. Indeed, there is still much to do, but already we have cleared land for a garden and vegetables have been planted. We are waiting for arrival of two ducks, two chickens and a rabbit!

Thanks to the understanding of the Social Welfare Office in Beauvais and the board of directors of Le Val Fleuri (a residence for thirty intellectually disabled men in Trosly-Breuil, founded by Mr. Prat in 1960); L'Arche can begin legally

as an annex of Le Val Fleuri. This means that we are entitled to receive financial support. In a few months we will make our request for approval as a separate centre.

Jean Vanier: There was some financial support from the locality, but for various administrative reasons it did not arrive until three months later. Mrs. Martin was required to notify the local prefecture that Raphaël had moved into our home. I had to get papers from the prefecture in Beauvais....all that took time. So it was with the help of friends, and of my dad who sent us one or two hundred dollars a month to help me. We didn't spend much money, and we were given food by friends. Then, on the 22nd of August, I remember well, Henri Wambergue came to help me. He was the brother of a Carmelite, Sr Marie-Mad.

7.

The L'Arche home grows

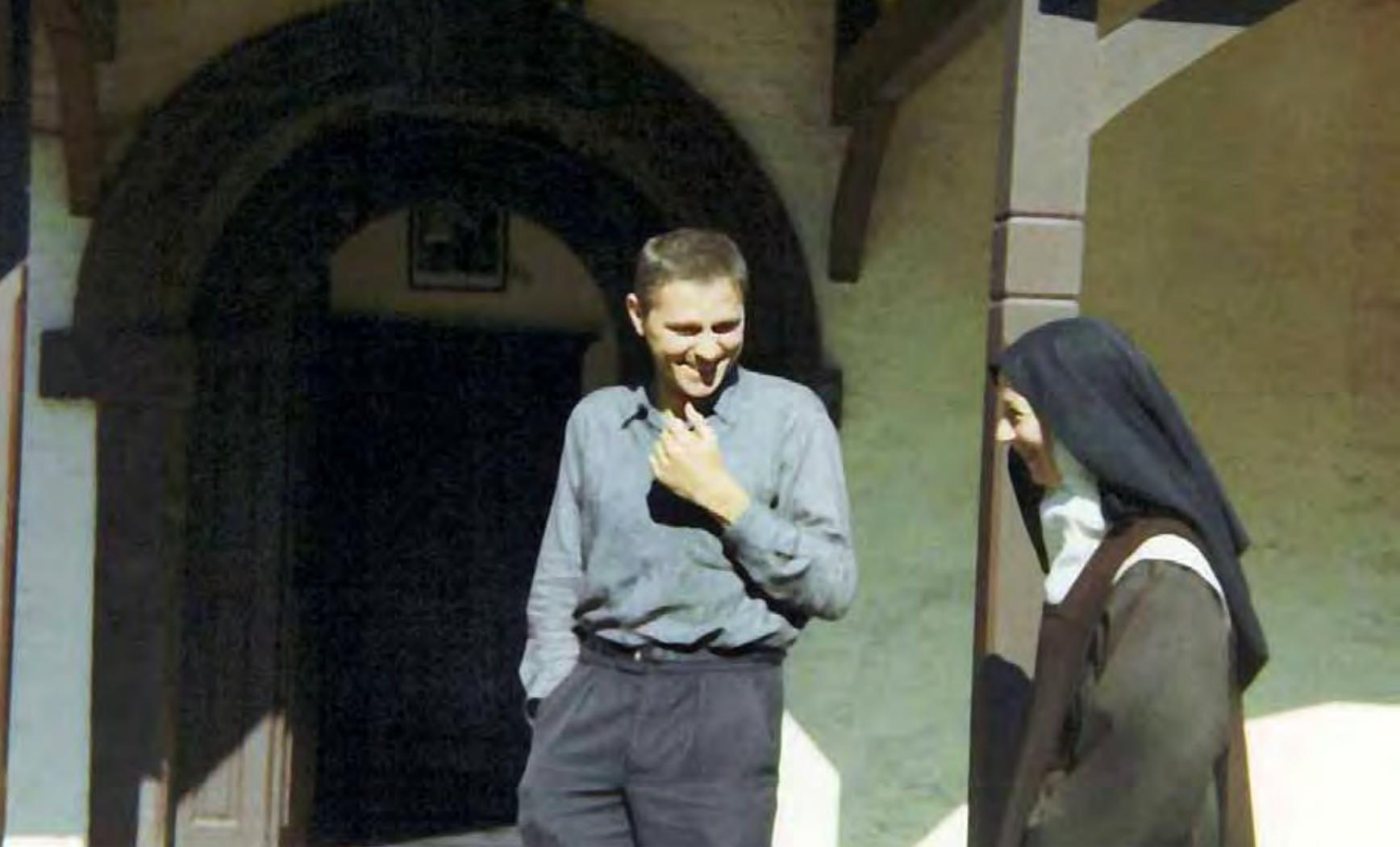
Kathryn Spink: On 22 August 1964, *Henri Wambergue, a cousin of Fr. Thomas and brother of Sister Marie-Madeleine*, a Carmelite who would hold L'Arche in a special way in her prayers, came to help.

Henri Wambergue: I arrived on the 22nd of August, 1964; I think it was a Saturday. I took a train from Alsace to Compiègne, and then I took the bus and got off at Breuil. I got to the church in Breuil, where they sent me back one km to Trosly, with my little bag. Finally I arrived in the little L'Arche house, at the top of Orléans Street in Trosly. At that time *Louis Pretty was there, with Jean-Louis Coïc, Raphaël and Philippe*. Neither

Jacques Dudouit nor Jean-Pierre Crépieux had arrived; they were both to come later, between October and December, 1964. We began to live together, and to get along. In the attic, there were curtains hanging between the beds. Louis Pretty had arranged things, and had drawn up plans to renovate the house. With the help of someone from Cuise-la-Motte, he had already done a little of that work.

Antoinette Maurice: I also remember the day when, at the end of August, I went to eat at L'Arche. It was Jean Vanier himself who had done the cooking, and it was not good! We all ate from the same platter, which I was not used to, but which I have come around to since. There were many around the table. Henri Wambergue was already there. I was very moved by the atmosphere there, and returned again in September. Thereafter, every two weeks, on a Monday, because that was our day off, either Christiane or myself went there to make the midday meal.

Henri Wambergue: Daily life (before Jean took over the Val Fleuri in March 1965) began



Henri Wambergue and his sister Marie-Mad ↵



Henri, Raphaël, Philippe and Louis ↵

thus: wake up, personal hygiene, helping each one wash himself. The toilet was the far end of the garden where there was a pit. Initially it was very primitive, but we could go to the Val Fleuri to take a shower or a bath.

What did we do each day? There were the dishes, and meal preparation. I am not a very good cook, but we managed, and we got very lucky. There was a trio of social workers from Compiègne who came and cooked for us three evenings a week – Antoinette Maurice, Miss Christiane Edé and Miss Fontaine I believe. They formed a core of help.

Also, there was Fr. Thomas who celebrated mass daily, and on Tuesday evenings there was Eucharistic adoration in the little chapel at the Place des Fêtes. If I remember correctly it seems to me that Antoinette Maurice, Miss Edé and Miss Fontaine attended as well.

Louis Pretty (Letter November 18th, 1964): As I have told you my work consisted up to now of two very different tasks: a) making plans in Paris b) living and working part of the week at L'Arche in Trosly. It is about this second aspect of my work that I would like to talk to you now.

This is by far the most rewarding and satisfying aspect of what I have been doing. I have discovered that intellectually disabled adults have a way of being that is in no way more abnormal than that of society in general. I feel that I have learned such a tremendous amount that is practically impossible to describe or express. It is a world of complete openness, of abandon to the kindness of others, of total acceptance of dependence upon others, and very often implies a real desire to serve others and please others.

These people in general possess and express naturally all the human values that we find so difficult to acquire because of our pride and our self preoccupation. They are on the contrary, extremely sociable and particularly sensitive in an intuitive manner to others around them, even if many cannot speak.

I often feel that they give me and teach me so much spiritually and humanly; to the point of feeling that I can bring them very little.

Most are extremely conscious of what is right and what is wrong, always applied in terms of others around them, and expressed in such a straight forward and naïve manner that is often

disarming. However, they certainly lead us to think about many issues in different ways than we usually do.

Now that I have finished the plans I spend practically all of my time in Trosly. I do all kinds of things, but if I were to keep doing only work on the plans I would probably be unlikely to stay. I guess that the most important thing is just trying to be present as completely as possible and attentive to all according to the circumstances.

There is also another very important person in the village and a determining element if I may say so. It is Fr Thomas Philippe. He is a Dominican priest who just lives in the village from what people give him. Someone has lent him a small house that he has converted into a chapel, and he lives behind it in a very small room. He has been a teacher of philosophy and theology most of his life but you would never believe it when you first meet him. He also helps as a chaplain for two other homes for intellectually disabled children. He is a remarkable person characterized by his simplicity, humility, and tremendous capacity for loving others.

His whole life is centered on this tremendous

sense of love and you feel it whenever he speaks.

I have tremendous respect for him. He is the first priest whom I have ever met who has become a real friend and I feel that this is something extremely important for me.

There are so many more things that I would like to speak to you of about L'Arche, but it would be too long. Instead I am sending you under separate cover a few printed sheets and photographs which will help you to understand the aim of L'Arche and what it hopes to achieve.

The photographs were taken at the end of August and you will see the original group. It may seem small but we are a few more now.

Jean Vanier: In September, about the 7th, Dr. Préaut asked if we would welcome another person, Jacques Dudouit. Then on December 8th, a social worker asked if we could welcome Pierrot. So already by December we (me, Henri Wambergue and Louis Pretty) had welcomed four people, so we were seven altogether. We laughed a lot, and fooled around. The most important thing was to communicate, and we communicated a lot through laughter.



Jacques Dudouit ↵



"We laughed a lot, and fooled around" ↵



“We laughed a lot, and fooled around” ↵

There was mass every morning at seven thirty, after which we had breakfast together. Then we worked together, did errands and the shopping. Altogether, everything was pretty simple. Practically speaking, we had no immediate neighbours. There were not many people in the village in those days; mostly people left the village to work, so we were not very visible. The difficulties with the villagers came much later, about six years later, when L'Arche started to grow, and opened other homes, causing fear among the villagers.

I should say that the Val Fleuri started with 30 people there and the villagers did not like its large size. So the little house where we were living together was warmly received, especially as Fr. Thomas visited with and spoke with the villagers. They called him the White Father, because he dressed in his white Dominican robes. Everyone loved him because he was full of goodness. His presence made things easier for us. For example, Mrs. Bertrand, who was old, had always hoped that there would be a priest in the village so that she could get to mass, so she was delighted that Fr. Thomas had come to Trosly! She must have been about 80 years old, but every Friday, she

brought us soup! On Mondays, Miss Maurice came to make the midday meal. There were also several friends of Fr. Thomas who came to help me. Sometimes on the weekends, I went away with Raphaël and Philippe. I had a small old car, and we toured around, or sometimes walked, but that was not very easy for Philippe who had a paralysed leg. I should say that Philippe was someone who liked to talk all the time, whereas Raphaël could barely talk, and mostly used signs and grunts to communicate. Raphaël spoke little, loved dogs, and loved the garden. One of my friends came from England to work on the garden and also helped in the kitchen a little. Raphaël and Philippe helped in the kitchen as well, and we did the housecleaning together. All in all we did small things, together. Some friends sent me meat by mail! Sometimes Raphaël, Philippe and I went to Compiègne to do errands together.

I remember that not far from Trosly there was a centre, run by an Italian religious order, for children they called “orphans”. I remember one day *one of the members of that order came to visit* at tea time, with five or six of the young girls from there, who must have been between ten and fifteen



Visit of Mother Gilberte and the girls from the orphanage ↵

years of age. We had a little tea party with Raphaël and Philippe, and played music afterwards. I kept trying to find events, little events, to brighten up our lives, and to help Raphaël and Philippe to meet other people.

Louis Pretty (Letter 1964): As far as my work is concerned it is very different from anything I have ever done. The plans for renovating the old house are finished. However I have mixed feelings about this part of my work. The plans go completely against all my architectural training in terms of esthetics. Since we have really no money we are fixing up the house with what people are giving us, in the form of materials and personal help. We will be doing certain changes to the house which I feel are not in keeping with its existing style. But at the same time one must consider diplomatic reasons which I understand only too well. How can you tell someone who is giving you something that he feels is appropriate, that you think that something else would be better esthetically, when you have nothing and no means of procuring it? Or how do you tell a sincere and competent tradesman, giving up his time to help you and who is

convinced that his method is good enough, that you would prefer that it should be done in another manner requiring more work when the practical end result is the same?

In order to get what I feel would be right I would have to impose my views, taking the risk that it would not be done at all, and would disregard the feelings of others, which I consider so important both for the people themselves and for the future of L'Arche. This is something I cannot do. At times human values and architectural esthetic values seem to be in direct opposition to each other.

Jean-Pierre Crépieux: [photo] I was 20 years old. One day a social worker came to see me. She told me that in the Oise region, a few kilometers from Compiègne, in the village of Trosly-Breuil, a new home had been opened. She had written to ask for an interview with the Director.

I went with the social worker to meet the Director on Monday, December 4th. I remember because on Thursday, December 7th I went to Trosly-Breuil. I saw a very tall man coming towards me, and I asked myself who this big man



Raphaël and Jean-Pierre Crépieux ↵

was. Seeing him, I was frightened, but I was not afraid talking with him. He asked me if I would like to join the family of L'Arche, that's how he put it to me.

I asked to come for a trial period of two weeks. I was wondering what kind of welcome I would receive, but I was not frightened. I was welcomed at the Gare du Nord in Paris, by Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux, the first two men to have been welcomed at L'Arche. They had both come to L'Arche from the centre called Saint-Jean-les-deux-Jumeaux. They had both arrived at the same time, in August of that year.

After that we went together to Duranton Street in Paris, to the home of Jacqueline d'Hal-luin, an assistant who had been living in Trosly-Breuil. There I met Henri Wambergue who was the first assistant, and Jacques Dudouit, who had also been welcomed to L'Arche. I don't know where Jacques came from, perhaps like me he had come from his family home. We all had a meal at Jaqueline's that evening, and then Jean drove us in his car to Trosly.

Everyone from L'Arche had come to Paris to welcome me! I was very much awaited!

Louis Pretty: In the beginning we didn't have any money, or at least very, very little. There was a woman called Mrs. Bertrand, who made us a huge pot of soup, and in return Raphaël went and weeded her garden one day a week. Our menu consisted in large part of eggs. There was a seller of eggs in Paris who gave us all the eggs he had whose shells were too thin to survive transporting them to market. The other food that we had a lot of was apples. There was an orchard, and we were permitted to go and pick up the apples which had fallen onto the ground. There was also a fish shop nearby, and at the end of the day they often gave us fish which they had not been able to sell. And the butcher! His shop was next door to the house, and we could smell when he was making cold cuts; there was a delicious odour, it smelled so good! He also sometimes gave us meat at the end of the day.

Kathryn Spink: Being plunged into this world of suffering was to bring about a gentle revolution. Like Fr. Thomas, Jean Vanier was poor when he arrived at Trosly-Breuil. Having waited until his mid-thirties to find his true vocation had

been an impoverishing experience, and, as one friend put it, 'he had lost a lot of baggage' along the way. The life he led with Raphaël and Philippe in their little home, with one tap and one wood burning stove was simple in the extreme. They went shopping together, prepared meals, cleaned the house, and did the washing. **Raphaël and Philippe helped as best they could with the different chores in the house and garden. In the morning they went to Mass** and in the evening they said part of the rosary together. The house looked straight out on to the road, without a wall or garden to separate them from passers-by. Raphaël and Philippe manifestly inspired fear in some of the villagers and an unhealthy pity in others. The more his friendship with the two men grew, the more Jean Vanier found himself hurt by such attitudes, and even by people applauding him for what he was doing.

Louis Pretty (Letter December 18th, 1964): Today I would like to talk to you about our visit to Camphill village. This is the village specially created for the intellectually disabled adults in Yorkshire in the North of England.



Raphaël, Jean-Pierre and Jacques working in the garden ↖

Jean-Pierre and Jean at morning mass ↖

The village is organised as a real community in the very profound sense of the word. No distinction exists between the villagers, as the people with intellectual disabilities are called, and the rest of the community. No one is paid, villagers or staff. Everything goes to the community.

As I told Mira, Jean Vanier has gone to Montreal. He will be one of the two main speakers of the Congress of Theological Students held at the Presbyterian College at Mc Gill University. The theme of the Congress is “the liturgical community of the poor”. This Congress will be held from the December 29th - January 2nd.

Jean Vanier: In October, someone came to help me and asked me an important question: “Do you believe that it is really Raphaël and Philippe’s wish to go to mass every morning?” We were in the early stages, where I basically had made all the decisions, but I replied: “We must ask them!” So we did, and they both said “No!”

Jean Vanier (Video 1989): When I started, I think that the only thing of which I was certain was that this was an irreversible gesture. That is to

say, I could not welcome two men like that, who had no family, and then a few years later say I am sorry, I made a mistake. It was a very simple life: we ate together, cooked together, shopped together, and worked in the garden. We lived very, very simply as the house was a wreck.

Louis Pretty: The men with disabilities were Philippe, Raphaël, Jacquot, Jean-Pierre and Lucien, and Henri Wambergue had arrived to help. There was also Jean-Louis who was a mason and helped us a lot with the renovations, especially anything to do with stone. As there was no toilet in the house, at the back of the garden we built a shelter with a bucket in it, and that became our toilet. Jean-Louis worked hard to create the stone walls for that little shelter.

There were several other people who came to help us as well. One of them was a great guy from Switzerland, whose name I can’t remember. I think he was there for two or three months.

We did all kinds of work on the house with people from the village who came to help us, and also with Jean-Louis, Raphaël and Philippe. However it was clear that the latter, after half an

hour, would move on to do something else! We also went on several walks in the forest of Compiègne, including one to St-Jean-aux-Bois because in the fall it was the feast of St-Hubert. There was a mass in the church of St-Jean-aux-Bois, where we saw dogs, and there was even a horse brought into the church! Philippe and Raphaël loved that, so we went several times! I think they continued to go after I left.

Jean-Pierre Crépieux: For me, at the beginning it was strange; I was not used to it. At Choisy, I had been with my friends in the street, it had been very different. I didn't know about anything, how to cook, or how to eat sitting together at table. When I lived at home, when I came in each evening my parents would have finished eating, and I would manage to find something on my own or I would go to eat at a friend's place.

At Trosly, it was different. It was difficult for me to have new companions; I missed my friends from home. At L'Arche there were Jacques Dudouit, Philippe Seux, Raphaël Simi, and Jean-Pierre Senelle who was new and arrived later but did not stay because his parents wanted him back home.

Raphaël was funny, he was a great tease, and everyone in the village knew him.

One day he picked up a very hot plate in his hands. Everyone was surprised that he did not drop the plate.

At L'Arche there was a lot of joking around. There was a camembert which played music! Every time a guest came, out came the cheese, and it made Raphaël laugh a lot.

Henri Wambergue: Oh my God, to start with, we had to sleep, between little curtains upstairs; at least there were beds!

Kathryn Spink: At the beginning of November, *Sister Marie-Benoît* who was living in the village with two other Sisters asked to come and work on regular basis in the house. Meals improved dramatically. Then, in December a social worker asked them to welcome Jean-Pierre Crépieux. The little family was gradually growing.

Louis Pretty: Another person who was very important was a Dominican nun whose name I forget now. She arrived after maybe two or three



Work in the garden and in the house ↖



Sister Marie-Benoît Chassaigne and Philippe ↵



Interview RMC

months, and stayed for a long time. It was wonderful that she came, because before her arrival it was Jean, Henri and I who did the cooking, which was pretty meagre. There was no oven, no real stovetop, just two gas burners. You had to cook everything on those 2 burners, and to keep things warm, pile one pot on top of another.

Henri Wambergue: Marie-Benoît arrived around the same time as Pierre Crépieux and Jacques Dudouit, towards the end of 1964. Perhaps she also worked in the workshop at the Val Fleuri after Jean Vanier took charge there in March 1965. She was a member of a community of 3 Dominicans who were looking for work in the region.

Louis Pretty (Letter June 30th, 1965): Today I want to talk to you about one of the people who is with us. I think her way of life might interest you. She is really a most wonderful person, the likes of which you rarely have the occasion to know. I really wish you had the occasion to meet her. Marie-Benoît is a nun of the order of “Les Dominicaines des Campagnes”. She and two

others live in a small house and really each one works independently as any normal lay person. Marie-Benoît is with us and really is practically indispensable. Jean has probably talked to you about her. The two others work in factories.

Jean-Pierre Crépieux: Jean Vanier did the cooking like everyone else. Antoinette Maurice and Miss Edé brought us soup. They both lived in Compiègne, and were social workers. Sr. Marie-Benoît came to do the cooking from Monday to Friday; she had a house in the village. One day I was helping Marie-Benoît with the cooking. Jean Vanier arrived back from Canada and I was serving at table with a chef’s hat – he couldn’t get over it!

One day, I went to Paris with Henri Wambergue to load a truck with furniture which belonged to the brother of Miss Gsell, a villager in Trosly whose house Fr. Thomas lived in. Her brother gave us the furniture.

Annie Wattine (Morinville): [photo] Mr. Vanier organized biblical evenings one evening a week at L’Arche. That’s how I met him

the first time. He invited some important people from the district, and some poor people from the village, there was no difference. He found himself with the Director of a factory, and us, which we found very refreshing. At the end of the evening, there was Raphaël who served us hot chocolate from a pot that had many stories to tell as could be seen from its many dents, not to mention the ladle! Raphaël was delighted to serve us. Jean Vanier read from a gospel and then commented on it. It was very interesting for me as I had never done that before. There were Marie-Benoît, a sister, Henri Wambergue, Louis Pretty,

an architect who Mr. Vanier had asked to come and help us during his sabbatical year, because we certainly needed help! From the beginning Mr. Vanier was very much surrounded by people who were competent as well as loving. There was also Fr. Thomas, let's not forget him, we called him [the White Father](#). I got to know the White Father when I came to L'Arche and the Val Fleuri. Since the beginning the chapel was at the Place des Fêtes, as was his little room. At mass that first Christmas we were a bit squished, but there weren't as many people because the Val Fleuri had not yet been taken on.



Mr. Prat and Annie Morinwillé (Wattine) ↵



The White Father ↵

8.

Christmas 1964

Jean-Pierre Crépieux: I spent a first Christmas at Trosly, and I received a sweater that was hand-made by the mother of Fr. Thomas. After mass, we had invited the neighbours. We had invited two little boys, twins, Alex and I can't remember the name of the other. They were in public care. Afterwards they lived at the orphanage in Pierrefonds, where I often went to see them. Today they must be grownups.

Thérèse Vanier: I asked Jean if I could spend Christmas in the little home, and he agreed. Thus I came to Trosly to spend Christmas with him and with Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux. I remember it very well. I think there may have been a third man as well, but who possibly had

to leave? I had to take the night train to arrive in Compiègne on Christmas Day in the morning. Jean came to meet me, and it was snowing, in fact there was a lot of snow. At the side of the road there was a man sitting in the snow. Seeing him, Jean stopped the car and said to me: "You know, this man was here on my way to the station to get you, and it seems to me that it would be good to invite him to eat with us."

He told us that his name was Gabriel and told us about his life on the road. He hardly had any belongings.

Christmas day we had a wonderful meal. We ate really well. I was very tired and I think Gabriel was as well. I went to stay with someone in the village.

The next morning, looking for some coffee, I went back to the house. I opened the door and almost got a dish in the face! I carefully avoided the plates, and realized there was a battle in progress between two archangels: Raphaël and Gabriel. Jean intervened and eventually everything calmed down. I think perhaps Gabriel stayed for breakfast. Raphaël had been doing the dishes, and I don't know why the dispute had broken out. Even if things eventually went well on Christmas Day,

the following day was not easy. I think Jean had to send Gabriel away. I remember saying to Jean, and I repeat it often when I am telling stories about L'Arche, that L'Arche cannot welcome everyone! It's important to discern, and as quickly as possible, who is suited for L'Arche.

That is my first memory of L'Arche! It was with great interest and admiration that I met and communicated with Philippe. Obviously I spoke with Philippe, but also with Raphaël, who although he didn't have much language, had a most expressive face!

Antoinette Maurice: I remember Christmas morning, 1964; Marguerite Bilodeau and Christiane were there. Marguerite was a young Canadian about 35 years old who was a secretary in Paris. She came to Trosly to spend that first Christmas at L'Arche. I met her that day for the first time, at Annel, where Fr. Thomas said mass. She told Christiane and I how struck she had been by her evening at L'Arche. Not only by the people with disabilities, but also by Thérèse Vanier, Jean's sister, and the way she had shaved a homeless man, Gabriel, who Jean had picked up on the road

side. Marguerite was very moved by that evening. She came back often to Trosly and had plans to make a commitment to live at L'Arche. However, she fell ill and died in May 1965. Those months were very important to her, and she left everything she had to L'Arche.

Kathryn Spink: In the early days both Jean Vanier and Fr. Thomas shared the vision of welcoming anyone who wished to come, be they the very elderly, drug addicts or simply 'gentleman of the road'. On Christmas 1964 Jean Vanier went to collect his sister Thérèse who was arriving at Compiègne station from England. On the way there he noticed a man walking along the road and, seeing him again on the return journey, invited him for Christmas lunch. Showered and refreshed, Gabriel presided over the Christmas festivities, smoked cigarettes and regaled the assembled company with stories. (...) But, as soon as he decided to install himself on a more permanent basis, it became quickly apparent that he was not really suited to living in community. (...) When finally Jean Vanier walked into the dining room one day to find plates flying through the air,

it was decided that for the sake of Raphaël and Philippe, Gabriel must leave. For Jean Vanier the vision was gradually becoming clearer: L'Arche, as far as he was concerned, could not take in all who were in need but must be for those suffering from a specific form of poverty, people with intellectual disabilities.

Jean Vanier: Gabriel was a homeless man who had all the difficulties of people who

live on the street. He could not stand Raphaël and Philippe, and I have to say they could not stand him either! I had to ask him to leave. I took him to Paris, to the Gare du Lyon, and I had telephoned Abbé Pierre who was willing to welcome him. Thus in February 1965 I became aware that we could not welcome just anyone, anyhow, but primarily men and women, particularly men, who had an intellectual disability.

9.
March 22, 1965:
Jean Vanier assumes
responsibility of the Val
Fleuri

Louis Pretty (Letter March 17th, 1965):
L'Arche is on the way to bigger things. A few days ago we received payment from the Prefecture who was very enthusiastic about what we are doing, so much so that they asked us to present a project to build the space and necessary accommodation for 40 more friends. They want the report for the beginning of April. We were rather taken aback, finding that things might be going a little too

quickly. However we feel that we have no choice. We must present as well the fundamental principles of L'Arche. (...)

I have done a great deal since my last letter. A few days ago I had the opportunity to meet Abbé Pierre with Jean.

Kathryn Spink: The special call to welcome people with intellectual disabilities was powerfully endorsed when, at the end of 1964, a crisis occurred at the Val Fleuri. The result was that all the staff handed in their notice. Three months later in March 1965 when those resignations became effective, Jean Vanier was asked to take over as its Director. Relations between L'Arche and the much larger residence, which housed 32 disabled men, had been a little strained. The director there, a Monsieur Wathier, had been a good man but not one who was very creative or rich in ideas. Conscious of Jean Vanier's friendship with both Dr Préaut and Fr. Thomas, he appears to have seen the French Canadian's presence in the village as a threat. He had allowed Raphaël and Philippe, and subsequently Jacques and Jean-Pierre, to go to the Val Fleuri for showers, but otherwise there



Val Fleuri ↵



Val Fleuri and workshops (left) ↖



The men of the Val ↵

was little contact between the two houses. In those days the residents of the Val Fleuri were kept firmly under lock and key except during a daily walk taken in single file, with one member of staff in front and another bringing up the rear. The atmosphere inside the building was one of noise and violence. It was not without a certain apprehension that Jean Vanier agreed to pick up the pieces following the departure of all but two of the staff. There was a reluctance too to take a step that would radically alter the prophetic little family in the Foyer of L'Arche. As one of the earliest assistants put it: "The community was poor in every way except in its prayer which was magnificent, but with this it became even poorer because we could not have the kind of community we wanted".

It was Jean Vanier's conviction that what people with disabilities really needed was a foyer, a home, a hearth, a family. At that time in particular they were frequently not understood by their parents, brothers and sisters, and even if their blood relatives did understand them they were inclined to be too paternalistic, treating them like children and failing to take into account what Dr Thompson and others had found them to be capable of. These

alternative foyers needed above all to be 'homes', but 'homes' that would provide something deeper than the family home. Jean Vanier himself described his feelings in relation to the early days of L'Arche as those of one who had 'come home'.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 17-06-65): During my month-long visit to Canada and the United States in January, it was a joy to see the interest L'Arche had aroused. Little by little, people everywhere are trying to set up schools and create sheltered workshops. Many are realizing the urgency of the problem for the future of those who are disabled, and the need for creating small permanent homes.

Kathryn Spink: The desire to be a Christian community had meant that, in 1965, almost immediately after approaching the secular authorities and forming an association, Jean Vanier had gone to the then Bishop of Beauvais to speak about L'Arche and express his desire to be in communion with him. He had subsequently been greatly touched and encouraged by the bishop's friendship and eventual retirement to a small house in Trosly. Thereafter he made similar approaches to

the local bishop at the time of each new foundation. Invariably the response was one of interest and support.

Kathryn Spink: (...) Fr. Thomas recalled how Jean Vanier loved his little foyer and the family life he led there, where he did the cooking himself and was dependent on the villagers for help, and how the assumption of the directorships of the Val Fleuri and consequent uniting of his small family with a much larger State-supported structure was not a transition easily made: 'Jean did it only because he felt it was the will of God'. Jean Vanier for his part remembered: 'I had told Fr. Thomas that I wasn't capable of running it, but he thought it would be alright. In many respects it was madness. I had just no idea how to look after 32 people with a lot of violence and screaming.'

As at previous significant junctures in his life, however, he took the circumstances as they arose without excessive questioning or introspection. "I suppose there has always been something in me. There is naivety, but there's also risk and trust in self, which is both good and bad. You just keep going. I think those are strengths that

carry weaknesses also. You make mistakes, but I think also, as you look at the story, there is the presence of Jesus, of one who is using me with all my defects, fragilities and qualities, and bringing something to birth."

Kathryn Spink: On Sunday, March 22nd, 1965 he took charge of the Val Fleuri. The outgoing director had no great desire to show him how the place operated. He pointed out some of the books and handed him a heavy bundle of keys to cupboards, offices and files. The younger man set up his office without even knowing the names of the people who lived in the building. Within an hour someone had stolen his bunch of keys. With only two of the original staff members remaining to help him, the house, workshops and garden were swiftly reduced to chaos. There was no nurse so Jean Vanier had to learn how to give injections. One man was a diabetic and needed injecting every morning so the new director found himself practising on an orange.

Denise Lepère (Summary by Jean de la Selle): Denise Lepère lived in a suburb of Paris; she played piano for about 4 hours every day. When,

in 1962, her husband retired from his work as an engineer, they moved to Cuise. They participated in the work of the catholic fraternity with sick people, and came to know Jean Vanier. It was in this context, that in 1964, they offered Jean their services as volunteers and became part of the network of support for the little foyer of L'Arche.

In March, 1965, Jean-Louis Wathier, the Director of the Val Fleuri, resigned along with several of his employees. The Val had had 4 Directors in 4 years. Mr. Prat, the father of Jean-Pierre, offered the direction of the Val to Jean Vanier who asked Denise Lepère to become mistress of the house of the Val Fleuri, and asked her husband to take charge of the accounts. Denise realized that she had to choose between music which was her love, and L'Arche, which was for others. She and her husband said “yes”, without really knowing what they were getting into. So the personnel of the Val consisted of Joseph Calvez, who was an educator, Héléne Journaux, Maria Didelet, Catherine Welikij, [Georgette Cagniard](#), Renée Jean and Victor Baratella, who was the gardener. Thirty-two young men resided at the Val; there was a lot of insecurity, and at times

violence. Very quickly Denise was frightened and said so, but carried on. Her husband, in the face of significant difficulties with the accounting, resigned after three months.

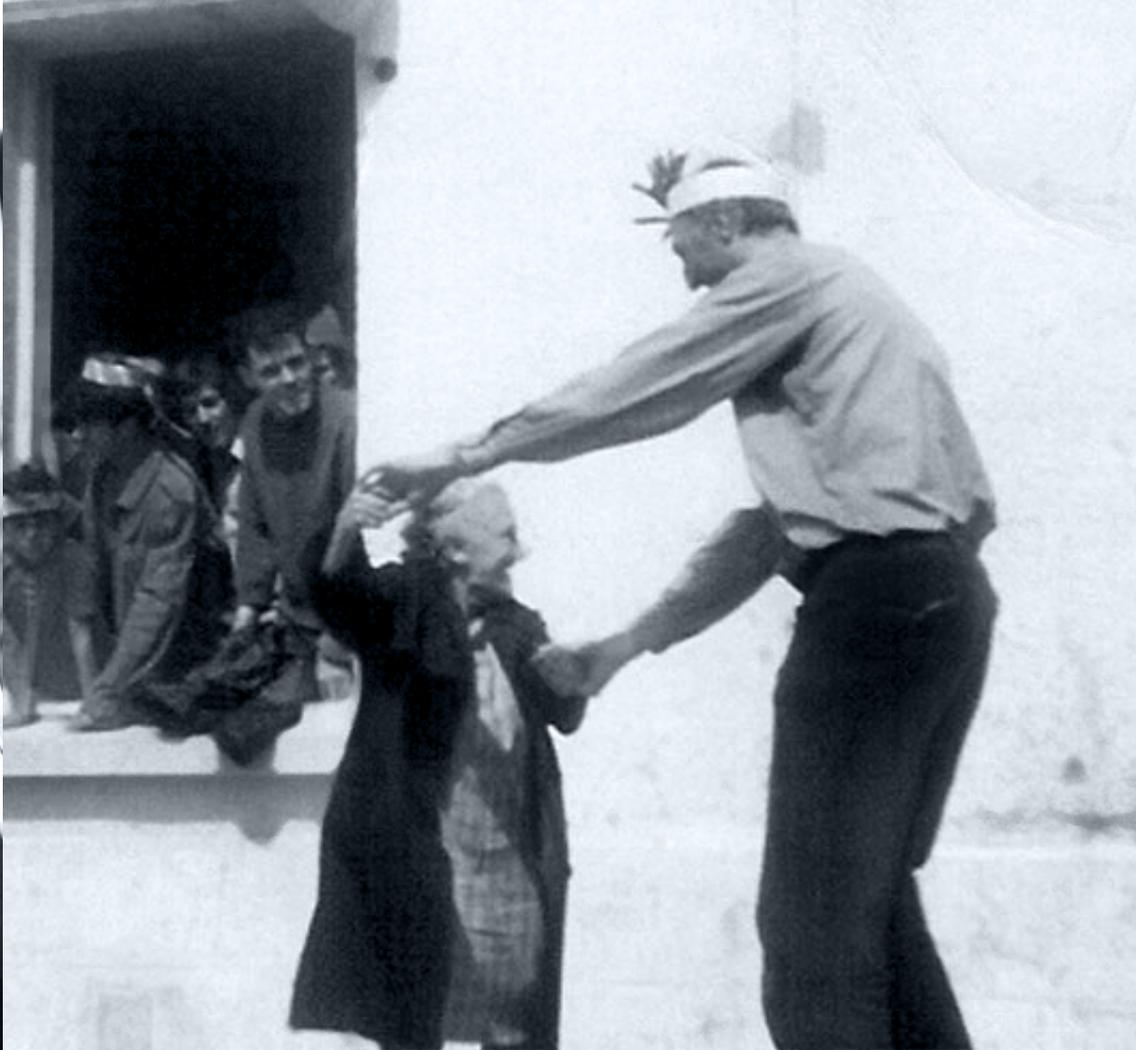
Denise, who was in no way prepared for her responsibilities, overcame her fears and even spent nights as the only woman in the Val, when Jean Vanier was in Canada. In a state of insecurity, she prayed, and continued to trust and persevere. She became the master of the household including the accounts, and the mother of the family. A few months later Barbara Swanekamp arrived, as well as Gerry McDonald and Annie Morinville.

Gerry McDonald: I was an airline stewardess, and I aspired to a more spiritual life. I was planning to marry, but felt that this was not right for me. I thought about a religious vocation; I was searching.

I was in France, so I went to visit L'Arche. Its simplicity attracted me that was for sure. It was so simple, and it was just getting started — there is energy in beginnings! It is impossible to describe but there was a spiritual atmosphere which appealed to me.



Mrs Lepere with some men from the Val ↵



Mrs. Cagniard ♪

Jean Vanier: I suddenly found myself at the head of an impossible situation. There were thirty men at the Val Fleuri and I was lost. They too were lost! Most of the personnel had left and I was quite alone. Two of the helpers had stayed, but I needed to find others. Fr. Thomas found someone who could help with the accounting. One of the first things I did for the Val Fleuri was to open all the doors. The men started to go out into the street, which of course caused some problems!

Marc Vommeurs: [photo] When Jean Vanier arrived, it became a lot better than it had been. He said to me: "If you want to leave, the door is open." Once Jean took over, I felt very relieved. After he arrived they started to give us salaries, but it took his coming to make it happen. First I had 10 francs, then 15, then 20, then 25, then 50 and eventually we had an actual salary. I had a salary of 700 francs.

Kathryn Spink: For all its 'prophetic' nature there had been a certain amount of formality and professionalism involved in the original setting up of the foyer. Three disabled men could not have simply been removed from an institution without

it. The taking over of the Val Fleuri, however, moved Jean Vanier and L'Arche into the world of greater regulation and administration. It brought with it a 'prix de journée', a daily government subsidy for those living in the Foyer de L'Arche, and hence greater external control. It also added the dimension of workshops. Work had to be found of a kind that would allow intellectually disabled people to develop their particular gifts and give them access to the dignity of a salary, no matter how small. There was an unmistakable happiness that sprang from a disabled person's discovery that he or she could make something beautiful or useful. Opportunities to nurture that happiness had to be created.

Gerry McDonald: At night it was important to have assistants at the Val, more than one or two people. I went there for supper and to help a little afterwards. There were about thirty young men there. It was hard, that is to say, the young men were living a life quite different than what it was to become. Little by little Jean lowered the walls, so to speak. There were many difficult situations, fights, and crises. Yes, for sure!



Marc Vommeurs (lower right) ↖



Pierre Marnas, Roger Cauwry and Jean



Joseph Valceç (in the white shirt) ↵



Some men from the Val

At the beginning there were one or two members of the original staff who stayed. Joseph — I forget his family name — was there, as well as Victor, who had previously been a gardener. This was very helpful, to have them both there because they knew the young men and the young men knew them, so the change did not seem so drastic to them.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 17-06-65): The joining of the two houses, Le Val Fleuri and L'Arche, has given a new impetus to our work. This unity could not have come about without the help of those at L'Arche who have taken on full responsibility for that house. This allows me to spend more time at Le Val Fleuri where I am assisted by M. and Mme Lepère.

Annie Wattine (Marinwillé): When Mr. Vanier took over, there was more freedom, less structure, and so perhaps people were a little more lost as well. Certain people were not able to stay. With Mr. Vanier, they were free, even if they needed some supervision, they were free.

Agnès Roland: It was wonderful in those days because we began to get to know the people with disabilities.

In the old days they walked in the forest under supervision and we never saw those young men. Afterwards, the barriers were no longer there and they came to visit us. For us, they were not handicapped, even if they had a disability. We loved them! Unconsciously, I think we understood that they had lots of problems associated with their disabilities, and that made us love them even more. My parents always had an open door because of that. Raphaël, and each one, they were very special! I never heard my parents sending them away saying they didn't have time, never, never. If we said anything to them it was when they arrived at the end of the morning and we said to them "Listen, it's time for lunch, it's time for you to go home to eat." I think in terms of Christianity, their presence also revealed another dimension, a richness, which made me feel that as they were, they were more beloved by God than the rest of us.

Agnès Roland: I had to return, I think it was towards the end of 1964. In the meantime I

had done many other things and I had told myself that I might do my studies in psychiatric nursing. I had been advised to first do my nursing studies, and then later specialize in psychiatric nursing. However, before I began my studies Mr. Vanier said to me “Come and work with us, and you will see...” It was he who hired me to work at the Val. There were only a few of us then. Mira and Gerry were there and Joseph was in charge of those who lived there. I wonder if he could have been the only one to look after the boys in those days?

Jean Vanier said to me “We want to open ‘les Hirondelles’, it would be good if you could do it.” I responded that I didn’t really know how it would work. I worked a little and then I spent time in the workshops, and finally we opened ‘les Hirondelles’. It was very pleasant in those days, like a family. We felt like one big family.

In the morning I went to the workshops and then at noon I went to ‘les Hirondelles’. The men who came were [Michel Berthelin](#), Jean-Claude Lepottier, René Carémé sometimes and Roger Mignon. There were about 6 or 7 who came regularly and sometimes others wanted to come as well. The meals were brought up in big pots which

Mrs. Welikij and Mrs Journaux had used to prepare the meal, and we had our own bowls and ate up there at ‘les Hirondelles’.

It was a place to eat, and then afterwards we did a bit of school work with a few people. At the beginning we wanted above all to teach them to count their money so they could take the bus to go to the movies. However, a few of them just wanted to hang around there and do nothing. One day we didn’t really know what to do. So I took [some broken Cerabati ceramic squares](#) and some cardboard and began to break up the squares and then to make a mosaic with them. That is how the mosaic workshop was born! One day Jacqueline said to me “If instead of doing it that way, we made a real workshop and pasted the mosaic onto wood instead of cardboard, we would have a wonderful product.” It was mostly Michel Berthelin who was doing the mosaics. He made an enormous number of mosaic clowns as hotplates for sideboards. It was Gerry who took this in hand. She went to look for broken squares which weren’t being used elsewhere, and for backing to glue them onto. For the Cerabati work, we were glueing sample tiles into catalogues. We had to be careful, and if they



Michel Berthelin ↵



Preparing the catalogues ↵



What to do with the broken tiles? ↵

were not smooth, we could not use them in the catalogues. It was those wasted tiles which seemed to me we could put to better use.

First we had the Cerabati contract, then later we made **archive bags** with more and more of the men, maybe that was around the end of 1965, I don't remember exactly. I do remember though that we opened that workshop with Benoît, who rocked all day. He worked well, but whenever you looked at him he was rocking.

Louis Pretty: I never lived at the Val. That is, Jean started there, but I was always more or less responsible for the first house, with Henri. Jean moved to the Val, but I didn't go there very often. The Val seemed to me to be so much bigger than the first house because there were already so many people living there. The men at the Val rarely came to eat at L'Arche, because there were too many of them. At that time at L'Arche there were only five of us, plus Henri, me and the Dominican sister; we were very small. On the other hand, when there were people who came from Paris, friends of Jean who came to help, most of the time they came for the day and spent it at the first L'Arche

house. This was perhaps because it was easier for them to get involved with four or five people than with a big group.

Kathryn Spink: The need soon attracted help. Volunteers appeared from the village and elsewhere to assist with the bookkeeping, gardening and cooking. It was a time when social services were trying to become better organised, so they sent a representative to help to put the accounts and the administration in order.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 17-06-65): We have much hope for the future. We confide our plans to you so that you can pray with us that they might become realities. The large property beside L'Arche is up for sale. The local governments of the Seine and of the Oise are very interested in our project and are presently studying ways of obtaining the necessary grants for the purchase of this property and for the construction of five new homes. A family-like home is the best place for the growth and development of any person, and especially for those who have disabilities. In small, family-like homes, they can find the affection they



Workshops : Archive bags | Jacques, Jean-Pierre, Jean-Michel Maisonneuve, Jean-Claude Lepottier ↵



Jean-Pierre and Gerry McDonald (left) ↖

need as well as the stability that will allow them to develop according to their own abilities.

Kathryn Spink: At a conference in Paris for professionals working with people with disabilities Jean Vanier stood up and spoke about community life with disabled people in a way that he subsequently recognised must have seemed very naïve to those with infinitely more experience

than he had. Nevertheless, a lady psychiatrist present, a Dr Richet who at the time was practising at Clermont psychiatric hospital 40 kilometres from Trosly, approached him afterwards and they became friends. She would help Jean Vanier and other assistants to deeper understanding of the suffering and psychological needs of the men in the Val Fleuri, and offer increased knowledge of how to help them.

10.

Arrival of Doctor Léone Richet, and the beginnings of the workshops

Antoinette Maurice: From the earliest days of L'Arche, Jean Vanier wished to have the support of a psychiatrist who could help us welcome and care for people that we found to be difficult. In 1965, Jean Vanier had participated in a conference in Paris which brought together health professionals, and to whom he spoke of his project of L'Arche. The psychiatrists were generally doubtful about his experience, except **Dr. Léone Richet**, from the psychiatric hospital at

Clermont. She approached Jean Vanier at the end of his talk. It was the start of a rich and fruitful collaboration. For the first three years, she was the psychiatrist for L'Arche. She was a very warm woman. It's thanks to her that Michel Berthelin and Michel Faucondière, who were at the hospital at Clermont, were welcomed at L'Arche. She left after three years to work as a psychiatrist at Caen. She always remained good friends with Jean Vanier and L'Arche, until her death.

Kathryn Spink: He (Jean Vanier) also wrote of how he realised that while L'Arche had been profoundly inspired by the gospels, and while it was to be a community lived in the spirit of the Beatitudes, there was also a need to make full use of medical and psychiatric resources in close co-operation with the relevant health authorities. Fr. Thomas, despite the insights he had received from Dr Thompson and Dr Préaut, was less inclined to acknowledge the requirement for professional care and more reluctant to accept the controls that inevitably went with government funding, seeing them as a potential threat to the gospel spirit of poverty. Jean Vanier, however, recognised



Jean, Dr Léone Richet and Mrs. Lepère ↵



In front of the workshops ↵



Top: Quitting time at the workshops. Bottom: Mosaic workshop ↵

Mosaic workshop with Jacqueline ↵

the importance of professional competence and encouraged it within the community, accepting with relative ease government stipulations with regard to structure and care, boards of directors and living conditions.

Gerry McDonald: Working in the workshops gave me energy. Sometimes it was fun, and sometimes difficult, but it was never dull. It was a complete change and I appreciated that. So the workshops started, and we made paper bags, the famous paper bags!

Jean-Pierre Crépieux: When Jean Vanier took over the Association from Mr. Wathier, we were working at the Val Fleuri. We made archive bags. There were not many of us. It was a small workshop in some wooden shacks, just opposite the office. The shacks burned, and so we rebuilt the workshops where they are now.

Kathryn Spink: In the right conditions, people with disabilities, in the workshops of Trosly and in L'Arche communities elsewhere, proved to be very gifted in the making of mosaics and pot-

tery, woodwork, weaving, gardening and a wealth of other creative skills. In 1960s, however, such avenues were still being explored and there might have been only one or two assistants for 32 people.

Annie Wattine (Morinwillé): In work in the workshops we made paper bags, and we put parlour games into boxes. We also did work with corks for one factory. There was also the [mosaic workshop, run by the artist Jacqueline d'Halluin](#) and Gerry McDonald who came from Paris several days each week. There was one person who could not work during the day because he could not get out of bed, so he came and worked during the night. Often when we arrived at work in the morning we couldn't open the doors to get in, because he had made so many boxes during the night! There was also work done in the garden.

The spiritual life was also important, and we went to mass daily.

Jean Vanier (Letter June 17th, 1965): Philippe and Pierrot are now working in one of the [workshops at Le Val](#), where they prepare samples for Cerabati Ceramics. Jacques, Jean-Pierre and

Lucien are wiring electric fixtures or boxing parlour games. Raphaël still prefers to work in the garden of L'Arche with Christian. On Holy Thursday, Pierrot made his first Communion. It was a joyful occasion, a real family celebration with Pierrot at the centre, peaceful and happy.

Jean Vanier (Video 1968): I think that the people who know us, and there are now many, are beginning to understand that the person with an intellectual disability is simply a human being. Those come to visit us here and see them happy, relaxed; they see our beautiful mosaics which are made in the workshop. Visitors say: "I didn't realize they could work" In fact, they discover that our boys can be really productive at work, and have an ability to make beautiful things. I sense that for many there is a gradual realization that the person with an intellectual disability is not someone useless or stupid, not an idiot, but truly a human being. I believe that little by little people are thus beginning to understand that sometimes they were prejudiced; that it is

a question of creating communities where each one can be happy and relaxed, where people get along and where we love each other.

The work before us is quite unique; these are grown men with disabilities who will probably stay with us for their whole life. It may be that they have no family, or because they are incapable of being reintegrated into society as they are without professional qualifications or could never marry. For various reasons they are here for life, and we need people who wish to live with them. It is not always very glorious to sit day after day at table, do the cooking, open oneself, help in the workshops day after day, and to do all this while creating a fraternal atmosphere of happiness. Finally, I feel that most of the boys are happy here. Some of them have never been able to relax because they have suffered so much, having spent so long in the psychiatric hospital or they have had problems which are too serious; but generally here they are happy and we are happy because they are the ones who bring us joy and much peace.

11.

The family of L'Arche grows

Kathryn Spink: Jean Vanier's days were full. In March 1965 his thesis was published. As soon as he had a spare copy he sent one to his parents and his father professed to be so interested that he read a page of it daily. The Vanier parents were still faithfully supporting their son both materially and spiritually in all that he was doing. Jean remained affectionately appreciative, assuring them that he was united to them in the Heart of Jesus, but the workload in L'Arche meant that his letters were neither as long nor as frequent as they might have wished. At midday Jean Vanier would eat his meals

at the Val Fleuri in a single vast dining room that was later divided into three still sizeable rooms. In the evenings he would return to the Foyer de L'Arche to relax over dinner. His office and his bedroom were at the Val Fleuri. He slept poorly during those initial years, for there were invariably disturbances in the night. Nevertheless, in the tumultuous atmosphere of the Val Fleuri, where there was much shouting and where at times men would go into uncontrollable fits and have to be restrained by force; Jean Vanier was still able to perceive the mysterious presence of God. In all the suffering and the madness there was yet something profoundly of God.

Antoinette Maurice (Cette richesse qui vient du pauvre): [\[photo\]](#) Foreign assistants asked to come to L'Arche. At first it was mostly people who felt called through conferences which Jean gave each year at the universities in Toronto and Montreal. Some of those are still at L'Arche today: Barbara Swanekamp, Gabrielle Einsle, Simone Landrien.

The men and women who had been welcomed at L'Arche did not have much money, and they were badly dressed. One sensed this shortage of



Barbara Swanekamp and Antoinette ↵



Jean, Marie-Benoît, Mira Ziauddin and Henri ↵

funds in the daily life. We were careful about everything. L'Arche was not made of gold, that's for sure! The daily government subsidy for each of the men welcomed was very low. I was also shocked by the clothing of the assistants, who also in those days had very little pocket money.

Henri Wambergue: Relationships with the villagers were made through Fr. Thomas. The villagers called him the White Father. The White Father got around on a bicycle, always. Old Mrs. Bertrand, who must have been 82 or 85 years old, when she heard that people had moved into the L'Arche house, she didn't say anything, but very quickly brought us homemade soup, made with the vegetables from her own garden. I am not sure who tended the garden for her, perhaps her children. She lived in Croisette Street, across from the well, next to the Rolands. Fr. Thomas used to go and visit her, and I think used to take her communion. If I am not mistaken, I think Fr. Thomas had also been her neighbour, as he had lived at the Rolands for some time I believe, though I don't know for how long.

Kathryn Spink: Among the assistants who had come to L'Arche in Trosly-Breuil as early as May 1965 was an Indian girl, *Mira*, the Roman Catholic daughter of a Hindu mother and a Muslim father still living in Madras.

Louis Pretty: I knew Mira very well in Montreal, before she came to L'Arche. She arrived at L'Arche just as I was leaving or maybe even after my departure. Before leaving for L'Arche, I had been very involved in a center for foreign students. Gabrielle was the Director and Mira had come to Montreal. Mira also became very involved with that center, and that is how I came to know her.

Jean-Pierre Crépieux: In '65, *Lucien Leroy* arrived with Mira on May 21st, the birthday of Philippe Seux, that's how I remember. Lucien came from Denfert-Rochereau, and he had been, like me, in a house in Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois.

Mira was a friend of one of the assistants. She was Indian, and it's thanks to her that Barbara Swanekamp, who became Jean's helper, arrived. It is because of Mira that Gabrielle Einsle went to India to start L'Arche there. Me, I think that often



Henri, Jean-Pierre, Mira, Barbara, Benoît, Lucien et Jean ↵



Lucien Leroy ↵



Mira, Raphaël, Philippe and Barbara ↵



Lucien and Jean-Pierre in front of L'Arche ↵

assistants come because they hear about L'Arche from a friend.

Mira Ziauddin: Jean came (to Montreal) and spoke about the beginning of L'Arche in Trosly. He asked me "Would you like to come?" I replied to him "I have no experience with this kind of work. How can you expect me to do anything?" He told me "No, it will be OK. If you come, we will be happy."

I arrived in Trosly on May 25th, the day that [Miss Bilodeau](#) >, who was a close friend of Jean's, died. The first days were difficult because I didn't know anything, I didn't speak any French in those days, and I didn't know anyone. I slowly began to adapt and things began to go well. I loved the simplicity of life, and it did me a lot of good, especially after what I had known in Canada.

It was so humid everywhere that plants started to grow..

I slept in a room at the Hermitage. I did the cooking and washed Raphaël's feet, and other such things. There were Raphaël, Philippe, Jacques and Pierrot. I think there were just the four of them when I arrived. Henri was there and Louis Pretty



Marguerite Bilodeau

came then, at the same time as I did. He didn't stay long, he left. There was Andre Lecor who sang all the time. He and Pierrot sang, and there were also the Dominican sisters, like Marie-Benoît.

Anne-Marie Morinville was also there and came to help me, and there were always the same jobs to be done.

Jean-Pierre Crépieux: One day we were asked to sing at mass, for the communion of someone we didn't know; I was astonished that we were asked. It was not far from Pont-Sainte-Maxence. There *I saw that singing* would be useful for many things, and we became known.

Gabrielle Einsle: I was in Montreal, and was the Director of Crossroads International, a center of meeting and exchange for international graduate students at Montreal universities. One of our friends, Louis Pretty, was an architect, and wanted to spend his sabbatical year in Trosly. He went to France and met Jean Vanier, who he had heard at a conference I think. Every week Louis pretty wrote me a long letter. These letters made quite a document; I think I passed it on to Barbara some time

back. Each week Louis described the foundation of L'Arche. As an architect, he had given Jean some advice about renovations for the original L'Arche house. It was through the letters of Louis that I came to know more about L'Arche. Of course, Louis had told Jean, who went every year to Canada, to visit his friends in Montreal! Jean came twice to visit us, and spoke a lot to us about L'Arche. Every time that Jean came, I went with him to all his talks; I heard many talks about the poor of the world and about L'Arche, In Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal.

At the same time, at Crossroads Jean met *Adriano Da Silva*, who was doing his doctorate in philosophy and who was a good friend of ours. Adriano went very soon to Trosly, where he met and married Agnes.

Jean Vanier (Letter 17-06-65): Because the deepest inspiration of L'Arche comes from the Gospels, our doors are open to all those who need protection, whether they be Christian or not. We want them to feel free and at home. We want them to find the affection they need and that is rightfully theirs. Our hearts are open to all, for all are human beings.



Raphaël, Anne-Marie Morinwillé (Pollet), Bruno Lecointe, Philippe, Mira and Benoît ↵



Adriano da Silva ↵



Practising the song ↵



Jacques and Jean-Pierre on the guitar ↵

Kathryn Spink: In the early days of L'Arche he simply acted with all the apparent courage and enthusiasm of his conviction, as the need and opportunity arose. A house would fall vacant and he would buy it and fill it, without really ascertaining in advance whether it would suit the particular needs of the people who were to live in it. There were times when the arrival of assistants did not keep pace with the number of people with disabilities, and there were days when one single assistant had charge of 20 disabled men in the workshops. Nevertheless, as early as 1965 Jean Vanier wrote: "The first months of L'Arche have been lived in poverty and simplicity. Now that the first foundations have been laid, we must give it structure, organise and grow. We must make a solid work that will last."

Jean Vanier (Letter of 17-06-65): What astounds us more and more is the number of people who need permanent homes. The increasing number of requests from parents of children with disabilities and from psychiatric hospitals makes us realize the role of our poor house and the responsibility it has. In our modern world, with all its

demands for scholarship, with all its techniques and the priority it gives to production and efficiency, the integration of boys and girls who are slow or have intellectual disabilities has become more and more difficult. Manual work has less and less value. Even in agriculture, technicians and mechanics are replacing the workmen who are not specialized. People with intellectual disabilities, less caught up in ambitious desires and the seeking of honours, have pure, affectionate and simple hearts. Those who visit us are always surprised by the warm welcome they receive. The boys come and shake their hands and talk about their problems when asked, or are concerned about the problems and sufferings of others.

Anne-Marie de La PELLE: [photo] I had just gotten my driver's license, and my parents suggested, I think in July 1965 that I should go and see what L'Arche was all about, go and visit there. What really interested me was the opportunity to drive my parents' car by myself, even though I banged it on the narrow entrance gate of the Val Fleuri as I left. So I spent a day at L'Arche and I spent a lot of time talking with Jean Vanier. I was

astonished to find a place where violence was present side by side with a peace which flowed from the violence. I was very intrigued by that. But that was that. I had started studies in education and so after the visit, I forgot about L'Arche.





Philippe, Lucien, Jean-Pierre, Mira, Henri, Fr. Thomas



On the way to Rome ↖

12.

Pilgrimages and the Open House

Kathryn Spink: From the very first Jean Vanier had seen the importance of journeys and celebrations in lives that might otherwise be monotonous and devoid of hope, to keep up spirits and open hearts and minds to other realities. For centuries Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Christians alike had valued a *sense of pilgrimage*. The experience of journeying together to a holy place, a place of prayer, was important for everyone but possibly even more so for the poor person and for the person with disabilities. Leaving some of the familiar routines, meeting new people, facing fresh challenges and needing one another along the way

healed divisions, cemented old bonds and created new ones. It became a potent symbol of what people in L'Arche were trying to live. The community would set off in processions of private cars to Rome, Lourdes, Fatima or some other distant destination.

Antoinette Maurice: In July 1965, there was an opportunity to take part in a pilgrimage to Lourdes. Some members of the Val had not signed up but wanted to go: Michel Berthelin, Jean-Claude Lepottier, Marc Vommeurs and Jean-François (who did not stay).

So we had to get organized for those five men. There were the cars belonging to Christiane and to Miss Maurice! Jean Vanier came with us on the way there, but cars did not go very quickly in those days. We went about 80 or 90 km per hour, maximum! We visited the Carmel at Cognac. From there we went to Lourdes. Jean settled us in the hotel, and then left to join the others. With us, there were five men we didn't know at all, all sleeping in the same room.

I think it was this that allowed us to discover these men. In fact, I already knew them a little, but

this was another way to know them a little better. I remember especially Jean-Claude Lepottier and Jean-François. We did the Stations of the Cross with Jean-Francois and all the others.

Henri Wambergue: At L'Arche, we were all more or less pilgrims. We started, with Mrs. Lepère, in July 1965, to sign up for the diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes. We must have been 25 or 30, I can't remember how many. It was the pilgrimage of the diocese of Beauvais. Fr. Desmazières was no longer there at that point. We went each time and stayed at Cité Secours; we didn't stay in hotels.

Kathryn Spink: Often the cars would break down en route. There would be other minor setbacks, but ones which were often turned upside down and made wondrously acceptable and even happy by people like Dédé who would look at a shattered windscreen and see not the brokenness, the inconvenience and the work involved in its replacement but only the beauty, the way it shone like crystal in the sunlight. There would be moments of relaxation, joy, renewed hope, and for

some the beginnings of a new and more peaceful life, a life more open to the world, society and other people.

Louis Pretty: I didn't go on pilgrimage, nor did Raphaël. I stayed with Raphaël, and Jean left with almost everyone else. I have to say I was a lot less adventuresome than he was. I found it a big deal to leave with everyone without really knowing where they were going, where they would stay etc. Like Raphaël, I was more comfortable staying at home. Since it was truly adventure, they just took off! Jean was always very optimistic, he didn't see any problems, anywhere; everything was perfect, there was no need to worry, everything would go well! It's clear that if he had not been like that, he never would have gotten anything done, because it was really crazy in the beginning. He didn't know anything, but he had 300% faith, and thank God he was like that! His spirit was certainly a little contagious, but one did have some doubts.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 05-11-65): I must tell you about two events that took place just before our holidays: our trip to Lourdes and our open

house. On June 21st we invited our neighbours in Trosly and our friends from the surrounding area to come to our open house. Mr. Robillard, the representative of the local government, spoke about the importance of centres like ours. The mayor of Trosly emphasized how happy he was to participate in the growth of our centre, which welcomes boys from our local area. Dr. Préaut explained the role and purpose of our homes. M. Prat thanked the village people for the way they have welcomed our boys. We were happy to welcome so many of our friends into our homes. It was a magnificent day, lots of sun, lots of friendships, a real “open house”. Some sixty students from a school for specialized educators were with us and helped make our celebration a success. There was also a group of four musicians from Trosly who played for us. It is so important to have good, friendly relationships with those around us, to be well integrated into the town so that the boys feel accepted and loved by the people around us. Our open house really contributed to that, I think, and was also a way for us to show our gratitude to our friends.

The pilgrimage that thirty of us made to Lourdes was wonderful. People at the Cité Secours, where

we slept and ate, were so warm and welcoming. Those five days went by so fast! We were impressed to see so many sick people from all over the world come and pray to Our Lady at the Grotto. Some of the boys helped to push the wheelchairs of the sick from the sanctuary to the hospital. This contact with the sick was important for us all. How can we thank all those who helped to pray for this unforgettable pilgrimage? You can be assured that we prayed for you with much love and faith.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 05-11-65): During the last days of the holidays, all the assistants met at the monastery in Ourscamp for a time of work, relaxation and prayer. In this beautiful setting, in the silence and prayer of the monastery, with Père André as our guide, we reviewed our Christian and human ideals and objectives. We tried to look at our way of being with the disabled in order to discover our deficiencies so that we might do things better in the future. Above all, we sensed our responsibility regarding them. Many have no parents. Those who do have parents were entrusted to us with much confidence. We want to create a centre where our boys can grow and develop according



Jean with neighbours and friends ↵



Dr. Préaut and Fr. Thomas ↖

to their human and spiritual capacities, where they can be happy, work and receive an education that corresponds to their needs, and where they can be encouraged to use their leisure hours in a beneficial way and be helped medically and psychologically. Finally, they need to feel that they are at home, “en famille”, in the security that flows from love.

I think we all feel that our first role is to love the disabled, to love them just as they are, in what is deepest in them. On the level of reason they may be deficient, but often on the level of the heart, they are very rich. Our role is to discover, respect

and love each person. We want to create a family rather than a school or a workshop where there are educators and those to be educated, those who are superior and those who are inferior. We want to create a family where there is peace, love and friendship.

We have all come back to Trosly full of life. The houses that were empty for the month of August are once again full of joy and the workshops back to normal. Some people were kind enough to lend us a little house in Trosly where we opened a dining room for six people from Le Val Fleuri. That makes the meals at Le Val more peaceful.



Raphael and his drum



The royal court

13.

Care and Celebration

Annie Wattine (Morinwillé): I was a nurse's aide and I arrived at the Val in September 1965. It was my job to look after the infirmary. There was a nurse from Compiègne and also Paule Préaut, the daughter-in-law of Dr. Préaut, with whom I worked for 18 years. I was also in the workshops. I would prepare the medications and give them out. In those days we gave out medications at 10 am, at noon, at 4 pm, and at 6 pm. The dosages were incredible! Treatments were not as they are today; things have really progressed since then. We were not as competent with psychiatric medications then as we are now. There were some really difficult cases. There was a lot

of suffering, so much suffering. We would go to see the psychiatrist, and then we would go to see Fr. Thomas, that's how it always went. When there was suffering or aggressively, we always went to Fr. Thomas, who would take their hand, and pray. Later, the person would go back up the street, singing! You had to see it to believe it.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 05-11-65): Dr. Richet, our psychiatrist, and Mme Domenjoud, our psychologist, are now coming regularly each week. They are closely following the boys on a medical level and they help us through their presence, their experience and their advice.

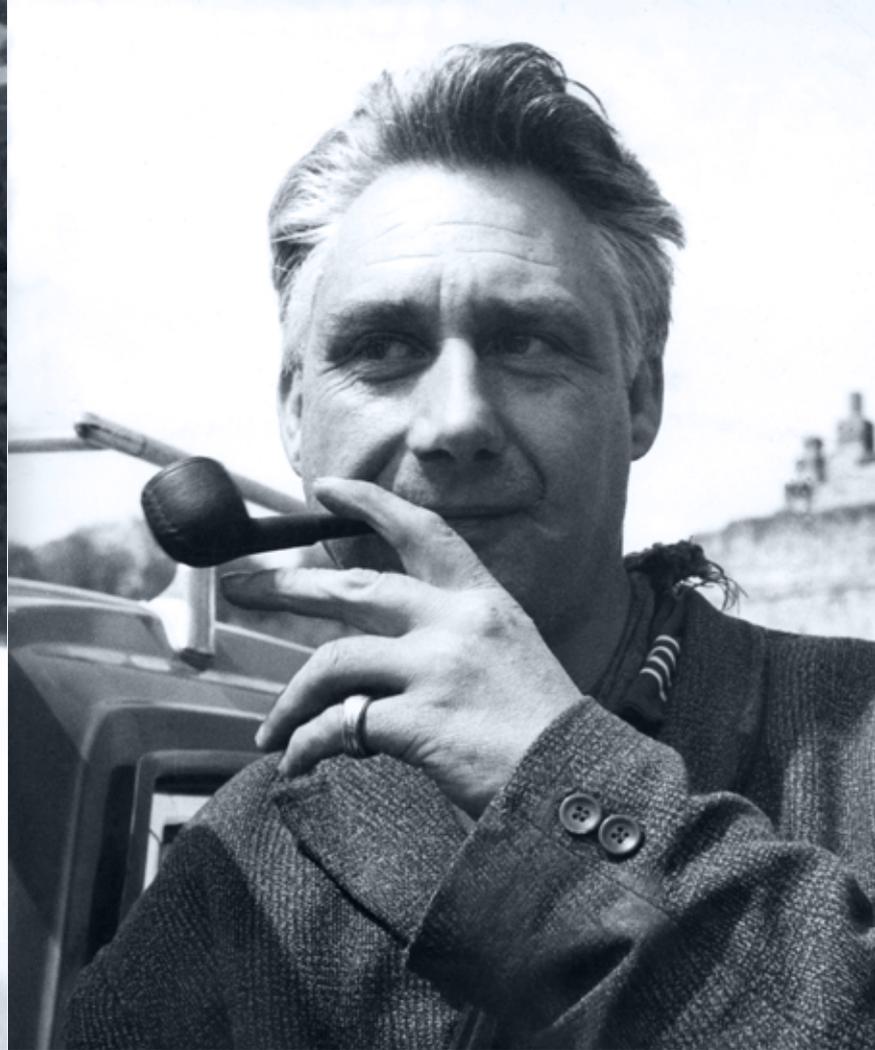
Marie-Elisabeth Rouchette: [photo] On All Saints Day 1965, I came to Trosly and stayed for a week. I was asked to type addresses on envelopes as I knew how to use a typewriter. So I began to type but I couldn't figure out why I was making so many mistakes! Afterwards they told me it was an English keyboard, which is different than the French one! I worked with Mrs. Lepère, way up top in the Val. I was connected to the L'Arche house where I ate my meals, like Mira. I saw a little



Jean, Marie-Elisabeth Rouchette and Barbara ↵



Fr. Thomas and Jacques ↵



Raphael and his pipe ↵



Philippe, Henri, Raphaël, Benoît, Lucien and Marie-Benoît ↵

bit of what was going on there, and began to hear about what would later become the L'Ermitage house. It seemed to me to be very dilapidated and I left saying to myself "Oh L'Arche is not for me, it's too poor, and I cannot live that now."

Jean Vanier (Letter of 05-11-65): The L'Arche family is growing. Benoît, who used to be at Le Val, is now at L'Arche. Raphaël, Philippe, Jacques, Pierrot and Lucien have urged him to come and live with them. Christian has come back. Henri and Marie-Benoît are now helped by Mira and Barbara (who teaches American folk dances at Le Val every Saturday morning). We are expecting Jean Claude from Canada. Raphaël is still busy lighting his pipe. Lucien is interested in birds. Pierrot, our nightingale, is preparing new songs. Philippe is still busy with his knitting and Jacques with his history books.

Jean-Pierre Crépieux: I used to often go for bike rides with Lucien Leroy. I would go up the hill which leads to Pierrefonds. In the house we would say "We're going for a bike ride" and so they knew where we were. We would go and visit

the children in the orphanage in Pierrefonds. One day a month, we would spend the day with them. We would sing together, and have tea. I really enjoyed that, we made friends. That is how Pierrot Grellet met them. He went to visit them over the years, even after I had left.

Kathryn Spink: L'Arche began to buy as many available houses as possible in Trosly-Breuil and its environs and to give them the names by which the community would know them. By November 1965 they had acquired the use of Les Hirondelles ('Swallows').

Annie Wattine (Morinwillé): Mr. Vanier put a lot of emphasis on meals, on mealtimes, good simple meals, and on birthdays which he loved to celebrate well. I became aware of the importance of celebrating birthdays, because I myself had always been wished happy birthday, but nothing more. But this was different, a real celebration! From then on I have really celebrated birthdays! It is a very important moment! There were some people who did not want us to celebrate their birthday, because nobody had celebrated it for many years.



Festive meals ↵



Festive meals ↵

Kathryn Spink: There was a good deal of laughter in the community over simple things. Mealtimes were occasions for joviality and celebration; people's birthdays were celebrated; their arrivals and their presence were celebrated. There was a growing appreciation of celebration as something different from a party at which friends met and drank and laughed, but where often the laughter was hollow and the drinks were necessary to warm hearts and spirits.

Annie Wattine (Morinville): When Raphaël and Philippe were invited to the Val for Mr Vanier's birthday; you could see that they were really like brothers. Incredible! One time, Raphaël was tired, and Mr Vanier had just returned from I don't know where, also tired, and during prayer, they were both asleep, leaning against each other. It was very beautiful; there was obviously so much trust! In L'Arche, each

one was well loved; we were able to deepen our faith, even if it was not obvious.

Kathryn Spink: On this divided earth celebration was never perfect. There was always a note of suffering: perhaps some members of the community were not there, some had withdrawn or were in pain, some might have broken away. Whilst celebrating the unity that had been given it was still important to be open to the suffering of the world. Indeed, celebration did not happen if the weak and the frail, if children or old people were not present. In the same way that the quality of the prayer after the evening meal was remarkable precisely because of the special potency of hearts turned in extreme simplicity and sincerity towards God, so at the heart of every celebration were the eyes and laughter of those who were most fragile and most vulnerable.

14.

Relationships with the Villagers

Kathryn Spink: Young people coming to L'Arche were highly educated and developed in their ideals and attitudes, and needed in some way to emerge from that and find their own space and creativity. The idea of living with the person with disabilities as one of the poor presented them with a fresh and purer basis for a harmonious life together. Assistants of that generation spoke readily of the poignant difference between the community life in L'Arche and the life they experienced in the 'outside world'. They committed themselves in a way which produced great dynamism but which

was not devoid of problems. It compounded the tension which always existed to a greater or lesser extent in L'Arche between the need for professionalism and the desire to remain open to divine providence and the Holy Spirit, between what some would consider necessary detachment and commitment to the point sometimes of self-destruction. It also aggravated the problems, which by the late 1960s were beginning to arise, with the local people of Trosly-Breuil.

Kathryn Spink: At the very beginning the villagers, though possibly taken aback by the people with intellectual disabilities who suddenly appeared on their streets, accepted their presence with good grace. The arrival of assistants from all over the world, however, many of whom were not very well dressed and who behaved in a way which seemed strange to elderly neighbourhood residents, inevitably gave rise to apprehension. The local people saw Canadians and English people squatting on the pavement chatting with their bikes on the ground beside them and they wondered how Monsieur Vanier could possibly have assistants like that to look after people with disa-

bilities. Monsieur Vanier, for his part, afterwards acknowledged with regret that in his enthusiasm to help disabled people he had been undiplomatic and insensitive to the villagers.

Nathalie Orlinski (with regard to the purchase by Jean Vanier of the original L'Arche home): There was no reaction at all. They bought the house because they were just beginning. There were already Parisians who had bought houses in Trosly. For the villagers, those people were just strangers, from Paris. They brought with them their habits, for instance, they locked their doors. They did not say hello and turned their heads away when one passed them. Jean Vanier, on the other hand **was the Canadian**, he was not like that, and that's all there was to it.

However, when they started to see more and more people with disabilities at L'Arche, and then assistants who came from all over the world, then, there was certainly a strong reaction. It wasn't against the people with disabilities, but against the assistants! They were badly dressed, their hair was often unkempt, they were often barefoot etc. The reaction of the old people in the village was very





"... It was the Canadian" ↵

very, strong; they were frightened of young men with long hair. They had never seen anything like it, and so they became frightened of the assistants, though not of the people with disabilities.

Jean-Pierre Crépieux: Jean Vanier bought several houses in the village. That allowed us to welcome some new people, from various places: from Creil, from the psychiatric hospital at Clermont and elsewhere. The villagers were nervous — a Canadian who moves into the village and starts buying up houses. I am sure they worried he might buy the whole village! At first, across from the Val there was a dormitory, but later they reduced the number of people living at the Val.

I said to Jean “Hey Jean, you are buying up houses, but who will run them all?”

For a joke, he said it would be me. I knew that Jean wanted to help people with disabilities, that’s for sure. But I said to myself, the day when Jean is no longer with us, who will run things? I could not imagine there would be a successor; I thought that when you were Director, it was for life.

Kathryn Spink: The tension mounted as he, a foreigner, bought up more and more of the local houses. Most of the people in the neighbourhood had lived there for several generations. Their land and houses represented their history and cultural patrimony. There came a point when these seemed threatened by someone who appeared to have unlimited financial resources, who, though he spoke French, did not speak their language, and who did not go about things in their way.

Annie Wattine (Morinwillé): It’s true that at a certain moment we were buying many houses. There had been many Parisians who had second homes in Trosly, but they began to leave. L’Arche did a really good job refurbishing the houses, the village is beautiful now, it was not like that before, the houses were not maintained like they are now; it was pretty poor in those days.

Resident of Trosly (Video 1989): I saw L’Arche being established here, and I saw a whole bunch of houses being involved. Some people even said “It would be better if you stayed where you came from.” That’s history however, and it’s for-

gotten now. Now the people of L'Arche are accepted, and they are well liked as they are people who share what they are doing, there are not many who do that! It's true, looking after people with disa-

bilities like that, people who can't walk or feed themselves, or can't speak, that's amazing, you should try it! They are well accepted in the village now, very, very well accepted.



Relaxing at the foyer of L'Arche ↵

15.

Louis Pretty's departure

Mira Ziauddin (Video 1968): Daily life here is very very simple, each helps a little with the kitchen work to prepare the meal, we share the meal all together with the boys, we share everything in fact: their joy, their concerns, their suffering, everything! I feel a lot of joy, and you know, a simplicity, a way of life, that is, we learn to live together because we are all disabled in some way or other. We often feel a certain powerlessness, or weakness, and faced with certain problems we feel so helpless, so unsure of what to do, in those moments we feel very much our own handicaps and limitations. Moreover here we discover even more, because there is no playing at this, we are

very much ourselves, and I think that it is in this area that the boys give us so very much. You see, it's very much an exchange, we learn a lot from them, and they have a lot to offer in this interpersonal realm.

Gerry McDonald: I was asked to be there, in the workshops. We did subcontract work in a little shack with an oil burning stove which had to be lit each morning. In the winter it was freezing in there and I remember a German fellow who was a volunteer, who arrived each morning saying "Damn cold! Damn cold!".

Louis Pretty: I knew Barbara at L'Arche; she arrived near the end of my time there.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 05-11-65): Louis's plans for the house are now becoming a reality. The bathrooms are done and soon the attic will be remodelled with a new ceiling, windows and walls. All we have to do now is install the central heating, but that will not be ready for this winter. We will have to wait until the winter of 1968 for that!



Barbara Swanekamp ↵



Barbara and the subcontract workshop j

Jean Vanier (Letter of 05-11-65): Our plans to build and expand are not definite yet but hope to develop them little by little. We receive many requests. There are so many parents in anguish over the future of their children and many boys who have no family, no place of welcome like L'Arche. At Le Val, I feel it is our duty to welcome young boys with disabilities who have no parents or anyone to care for them. They need our help and support in a very special way.

Louis Pretty (Letter February 28th, 1966): We just decided to get married, on the June 21st.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 05-11-65): We will soon be saying goodbye to Louis. He has to return to Canada. His absence will leave a real emptiness in our hearts and in our house for he was here at the foundation of L'Arche. He always gave us good advice and watched

over the house during my absence. Louis came for two weeks and stayed for more than a year! Many things in the house depended on him. With his departure a new era in L'Arche begins. The first months in L'Arche were lived in poverty and simplicity. Now that the foundations have been laid, we must build, organize and grow. We must create something solid that will last. We have welcomed our boys not just for a few months or a few years but God willing, for the rest of their lives. Louis is leaving, but the work he did remains, and we remain united to him. We will never forget all he did for us. Our hearts cry out “thank you”.

Louis Pretty: When I left it was to get married. Jean came with Henri, and with them in the back were all the boys. I have to say it was very moving. They came to our wedding and I was deeply touched by that.

16.

Prayer and Sharing

Louis Pretty: After supper, we always had prayer before going to bed; every night, before bedtime.

Annie Wattine (Morinwillé): We all went to mass at five thirty. In the early days it was in the little chapel on the Place desFêtes, later there was a chapel at the ironworks, and then it was made a little bigger, and that's how it is today. After the good and simple evening meal, we had evening prayer together, to give thanks for the day. We were very faithful to this, and were grounded in and by this practice.

Antoinette Maurice: At the end of 1965, Fr. Thomas organised a meeting with the friends of L'Arche. We were so many that we could not hold it in the chapel. Therefore we gathered in a dilapidated old house which had not yet been renovated, and which later became the house called L'Ermitage. Fr. Thomas asked us "Do you think that we could expose the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel once a month?". Christiane Edé replied "Why not weekly?". That is how Adoration started every Tuesday evening at 8:30 pm with the saying of the rosary, and with commentary by Fr. Thomas. *The chapel became too small.* Miss Gsell therefore offered an adjoining room. There was one step down, but it was more inviting.

So I, often with Christiane, went to Adoration. I would not say that we went every week, but very often.

I remember Benoît Consigny. He was young in those days. I was surprised to see that he was able to stay still for an hour in the chapel for Adoration.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 19-01-66): Our Christmas celebrations were joyful. Most of the boys were able to go home; others were welcomed

by friends. The rest, a small group of nine, celebrated Christmas here at L'Arche. After midnight Mass, we had a gathering with our friends from the village and with others who had come from farther away. All together there were forty of us.

On the feast of the Epiphany we had dinner by candlelight at Le Val Fleuri. Dr. Préaut came to preside at the feast. After the meal all seventy-three of us gathered together for an evening of songs and music. Benoît was chosen king, and he chose Mrs. Cagniard as his queen. We were happy to invite some of our friends from Trosly but were sorry that we did not have room for more.



Pierrot Grellet in front of the chapel ↖

17.

Conferences, Holidays and Pilgrimages

Jean Vanier (Letter of 19-01-66): I leave for Canada on February 18. During my three-week absence Mme Lepère will be responsible for Le Val Fleuri and Mira for L'Arche. I have been invited to give a series of talks at the University of Toronto and then in Vancouver, Edmonton and St. Boniface. I will also spend several days in Montreal. During these weeks I hope to be able to visit as many of our Canadian friends as possible. Alas, my time there will be short. I cannot leave our boys here at Le Val and L'Arche for very long, but I am happy to see friends of L'Arche and to be able to talk about our life here.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 19-01-66): Soon after I come back we will be leaving for Italy. This should be quite a trip! The trip we made to Lourdes had a very profound influence on the boys. For many of them it was the first time they had ever travelled. This Jubilee year, with the end of the Vatican Council, seems to be the perfect time for us to journey to the centre of Catholicism. The boys have already seen the Holy Father on television and are anxious to see him in person. There will be about sixty of us — forty boys and about twenty assistants, travelling in individual cars. We are planning to pass through Lausanne, Milan, Florence, Assisi, Rome, San Giovanni Rotondo, Loretton Bologna, Turin and Lyon.

Marc Vommeurs: When Jean Vanier came, that is when we made the first pilgrimage to Italy, in 1966. It was the era of Paul VI.

Kathryn Spink: As early as 1966, when L'Arche first went on pilgrimage to Rome, Pope Paul VI had welcomed the people with disabilities as people for whom God reserved a special role in the Church.



Audience with Paul VI ↵



Paul V9 with the group from L'Arche ↵

Henri Wambergue: It was a big pilgrimage, and it was a big deal in April 1966. We always said “We must absolutely drive with two cars in convoy, in case one of them breaks down.” It was the same for people; we tried to stay in pairs. In the end, there were both cultural and religious aspects to the trip. We saw many things during our 13 days in Rome. We came back through Assisi, Milan and even Venice!

Annie Wattine (Morinvillé): We went to Rome with 18 cars, including some very old ones. At departure time, on the Place des Fêtes, Fr Thomas blessed all the cars so that we would have a good pilgrimage. Mr. Vanier’s father was still alive, and had given us a donation, so at noon we all ate in a restaurant. I can’t really remember if it was lunch or supper? In any case, we were given a meal, and it was great!

I was in a car with someone very difficult that we had not been able to place elsewhere. On the autoroute between Milan and Rome, he opened the car door, as he wanted to throw out his cigarette butt! Even worse, over there people drive like crazies! We were really protected, it was incredible! We were so frightened!

Jean-Pierre Crépieux: We travelled a lot. The first trip I went on with Trosly was to Lourdes. Afterwards, we continued the trips. We went to Rome by car. At the beginning the cars followed one another; we didn’t take the train as we do now. We also invited friends to come with us. We saw Paul VI, so you see how long ago it was!

Anne-Marie Pallet (Morinvillé): For the first pilgrimage to Rome, we all went in cars. Barbara drove the whole way. When we got there she was exhausted, but did not want to rest. She partook in all aspects of the pilgrimage without paying attention to her own fatigue. She was already then full of devotion. She always wanted to push her limits.

Thérèse Parienté: Everyone was being asked if they wanted to go on the pilgrimage, and when it was suggested to me I asked Jean Vanier if we could come and he said of course. He knew Jean-Jacques, my husband, who being disabled himself, had a link with L’Arche. Fr. Thomas used to come and see him; we went with him to L’Arche when there was mass or talks, so the members of L’Arche

knew him. We had a friend from Clermont who came with us. So it was not completely closed. It was a very moving experience.

I drove in my car, a bigger car than the one I have now. My husband was at my side, and also our friend was with us, as well as the two young men from L'Arche.

I don't know how many cars there were, but we finally all left after the blessing by Fr. Thomas. It was very, very well organized, and really something born in joy.

The first stage was Trosly-Fribourg. We stopped in Fribourg, and then we did Fribourg-Milan. In Milan we stayed with the Jesuits. Then from Milan we traveled to Rome, or rather the outskirts of Rome, where we were hosted by various religious communities, who had big properties. There were three groups, and we were in Jean Vanier's group. It was a pilgrimage where there was a lot of joyful singing. Joy! The Italians were staring at us, the Romans were staring at us, and we saw the Pope, John VI. Jean was received by the Pope as were Agnes da Silve and Adriano also. When the Pope passed by, L'Arche called out to him, so he blessed us,

he got down and came over to shake our hands and embrace us.

Agnès Roland:  I had a small car, we left and we found each other again, I am not exactly sure where, but I remember that Jean said, "even if there is a red light, do not stop. Everyone should keep going because otherwise we will lose someone and never find each other again!" We were going through all the red lights! All through France! We kept going because otherwise we would have lost each other.

Agnès Roland: During the pilgrimage to Rome, we lost Marc Vommeurs. Luckily he was being sneaky, and was waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs!

Jean Vanier (Letter of 18-04-66): I wanted to write to you right after our pilgrimage to Rome and to send you the text that the Holy Father read to us during our audience with him. It is a beautiful, sensitive text full of understanding. Anything I may say about it would probably complicate rather than clarify it. As we listened to him, we were ama-



Agnes Roland (extreme left) ↖

zed. The Holy Father understands so well that if one compares our boys with a modern worker on the basis of productivity and capacity for autonomy, there are indeed disabled. However, if the comparison is made on the basis of the heart, of their ability to give themselves, to make sacrifices for others and to achieve holiness, then they are indeed far from being disabled. It was beautiful to see the Holy Father asking for help from “the poor”, saying that he was counting on them. In some way our group represented people with disabilities throughout the world, and in speaking to us the Holy Father was speaking to them all.

The rest of the trip was entirely eclipsed by our visit with the Holy Father and the Easter vigil celebrated by the Pope in St. Peter's Basilica, where we were given special seats in the gallery. We were so moved by his radiant goodness and peace and by the weight of all he is carrying. After reading the text he had prepared, he greeted each one personally, permitted us to kiss his ring and gave each one of us a little souvenir. We were all quite moved when we realized that this Bishop, who carries the concerns not only of the Church and of all Christians but of the whole world, that this man

who has freed himself from any ties to a particular country to be totally given to the work of Christ in all countries would give us, a very small and insignificant group, so much of his time affection and encouragement.

One of the benefits of the trip, besides the meeting with Pope Paul VI, was the spirit of love inspiring the whole group. Sixty-five of us went in fifteen cars and we travelled in groups of two convoys. There was much joy every evening when we all met to recount the day's exploits; there was much mutual help during the minor breakdowns of our cars. The trip is over and daily life has begun again, and now we are living the fruits of our pilgrimage.

Kathryn Spink: Michel took part in one of these [early pilgrimages to Rome](#) as part of a short stay to see whether he would remain in L'Arche. At the hospital where he had been living he had been told simply that he was to stay for a trial period and not to expect anything very different from his hospital life. Suddenly he found himself in a car in St Peter's Square and chattered with great excitement about his wishes, fears and feelings. The



Raphaël, Paul V9 and Jean ↵



Mrs. Lepere, Jean and Paul V9 ↵

L'Arche assistants had no official file for him so only later discovered that in hospital Michel had not uttered a word for many years. Their lack of knowledge had made it possible for him to react to them quite differently from the way he had responded to professionals. As one of the early assistants recalled: "There was a lot of madness. We were incompetent in many ways. We were young and threw ourselves into this new idea of 'living together' without any regard for how late we went to bed, conserving our energies or having a private life of any kind, but in a way that madness, that incompetence was justified by the fact that we were possibly the first to say to people with disabilities, 'You are loved just as you are!'"

Annie Wattine (Morinville): I really enjoyed going on the pilgrimages and holidays. I

went on lots of holidays! It was super! To go on holidays with the members was relaxed. There were no meetings or other things, just holiday! Everyone was so happy on holiday. We discovered different aspects of one another during holidays. In fact, I was surprised when I was in the workshops to understand that the work also had a different but also healing role.

Gerry McDonald: I was very touched because they did so very much to organize real holidays for the boys. Holidays are of course sacrosanct in France, it's a whole month! It was really a lot of work to find holidays for a whole month or to search for people who would welcome the boys. At the beginning it was often families who welcomed them. Holidays were both difficult and rewarding. There were some very, very generous people.

18.

Expansion of the Workshops and the Community

Thérèse Parienté: I was living in Paris and studying there, first nursing and then social work. We built a house in Rémy, because my husband was disabled, and I continued to work in Paris. Mother died in 1966, and so having the time which I had been spending with her freed up, I tried to find work in Compiègne, or at least nearby.

A friend, who was also a social worker, had told me about L'Arche and of the wish of Jean Vanier to find a social worker. So I went to L'Arche and

introduced myself. Jean Vanier told me to come. I started by getting to know the workshops – L'Arche was pretty small at the time, and I worked with Gilbert who was in charge, both of the Val Fleuri and of the workshop where we made archival quality paper bags. Thus I started to get to know the people with disabilities and to see that they did not frighten me too much. In fact, we had a very good connection, right away. Mr. Vanier, Jean, wanted me to find families who would welcome the men for weekends, or even for some of the externs. It was extremely difficult, so I stayed in close contact with the families who welcomed the men. That is how I got to know Mrs. Fauquembergue, as I was monitoring the situation of the young people she welcomed, so that she could receive her pay. I also took on Quincampoix, I went there every month. It was Hilary who ran the house for the blind and the disabled.

I remember one blind person, and especially his face, who sang while having his snack. I can hear him even now, as he sang “It’s the rose that is important” and I can see his face. We worked a lot as L'Arche grew more, because at that stage there were only three houses.



Jean-Pierre Prat, Gilbert Adam, Philippe and Jean-Michel Cross ↵



Barbara and Gabrielle Einsle ↵

Gabrielle Einsle: [photo] In 1966 I visited L'Arche and spent about a week there. I remember especially the evening prayer, we were all gathered around the table, and Jacques Dudouit always had a lot to say about the Gospel during evening prayer. Lucien Leroy had permission not to participate in prayer time but instead smoked a cigarette outside. There was a certain freedom and at the same time a fervour at evening prayer, and I was very struck by this during my visit. At the L'Arche house, Barbara was already there, Mira as well, and the two of them lived in the building which would later become l'Ermitage, which had an impossible toilet — a plank!

Françoise Lagand: I had heard talk about L'Arche in 1965 through the scouts of France. We ate a meal at L'Arche, after which I said “I would never set foot in there again” We ate so badly: creme brulee, fish not properly cooked etc.

Later, I heard about L'Arche again through Bernard Penot who was going to the Val Fleuri to screen films. It was in 1966, I was working already elsewhere but I did not enjoy my work, and I did not want to continue it. So Bernard said to me

“Why don't you come and see?”

So I went and I asked to meet with Jean Vanier, who said to me “Come!”. He gave me an appointment for after July 22nd, because I was to turn 21 that day. I had spoken to my parents about L'Arche, and my father had asked me to wait until I reached the official age of majority. So I waited until my 21st birthday after July 22nd, and then I telephoned Jean and I saw him on the July 26th or 28th. He invited me to spend 8 days at L'Arche in the month of September.

When I arrived at the Val for the first time, I opened the door, and there was someone coming down the stairs making a terrible noise. He scared me! He scared me, but I still entered and met with Jean for about an hour. It was a good meeting.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 10-09-66): I am writing to you now as the new work year begins to give you news of our communities. The last letter told you about our magnificent pilgrimage to Rome and our audience with the Holy Father. Since then, during the month of July, we made another trip, this time by airplane! [The Canadian air base at Montmédy](#), France, invited us to spend a wee-



Visit to the Canadian air base at Montmedy ↖



Visit to the Canadian air base at Montmedy ↖

kend with them. They came to pick us up at the American Air Force base at Laon in three Dakota planes. Saturday afternoon there was an air show; two jet planes flew low over the runways, just over our heads. Sunday morning we went to Mass in the air base chapel, and after a tasty dinner and many warm adieus and thank yous, we flew back.

Trips like these are very important for our communities. They give us new hope and, for some, are the beginnings of a whole new way of life, a life of deeper peace, more open to the world, to society and to others. Most of our boys have no “worldly” hopes for the future. They cannot hope to advance in the professional world or to found a family. Life could become monotonous if their hearts and spirits were not stimulated by holidays and trips, opening them up to the world around them. Obviously, these trips must be more than tourism. They must be oriented more and more to the world and to others, that is, to a universal love and to spiritual values.

But our life here is more than just trips! Our workshops are now in full swing again. Work from our shops brings in about four thousand francs a month, which is entirely shared by the workers. However, in accordance with the labour laws for

sheltered work-shops, the boys have to turn in half of their salary to the houses where they live to cover living expenses. Now that many of our workers have reached the minimum salary level necessary, we have been able to register them in the Social Security program. As a result, they have a right to be reimbursed for medicine and medical visits and are paid half their salary if they are sick. You should see how happy they are when their salary rights are explained to them and when they find out that they have a right to an old-age pension!

At this time we do not think it is good to tie ourselves down only to factory work. We want to start manufacturing our own products. This has many advantages on the educational level including the joy of creating and producing our own products. We have begun by making woolen cushions with very pretty designs and colours. Philippe is our principal craftsman. Michel is our specialized worker in decorative designs for mosaics. If you like, you can order the model of your choice. In a month we will open a small bookbinding workshop. If you have books that need binding, would you like to send them to us? We are on the lookout for all sorts of second hand materials to equip this new workshop.

Gerry McDonald: We were looking for work, initially subcontract work; later we did mosaics and so the workshop grew and we began making paper bags as well. I thought later that I had done enough of this type of work given that I was not a great administrator or organiser. I knew nothing about it, so Gilbert took over. Then a young man, [Michel Tyl](#) >, joined us as the head of the workshops. He was very organized and knew how to prepare the paychecks and other things which I had ignored.

Gerry McDonald: I think the mosaics were the idea of Jacqueline because at Pont-Sainte-Maxence, they recuperated the discarded ceramic tiles from Cerabati. We were able to make something from the rejected tiles. We made very simple designs, and the boys cut the tiles and glued them. They were very happy with what they were doing. Later Jeanne Riandey, who was very gifted, very, very gifted, took over and she had lots of creative ideas.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 10-09-66): Our communities here are growing. We have been accepting a number of day-workers from the surrounding



Michel Tyl

areas: Compiègne, Creil, Carlepont, Croutoy and Jaux. They come to work in the morning and go back home at night.

In addition, at Carlepont, Mr. and Mrs. Fauquembergue have welcomed some of our boys into their family. Every morning they bring them to work here in our workshops and at night they drive them back home. So more boys have found a new family where they can grow in joy and fraternal love.

It is painful for us to receive so many urgent requests for help and not be able to respond. There is so much pain hidden away in our world, so many mothers courageously braving great difficulties, so many disabled adolescents and adults who are persecuted, misunderstood and alienated from society. They need a place to live. Our society is hard on them and sometimes unjust. Those who have the greatest need for understanding and affection are the ones who receive the least. Everywhere there are cries for help! Despite our expansion we are still far from meeting the needs. The local government has given us the permission to place some boys in local families with, of course, proper remuneration.

Kathryn Spink: The small community begun in 1964 in Trosly-Breuil soon increased in number, not only of people with disabilities but also of 'assistants' prepared not to turn away but to seek instead to share their lives.

Françoise Lagand: [photo] I gave my notice at Blanchard, In Compiègne, and arrived at L'Arche on November 13. There I found Lucien, Raphaël, Benoît, Bruno, Jacques and it seems to me there was someone else as well. In terms of assistants, there was Mira, Henri, and a Canadian Brian Halferty. I think he was there also, but there were so many others afterwards! Brian Halferty played the guitar; I think it must have been 1966-67?

My first job was bookbinding, on the first floor of L'Accueil, and it was Mr. Quinque who taught me bookbinding. He was an assistant who did not stay. I went to Saint-Rémy-lès-Chevreuse for three weeks for a bookbinding course. When I returned, we continued with the bookbinding workshop.

The bookbinding workshop was in the attic. There were many people who worked there and I was the only assistant. Afterwards [Pierre Bruniere](#)

came and worked with me. There were also Jean-Michel Maisonneuve, Pierrot Grellet, Patrick Rivière, Marc Thomazon, Gérard Brunat and Marceau Sauvé.. In the end, the [bookbinding workshop](#) closed because it was actually very difficult work. You had to cut the books straight! It was the Center for Atomic Energy who gave us the books to make, and also the libraries of Compiègne, Amiens, etc. We sure cut a lot of books!

Michel Tyl looked for the work. Also Jean Vanier who had lots of contacts found work, but we stopped soon because I could not catch all the mistakes. If the guys did not make straight cuts with the guillotine, there was nothing else to do, the book was ruined. It was too complicated for our people.

The corks were from Techniplast. The corks were red and white plastic, and we had to make 10,000 or more per day. Anne-Marie Pollet (Morinville) was there. The corks were done on the first floor, next to my workshop.

There was also the workshop with Gerry McDonald, I can't remember exactly what they were doing, screws, corks... and there was also a Canadian lawyer....what was his name?





Jacques and Françoise ↵



Pierre Bruniere and the archive bag workshops ↵

19.

Death of Jean's Father and Opening of Les Rameaux

Bill Clarke: I did my theology in a Jesuit seminary in Toronto in 1963, for four years. Towards the end of my time there, I went and heard Jean Vanier speak, at least once, at Saint Michael's College in Toronto. There were many people there. I do not know how, but he was already well known. It was probably around Christmas 1966, and there was a meeting of Catholic theology students from across Canada, I think. I went there with Steve Newroth. There were talks for five days, given by two spea-

kers, one of whom was Jean. I don't remember the content of those talks, other than to say that I was deeply touched by this sense of community animated by a new spirit where the essential is to share life with others. To live "with" and not to work "for". So, after that I was convinced that when I went to Europe for the third year of my studies, I would manage to find some time to visit the community of Trosly.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 26-03-67): During a talk I gave to some eighteen hundred students in Toronto, I was touched by the generosity of those young people. For many, ambition and the desire for personal gain were overtaken by a deep desire to give their lives to others and to make a commitment to a worthwhile cause. However, we need to create places where they can come and serve and give of themselves. L'Arche is trying to do that. In L'Arche we are called to create homes and workshops where assistants can live and give their lives to others in community. L'Arche is not just a place to welcome a few boys with an intellectual disability helping them grow and develop, but it is also a symbol of hope for many others throughout the world.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 26-03-67): I would like first of all thank you for your expressions of sympathy at the time of my father's death. Even though I usually spend only about ten days a year in Canada, through the grace of God I was there in Ottawa when he died and was close to him during his last days. His death was peaceful and gentle, just an hour after he had received communion. My father died just as he had lived, with great simplicity. In spite of the pain and suffering we, his family and friends, were feeling, his funeral was marked by a sense of joy. Instead of the traditional black funeral vestments, the concelebrating bishops, representing the ten Canadian provinces, wore white as a sign of our hope and certitude that my beloved father was already in the eternal love of God.

I was still able to fulfil some of my commitments in Canada. Wherever I went I noticed an increase in the problems and challenges facing men and women who are neither efficient nor productive in a world that puts such emphasis on efficiency. It is encouraging to see this new wave of humanism, people trying to discover the more profound, personal value of those who are called disabled. Many centres or residences are begin-

ning where men and women, who will never be completely autonomous, can grow and develop according to their human and spiritual capacities.

Kathryn Spink: Other communities in France and elsewhere followed rapidly in its wake, all born of a desire to create homes — not institutions but foyers, with all that the French word conveys of family life gathered about a shared hearth— where people with disabilities and assistants could experience together the joy and the difficulties of a community life inspired by the Beatitudes. Inevitably they varied in their outer expression.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 26-03-67): Since my last letter, the cleanup, “paint up”, “fix up” team has been very active. The most important fruit of their labours is the new chapel. We opened it on December 21 for the first Mass of Philippe Gruson, a great friend of ours. Midnight Mass was celebrated there and was beautiful.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 26-03-67): Mr. and Mrs. Fauquembergue have now welcomed six of

our boys into their home as family placements. Michel was the first to go there followed by his brother Jean-Claude, Abdallah, Roger, Jean-Pierre and, finally, Bernard in January. They are all happy in Carlepont where the family atmosphere is so wonderful. Each morning, three of them come to work in our workshops here in Trosly, while others have jobs elsewhere, except for Bernard who stays and works on the farm.

The new little family of **Les Rameaux** (The Branches) includes Bernard, Jean-Pierre and Jean-Marie, with Steve and Ann as heads of house.

Jean Vanier (Letter of 26-03-67): Since November we have been trying to better organize our leisure activities in the community. Television can be a diversion sometimes, but in the long run there is the danger that it will stifle all creativity in our people. We have organized a number of clubs that meet regularly: stamp collecting, painting, photography, basket weaving, plasterwork and rope design. Some boys are also learning to play the guitar or the recorder. Saturday mornings are set aside for singing and folk dancing. There is also a bicycle club, and





when the weather is good, some go fishing on Saturday afternoons. We cannot forget Roger Brechotteau and Bernard Penot who often come and show us excellent films.

In February each one of us had the choice of

going either to the circus or to a concert. At the circus we laughed ourselves silly watching the clowns and the chimps, and we admired the acrobats and the elephants. At the concert Philippe said the Mozart symphony was “sensational”!

20.

Placements, Open House and Pilgrimages 1967

Anne-Marie de La Selle: In those days, to become a teacher, you had to study psychology first. So I first studied psychology, sort of by chance, since it was really teaching that interested me. During my studies, either Jean Vanier or Barbara would drop by occasionally to visit me. Over the course of my studies, I had to do a placement, and from time to time Jean suggested that I do the placement at L'Arche. At that time it was pretty innovative, and I was moving in extreme leftist circles. However, I had long before given up any religious practice, so L'Arche did not exactly strike me as my cup of tea! I really didn't feel like

going to check it out, but its innovative nature attracted me and I went in July 1967 to do a placement there as part of my psychology studies. At the time I think the only homes were L'Arche and the Val; that was it. Oh, yes, the Rameaux had just opened. I remember that it was a beautiful day, and we had lunch outside. Lunch happened on the lawn outside the Val. I also remember that Françoise Lagand had her bookbinding workshop on the first floor of the Reception. She left the window open and there were swallows which came in and out! I really enjoyed the month there, even though there was absolutely no question of my participation in the religious life, and in fact they left me very free in that regard. I did not participate in the evening prayer.

With regards to the work, I did something that really had nothing to do with psychology. For fifteen days I replaced Barbara as Jean Vanier's secretary; he had his office at the entrance to the Val. I don't have very many memories of those two weeks, but on the other hand I well remember the following two weeks spent in the workshops once Barbara had returned. It was quite challenging, for sure! I really enjoyed when we went for walks

in the forest. It was quite a change from the brouhaha of Paris!

Jean Vanier (Letter of October 67): The sunny weather encouraged many friends from near and far away to come to our open house. Mr. Turon from the local government came. He spoke from his heart directly to the boys and then to all our friends. His words were very encouraging for us. The mayor of Trosly also spoke and expressed his hope that places like L'Arche would grow and develop. Monseigneur Desmazières, the Bishop of Beauvais, was kind enough to come. Each workshop presented itself in a humorous way. The gardeners grew gigantic flowers in a few seconds' time! There was a parade of members of the book-binding workshops with a bottle of glue and scissors, the workers from the mosaic workshop, the "tramps" of the antenna workshop and the whole administration team (with Marius as M. Fauquembergue's donkey) calling for more pens! The highlight of it all was Steve and the maintenance team, who constructed a prefabricated house in three minutes' time (connecting the central heating into the neighbour's heater!), but the

house fell apart a minute later! Young people from a home in Tracy-le-Mont came and danced, and there were clowns from a home in Carlepont. Our Pierrot was also a highlight, singing a solo, "Je suis à toi pour la vie" ("I am yours for life").

After the celebration, there was an exhibition of our work. Friends could see the beautiful mosaics made by Michel, Marcel, Benoît, Alain and Abdallah. They could also see Philip's cushions and samples of our bookbinding. Thanks to the presence of some students from the school of educators in Epinay, we had games that attracted young people from Trosly.

Jean Vanier (Letter of October 67): Two days after the open house, our first group of pilgrims left. Thirty-three boys equipped with their tents, courage and smiles set out for La Salette in four cars and a minibus. Gérard, Jean-Claude and François learned a new song: "Jésus, je voudrais te chanter sur ma route," which became the theme song for our whole trip. We arrived on the "holy mountain" of La Salette in the midst of thick fog. The next morning the sun was out, so Michel, an assistant, and Alain helped us put up our tents. But

the nights were cold (we were at eighteen hundred metres), so only a few courageous ones slept outside! Those few days spent close to Our Lady of La Salette were wonderful. We remember so well our evening prayers and songs as well as our walks in the mountains with Michel and Lucien as our guides. We also remember Claude who went off all by himself. After many hours in search of him, we found him sleeping soundly in his tent!

Annie Wattine (Morinwillé): At La Salette we camped, with cooking pots, and it even snowed one morning. In those days there was not even a road to get to La Salette! We were there with our pots and everything we needed, there were no hotels, nothing. It was a real pilgrimage!

Jean Vanier (Letter of October 67): From the “holy mountain” of La Salette we drove south to the city of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. We put up our tents at a camping site. Our meals had a wonderful sand flavour to them. We enjoyed swimming in the Mediterranean and we had an unforgettable meeting with the Little Sisters of Jesus living in their caravan with the gypsies.

Perhaps our greatest joy was to sense the deep love among us and to be able to share that with others.

Five days after our departure, a second group of twenty-six under the leadership of Mira left for Lourdes and Spain. At Lourdes the group stayed for five full days at the Cité Secours. Because of the crowd at Lourdes, the group separated during the day but came together each morning for the Eucharist and in the evening for prayer. Raphaël, faithful companion to Mira, watched over everyone like a benevolent, wise grandfather. The five days passed by quickly. They were tiring but prayerful and joyful days.

From Lourdes the six cars left for Montserrat, where the Benedictine Fathers welcomed us and gave us a beautiful little house four kilometres from the monastery. During our stay Philippe really loved the Gregorian chant. René said quite correctly, “People pray here.” We also took advantage of being so close to the Mediterranean and went to a beach near Barcelona. The pilgrims came back tired but happy.

The night before they returned home, another group set out for Fatima with Steve and Ann.

Things started off badly as Mme Domenjoud's car broke down. However, everything got fixed and the whole group arrived safely in Portugal. We were in Portugal for the big annual pilgrimage, the twelfth and thirteenth of July. On the twelfth a number of different groups of pilgrims arrived, singing their beautiful songs. We stayed on the esplanade until midnight. Then on the thirteenth there was Mass in the pouring rain. We huddled together under our umbrellas. Roger said, "We are real pilgrims; we stayed until the end!"

We came back with our hearts full of joy after this pilgrimage to Our Lady of Peace in Fatima. In fact all three pilgrimages were under the sign of peace. We all went on pilgrimage to pray for peace: peace in our hearts, in our community and in the world.

A new year has begun, but a few faces are missing! Steve and Ann have left for Switzerland and then in April will go to Toronto. Bernard, Jean-Marie and Jean-Pierre, who lived with them in Les Rameaux, were sad to see them go for they loved them very much. They have brought much to L'Arche.

21.

Opening of L'Ermitage, Family placements and the Arrival of Dr. Erol Franko

Jean Vanier (Letter of October 67): You will be happy to know that thanks to a loan from a bank in Paris, we have bought the property next door to L'Arche. A grant we received has allowed us to fix the house up there. **L'Ermitage** will be our fourth house and will soon welcome six boys.

Jean Vanier (Video 1968): Other people came, assistants came, and six months later the biggest house was full. We founded another home

in the village where there were three boys, and then in this house behind, there were six boys. We increased the number of family placements, or rather we created family placements, and that is to say we placed boys in the village, in families or in communities. This is rather rare, because it is sometimes more difficult to welcome a man of 29 or 25 years old, than a child of 7. Children are often more welcome than adults.

Jean Vanier (Video 1968): Some well-intentioned young women have come as assistants and are now working in the workshops. There is Françoise in the bookbinding workshop and Thérèse who is in charge of the cork workshop. Gerry and Jeanne are responsible for the mosaics. Here are Mira, Barbara, Anne-Marie etc. There must be about fifteen of them.

Kathryn hSpink: Dr. Léone Richet was the first to help the community grasp the particular therapy of L'Arche. For several years she came to Trosly-Breuil for a few hours a week. When she left the area she found another psychiatrist, Dr Erol Franko, who helped and supported the com-



L'Ermitage ↖



Dinner at l'Ermitage ↖



l'Ermitage ↖

munity, and also played a vital role both in Jean Vanier's own intellectual development and in articulating the therapeutic aspect of L'Arche.

Antoinette Maurice: She (Dr. Léone Richet) suggested another psychiatrist from the Clermont hospital, *Dr. Franko*, to replace her. He occupied the position from 1967-1974. He had a strong personality. It was with him that I began as Assistant Director. I attended all the synthesis meetings that he led one afternoon a week. In those days all the assistants, after being at L'Arche for two years, were invited to these syntheses. They enjoyed coming, so there were often twenty to thirty people present. It was a means of training. Dr. Franko was a man of intuition, who listened, and who had a lot of respect for L'Arche. He had the knack of raising questions which were uncomfortable but which invited reflection. I learned a lot from him. I would say that he has a gift of genius as a psychiatrist. During these synthesis meetings he placed a lot of importance on the influence their family environment and background had on the people we welcomed.

Erol Franko: Léone Richet was, as we said in those days, an assistant physician, that is to say she had passed the requirements to become a doctor in a hospital or a medical chief of service. Whereas I was a beginning intern, that is to say she was much more highly qualified than I was, and she was preparing to leave for a position elsewhere, as was the usual practice in those days. However as she had been an internist for many years, she had many contacts in the staff room, including with me, and in those days the life of the staff room was pretty intense. So, that's how, I'm not sure why, she thought of me.

Erol Franko: (during his first visit to Trosly, having been driven there by Dr Richet in her small car): In her car there were books, stockings, shoes, I don't know what else, but there was everything in this tiny car! She wanted to show me the forest of Compiègne because I had just arrived in the region. But we got lost! We wasted a lot of time, and we laughed a lot. She is known for her verbal mishaps, always saying just what shouldn't be said, at the exact moment that it shouldn't be said, and in fact she was quite proud of that. So she



Reunion of Erol Frank and Antoinette Maurice, at the L'Arche 50 year anniversary celebration (octobre 2014). Photo: Dominique Le Cardinal ↵

tried to excuse herself for having gotten us lost in the forest of Compiègne. I am as awkward as she is, so it was pretty funny.

Erol Franko: I was welcomed by Jean Vanier, and of course by Barbara who had already arrived. I think also that Gilbert and Gerry McDonald were already also both there. Mira was there, and I am trying to remember the other names from those days. I remember a few more names. Jacqueline came a little bit later I think. The work meeting was always followed by a meal, usually the evening meal at L'Arche. Sometimes, the meal went on quite a while! In theory, we ate with everybody, but sometimes the work meeting went late, and the meal then happened very late, I don't know, maybe as late as nine or ten at night. Then we ate bread and sausage. So in fact it often happened that we worked late into the night. That became our usual pattern, and I came back each week for more of the same.

Kathryn Spink: With the help of Dr Franko, who 'worked magic' at a time when the men at the Val Fleuri really needed a magician, Jean Vanier

began to integrate both professional and spiritual insights into life in L'Arche. He sat in on the meetings when the psychiatrist and assistants from the homes and workshops came together to talk about a particular person and their problems, and received what he called a 'great training in the link between the chemical and the psychological and how to approach people and listen to them'. He came to see unusual or abnormal behaviour — such as violence, or delirium, or the refusal to eat or speak — not primarily as a symptom of mental illness to be categorised and medically cured but as a language to be listened to. Such behaviour showed that the person concerned was living in a world other than the 'normative'.

Annie Wattine (Morinwillé): In the time of Franko, we really put people back on their feet. You had to see it! Yvonne was letting herself die, and also Jean etc. There was incredible work done. We were several, a whole team, for those who required more care! It was impossible to have someone in a home with a community life when they needed a lot of care. Thankfully Franko was there, and available to us. We had to take note of

everything, tell everything to the psychiatrist, and he put us on the right track to continue. I learned an awful lot: how to approach our people, about their illnesses, and how to understand them. It was very complicated! The poor things, how much they must have suffered! It is a huge suffering; it is unimaginable that suffering, that being locked up! I think that Mr Vanier had seen it right away. Even when they could no longer control themselves, it was terrible suffering! I don't wish that on anyone. Thankfully the treatments helped at.

Thérèse Parienté: As L'Arche grew, we started to work on following up with families. There were Dr. Franko, Gerry McDonald and Catherine David. Franko wanted us to get together Tuesday nights here at the house, so they arrived before mealtime; each week someone made the meal, and we worked with Franko until midnight, or one in the morning. It was truly a time where we did not look at our watches! Gerry and I went to meet the families which Franko asked us to go and see. He chose the families who were having the most difficulty. We brought back what we had decided and what had been told to us. Then Franko and

Catherine gave us new instructions for the next visit.

Gerry McDonald: At a certain point, I said to myself: "I worked in the workshop for a long time, now I would like to do something different." So I started to follow-up with the families of the boys, and I worked with Mrs. Parienté, Thérèse, and Franko.

Thérèse Parienté: There were meetings called "syntheses" but there was also special work to be done with the families that Franko really wanted us to follow up with in a significant way, because the person we had welcomed was having more difficulties. It was really interesting work, and important, and I learned many things from Franko. I liked the work a lot.

Oh yes! I also was in charge of the admission files. It was my work, but mostly I went into the families. In those days, because we were opening more homes, we could welcome more adults, more men. I was in charge of the welcome files. In 1967, L'Arche was still little known, even if there were already the Val Fleuri, the Rameaux etc. I

think our homes were well regarded because it was something new. There were few young people coming from Clermont. In those days there were many more adults who had been living with their families who then came to us, and few young people coming from the psychiatric hospital. However in those days there were many more young people welcomed who had never had any schooling or any individual attention. I remember two adults who came from Montmacq, Jean-Jacques and Gerard, who had each lived with their parents since birth. Christian was the same; in fact each Friday evening I would drive him back to his mother's place.

These were adults who had been left aside; there was nothing for them in those days, besides the psychiatric hospital. For example, we welcomed Maxime, and each time I see him I think how grateful his parents must be that he is here.

In those days Jean Vanier was the Director and everything went through him. He went to all the synthesis meetings, he was everywhere. Yes, Jean Vanier was very, very present. I don't know if it is still like that? When a family approached us, we would go and visit the family, and then they

were given an appointment to come and meet our psychiatrist. There were various trial stays in the process, and then a longer stay; admission was decided during the course of a synthesis meeting. For example, when Pierre, who came from the psychiatric hospital in Paris, arrived a nurse brought him to the Gare du Nord since I was coming anyway to Paris, and I went with him on to Trosly, and it was the same thing in reverse for his return. I spent a lot of time with Pierre; when he arrived I would take him to see his mother. His mother was in a nursing home; I went with him so that he could see her. I did many things with him as his father had died having been deported during the war.

Annie Wattine (Morinwillé): I had my lunch at the Val at noon. There, one never knew how it was going to go, there was so much aggressivity! Incredible, incredible, incredible! Bowls pierced with forks, windowpanes broken each day, it was unimaginable. One small thing said the wrong way or interpreted the wrong way set off incredible reactions! It was amazing that I was never afraid. I used to take people — I was driving

in those days — to the lab. I drove through the forest. Maybe now I would not do it but then I did everything. I had already been almost strangled at the Val. They really saw that they could be loved at L'Arche and that they could stay there, so they grew and there was the whole spiritual side as well. They really became calmer; they grew and underwent a metamorphosis.

Jean Vanier (Video 1968): Mira was in charge of the L'Arche house, there was another young man who was in charge of the Val Fleuri, Michel was in charge of the workshops, and there were also Henri, and Marie-Elizabeth. Each one had their responsibilities. We were each assistants.

Thérèse Parienté: As we opened new homes, we had to welcome new people, and as there were many files waiting, we were able to welcome new

people more rapidly. Today the wait is longer, which is too bad, although those who are welcomed are really welcomed as human beings, and as children of God. That is really characteristic of L'Arche that people are welcomed as unique individuals.

Marie-Elizabeth Rouchette: After several months, I thought again about L'Arche and I wrote to Jean indicating my interest, to which he responded “Come! We are going to open a new home!”

I came. The house called l'Ermitage was being readied, and so I helped with the finishing touches: washing the windows and little things like that. When the home opened, I was a part-time assistant there, that is to say I continued to work in the afternoons in the office, but mornings in the home.



Relaxing at the Val Fleuri

22.

Opening of the Rose des Vents

Jean Vanier (Letter of April 68): Last November we opened a small apartment in Paris, La Rose des Vents, with Anne-Marie and Colette at 15 rue de Mézières. We needed a place in Paris both for the boys and the assistants. Shortly after the opening, Anne-Marie and Colette were joined by Marie-Annick. The permanent members of this little community, while being open to receiving friends, continue to study at the university. Every Thursday evening the friends of L'Arche meet at La Rose des Vents for a community Mass said by Father Gruson and share a meal. We are



The Oratory



Françoise



Anne-Marie



Jacqueline

thankful to all those who have helped us to furnish this apartment.

Anne-Marie de La Selle: I was in my final year of studies, I think, and L'Arche suggested that I start a little community in Paris, in an apartment on the rue de Mézières that would be called La Rose des Vents. We were three students:

me, Colette who later became a nun, and Marie-Annick. Right after my one month placement they suggested that I might open this apartment which would belong to Jacqueline d'Halluin. It would serve as a place to welcome assistants or people with a disability that came from time to time to Paris, either for holidays or for a weekend, etc

23.

*“If Jean had not known
Raphaël, Philippe,
Jacques and I, he could not
have started L’Arche!”*

René Leroy (Video 1989): It’s true; before I lived with my parents. L’Arche taught me many things: to calm myself, to no longer have rages like I did before, to no longer hit people. If I were told “you must go elsewhere!” I would say no, because now my roots are in L’Arche, and so it’s good, and I’ll stay here! I believe life is beautiful, because we are together, because we live in a community. The

community for me is my family; there are celebrations, birthdays, trips, a little of everything.

Jean-Pierre Crépieux: With regards to Jean Vanier, it’s true that it’s he who opened Trosly, but I would like to say that when one opens a home, one is not alone. If Jean had not known [Raphaël Simi](#), [Philippe Seux](#), [Jacques Dudouit](#) and me, he could not have started L’Arche!



Raphaël ↵



Lucien, Jean-Pierre and Jean ↵



Lucien, Jacques, Philippe and Henri ↵



Raphaël, Jean, Jean-Pierre, Pierrot, Philippe, Jacques ↵

Table of contents

1.	1960: THE VAL FLEURI, TROSLY	7
2.	FALL 1963: FR. THOMAS ARRIVES IN TROSLY	15
3.	CHRISTMAS 1963: JEAN VANIER VISITS FR. THOMAS IN TROSLY	17
4.	“TO DO SOMETHING...”	20
5.	OPENING OF L’ARCHE: AUGUST 4 - 5	30
6.	THE EARLY DAYS	33
7.	THE L’ARCHE HOME GROWS	42
8.	CHRISTMAS 1964	64
9.	MARCH 22, 1965: JEAN VANIER ASSUMES RESPONSIBILITY OF THE VAL FLEURI	67
10.	ARRIVAL OF DOCTOR LÉONE RICHEL, AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE WORKSHOPS	86
11.	THE FAMILY OF L’ARCHE GROWS	91
12.	PILGRIMAGES AND THE OPEN HOUSE.	105

13.	CARE AND CELEBRATION	112
14.	RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE VILLAGERS	120
15.	LOUIS PRETTY’S DEPARTURE.	126
16.	PRAYER AND SHARING	129
17.	CONFERENCES, HOLIDAYS AND PILGRIMAGES	131
18.	EXPANSION OF THE WORKSHOPS AND THE COMMUNITY	140
19.	DEATH OF JEAN’S FATHER AND OPENING OF LES RAMEAUX	150
20.	PLACEMENTS, OPEN HOUSE AND PILGRIMAGES 1967	155
21.	OPENING OF L’ERMITAGE, FAMILY PLACEMENTS AND THE ARRIVAL OF DR. EROL FRANKO.	159
22.	OPENING OF THE ROSE DES VENTS.	169
23.	“IF JEAN HAD NOT KNOWN RAPHAËL, PHILIPPE, JACQUES AND I, HE COULD NOT HAVE STARTED L’ARCHE!”	172