

L'Arche shines light on the hidden side of Father Thomas Philippe La Croix, 16.10.2015

L'Arche, the community founded by Jean Vanier, has made public results from an enquiry on the Dominican Thomas Philippe who played an important role in the beginnings of L'Arche.

In a letter addressed to its members dated April 28th, and recently put online on its website, L'Arche shines light on the “gravely shadowy areas” of Father Thomas Philippe.

Jean Vanier confided to the newspaper that he was very “shocked and upset” by this enquiry.

Twenty years after the death of the Dominican, the Church has acknowledged that Father Thomas Philippe was guilty of abuse of a sexual nature when offering spiritual accompaniment to adult women.

“To render justice” to the victims: In a letter addressed to its members dated April 28th, and recently put online on its website, L'Arche has brought to light “serious shadowy areas” in the past of Father Thomas Philippe (1905-1993), who played an important role in the beginnings of L'Arche and was the spiritual master of its founder, Jean Vanier.

After having received the complaints in June, 2014, L'Arche wanted to, “in complete agreement with Jean Vanier”, “address their complaints and listen more in depth” according to the letter signed by Patrick Fontaine and Eileen Glass, leaders of this international organization dedicated to people with developmental disabilities.

As Father Philippe is deceased, no criminal or civil proceedings can take place. However, in December 2014, a canonical instruction was entrusted to Father Paul-Dominique Marcovits, a Dominican, under the supervision of Bishop Pierre d'Ornellas, bishop of the city of Rennes and spiritual accompanier of L'Arche.

Fourteen people consulted

Fourteen people – witnesses and nearly a dozen victims – were heard. The conclusions confirmed the facts, that go back to the 1970's and continued until 1991 when Father Philippe left to live, at his own request, in Saint-Jodard, a town in the Loire region. He would live there until his death, two years later.

> Other article of interest: “About Father Marie-Dominique Philippe: Facing reality”

“Father Thomas Philippe engaged in sexual conduct with legally aged women with whom he said he was looking for and communicating a mystical experience” according to the report from which passages are cited in the letter. They attribute a psychological and spiritual hold on these women. Father Thomas Philippe asked the women to remain silent because, according to him, this corresponded to “a special grace” that no one could understand.

“The enquiry served to confirm that the testimonies were substantiated. Many of the same offences were repeated. After the conclusion of this enquiry, two other victims came forward. There may be others, but none of the testimonies have led to believe that people with disabilities were in any way concerned,” stipulated Patrick Fontaine to La Croix.

In their letter, the L'Arche leaders express their regrets and “strongly condemn these acts”, “aware of their impact on the lives of the victims.” They also underline the conclusion of the enquiry, that “In all of the testimonies that were gathered, nothing was heard that puts in question L'Arche and its mission – quite to the contrary.”

Support groups

L'Arche decided to make the results of the enquiry public, “because we wanted to show our solidarity in a process of truth for the victims.” However, “in respect for these same victims,” it would not disclose further details on these acts of abuse.

Another objective of this publication, the leaders write, is to “*avoid any confusing rumors*”, and “*allow for a truthful and non-idealized version of the history of L’Arche.*” Within L’Arche, support groups have been set up to help people who were attached to the memory of Father Philippe to integrate this information.”

This enquiry should also lead to work on verifying the accuracy of Father Philippe’s teachings. His work on Mariology had been, in effect, severely criticized by two of his friends, Jacques Maritain and Charles Journet, for associating the Virgin Mary to the spouse of Christ.

Spiritual Accompanier of Jean Vanier

L’Arche stresses that Father Thomas was not its founder and that L’Arche is not based on his teachings. However, he played an important role in its beginnings.

When Jean Vanier left the navy, he grew close to L’Eau-Vive, an international philosophy and theology center for students founded two years earlier by Father Thomas Philippe. It was located in the town of Soisy-sur-Seine in the Essonne region, and at the time was influential in the area. Father Philippe became the spiritual accompanier of Jean Vanier. Years later, when he was chaplain for the Val Fleuri, a small center for people with developmental disabilities, the Dominican Father Philippe would be the person who would introduce the world of disabilities to Jean Vanier. Profoundly affected by what he saw, Jean Vanier founded L’Arche in 1964.

Thomas Philippe then accompanied the beginnings of the community. However, his relationship became strained with Jean Vanier, who chose – against the opinion of Father Philippe – to open L’Arche to women, and then to open it up to ecumenical and later inter-religious dimensions.

Deeply shocked by recent revelations, Jean Vanier confirms never being aware of this hidden side of Father Thomas. And this, even if in 1956 the Dominican Father Thomas was condemned to severe canonical penalties by the Vatican (2): The reasons for this condemnation were never rendered public by Rome. According to the la Croix sources, it would also seem to pertain to abusive sexual acts towards women, some of them nuns, within the framework of spiritual accompaniment.

“I do not understand”

Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche

“I was deeply shocked and upset over the revelations of these last months about Father Philippe. A few years ago I was told of certain acts, but I remained totally in the dark until now as to the depth of their gravity. I wish to tell the victims my complete compassion for what they have lived. I weep alongside those who have been hurt. And yet I cannot deny all that I owe to Father Thomas. In regards to my life journey, he was an instrument of God especially when I left the marines and I was looking for a way to give my life to Jesus. I was deeply attached to him as a spiritual father. There is a tremendous gap between, on the one hand, the serious nature of these acts that generated such suffering in the victims and, on the other hand, the action of God in me and in L’Arche through Father Thomas. I am unable to peacefully reconcile these two realities. All I can say is, “I do not understand.” I am like a poor man in front of this. I do not want to judge or condemn. But I want to ask for forgiveness for all that I did not do or should have done.”

Additional reporting by Céline Hoyeau

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(1) Responsible for formation and training at the Saint-Jean community, founded by his brother, Father Marie-Dominique Philippe (1912-2006), who has been accused of similar acts.

(2) Note on l’Eau vive, in « Journet Maritain. Correspondance », Volume IV (1950-1957), Parole et si