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Letter addressed to: **Country and Regional Leaders**
: International Delegates
: International Envoys

Dear friends,

We are writing to you as our 50th anniversary celebrations draw to a close. Each celebration gave us an opportunity to re-read our story in a more in-depth way. Thanks to this Jubilee Year we were once again able to receive L'Arche as a gift from God, and to acknowledge all that we have received.

However, the current re-reading of our story must take into account some sad news concerning Père Thomas Philippe.

Père Thomas Philippe, a Dominican priest born in 1905, and who died in 1993, played an important role in the beginnings of L'Arche.

Jean Vanier met him for the first time in 1950 after having left the Navy. At that time Père Thomas was head of an International Centre for Theology and Philosophy, called "L'Eau Vive". Jean rapidly sensed and believed that Père Thomas' form of spirituality was a testimony to the concrete and life-giving presence of God in his life. Père Thomas became Jean's spiritual father and Jean chose to put his trust in him when seeking to discover where God was calling him to be. In 1963, Père Thomas, who was at that time chaplain for the "Val Fleuri", a small home for people with intellectual disabilities, invited Jean to come and discover the world of people with disabilities.

Later on Jean decided to found L'Arche. He was supported in this task by Doctor Préaut, an eminent psychiatrist from the Oise region, in welcoming Philippe and Raphael.

In the ensuing years Père Thomas played the role of spiritual accompanier for the emerging community. In 1971, in Trosly, he and a few other people founded "La Ferme", a place of welcome, prayer and formation. After his death it became a member community of L'Arche.

Père Thomas left La Ferme in 1991 to spend the rest of his life in St Jodard, in the religious community of St Jean. It is important to note that Père Thomas did not always understand Jean's intuition, nor the way L'Arche developed. Père Thomas often opposed the decisions and orientations taken.

Aside from his significant contribution to the pre-foundation period, and to the early years of L'Arche, and the good that he did for so many people that he accompanied, we also know that Père Thomas' personal path gave rise to questions. We can neither ignore, nor keep silence about the serious grey areas which marked his life, some of which we have just been made aware of.

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In 1956, long before L'Arche was founded, Père Thomas Philippe was the subject of a canonical sanction. At the end of the Holy Office trial, very rigorous sanctions were imposed on him over the space of several years: he was forbidden to teach, to exercise his ministry in any way, and to administer the sacraments in public.

We do not know the cause for his condemnation because the archives from the trial have not yet been made accessible. However, a few publications from the last decade¹ that we have researched and consulted, lead us to suppose that this condemnation is related to inappropriate behaviour by Père Thomas during spiritual accompaniment; behaviour which would have led to several women pressing charges against him.

Then in June 2014, we received some distressing testimonies. This time they alluded to the years subsequent to L'Arche's foundation, and are related to women without intellectual disabilities, who were adults at the time of the events.

These testimonies speak of Père Thomas' seriously inappropriate sexual gestures during spiritual accompaniment.

We are grateful to these people who courageously expressed their suffering and want to offer them our support.

As Père Thomas has died, no civil or criminal lawsuit can be filed. Moreover, the people concerned wish to be heard and to make the truth known, they do not seek revenge and do not seek compensation. Together with the International Leadership Team, and with Jean Vanier's full consent, we wished to respond to their request, and to listen to them further.

In June 2014, two of these testimonies were sent to the Catholic Church and were subsequently forwarded to us by Mgr Pierre d'Ornellas, Archbishop of Rennes and Accompanying Bishop for L'Arche International. An agreement was reached with Mgr Pierre d'Ornellas that he would open up a canonical enquiry (i.e in compliance with the law of the Catholic Church), in order to hear those concerned and to clarify the facts.

The enquiry, which began in December 2014, has just been finalized by a written report, which we were able to read. Out of respect for those involved, this report remains confidential; below is the full summary written by Mgr d'Ornellas:

At the request of the Church and L'Arche, Father Paul-Dominique Marcovits, Dominican, set up a hearing process for the 14 witnesses reporting deeds committed by Père Thomas Philippe, Dominican, who died on 4th February 1993. Some of those witnesses were the victims themselves, others were those that victims had chosen to confide in.

This is what emerges from these consistent and frank testimonies : Père Thomas Philippe was the perpetrator of abusive sexual behaviour towards adult women, he explained that through these means he sought to uncover and communicate a mystical experience ; there is however a serious contradiction between these acts and the religious vows which he had taken and the discipline and morals taught by the Church; these acts attest to the fact that

¹ - Biography: John W. Thompson, "Psychiatrist in the shadow of the holocaust" – Paul J. Weindling, University Rochester Press. 2010
- Mentions and notes from: *Journet Maritain, Correspondance*, Volume IV (1950-1957), Saint Augustin – Parole et Silence (Translation of title: Word and Silence). 2005
- Masters dissertation on Religious History: The "Wise and the learned" to the "little ones" (Title translated from "Les Sages et les savants" aux "Tout petits"). *Prior to the origins of L'Arche communities 1945-1965 – Antoine Mourges (Title translated from "Aux origines des communautés de l'Arche, 1945-1965 - Antoine Mourges)*, under the direction of Michel Fourcade in Montpellier III. 2009

he had a psychological and spiritual hold over these women who he asked to remain silent as, according to him, these acts corresponded to "special graces" that nobody could understand.

No matter how much good Père Thomas has done, for which many are grateful, these acts and their justification are proof of a distorted conscience that claimed many known, and no doubt unknown, victims for whom justice must be done.

In all of the testimonies received, nothing was heard that would call L'Arche or its mission into question, quite the contrary.

We strongly condemn these actions, aware as we are of the serious impact they have had on the lives of their victims. We reaffirm our regret and our compassion for all those concerned.

It is inevitable that such acts call us to take a new look at Père Thomas' teaching and at his contribution to L'Arche's development

We chose to inform you in order to do justice to the victims who alerted us about the hurt they have suffered, and to avoid contradictory rumours being spread.

We also believe that this information will help all of us to a more authentic and less idealised reading of the story of L'Arche.

This is also an opportunity for us to restate our determination to make every effort within L'Arche to ensure that the conditions required to welcome and accompany community members, including the policies and procedures that govern our life together, are in place to guarantee the respect and care that each person has the right to expect from community life. We reiterate our commitment to act in accordance with the law, and with absolute clarity in our communication.

We are aware of the disturbing effect that this news can have on people, particularly for the longer term members amongst us, or for the members of communities that had forged personal ties with Père Thomas, or for those whose personal journey was deeply influenced by his teachings.

We are available to speak with you and listen to you, particularly in order to decide on the best way to bring the content of this letter to the attention of the members of the communities that you feel should be informed.

We ask you to keep the Federation in your prayers, we remind you of our affection and send you our best wishes.

Patrick Fontaine



Eileen Glass

