

To all members of L'Arche communities around the world

February 22, 2020

Dear friends,

Last June, we informed you of our decision to initiate an inquiry for which we *'commissioned an external agency to conduct a thorough and independent investigation that will allow us to better understand our history, to improve our work in preventing abuse and thus to improve our own current policies and practices'*. This included answering questions about *'the environment surrounding Father Thomas [at the time he abused adult women without disabilities in L'Arche], including the role of Jean Vanier in this environment'*.

The decision to launch this work and to share its conclusions with you has been approved by the International Leadership Team and the Stewardship Board of L'Arche International. This work continues the effort begun in 2014 by our predecessors, Patrick Fontaine and Eileen Glass, when testimonies involving Father Thomas reached them.

It is with great sorrow that we come to share with you the results of this inquiry and our own research. The timing of this work, specifically coming so close to Jean's death, was simply a coincidence.

Because this work implicates Jean Vanier and calls into question some of our assumptions about the origins of L'Arche, the conclusions we are reporting to you today are challenging and will upset many of us. Mindful of the courage of those who shared their testimonies, and aware of the values that inspire L'Arche, we share these conclusions with you.

After a careful examination of the documentary sources to which L'Arche International had access and of the testimonies brought to the attention of the investigators, today we can affirm the following points:

- As early as the 1950s, and contrary to what he told us, Jean Vanier, was aware of many of the significant reasons for the 1956 canonical trial and the condemnation by the Catholic Church of Father Thomas Philippe because of his theories that were described as "false mysticism" and of the sexual practices that derived from these theories.

Father Thomas Philippe was the person that Jean described as his spiritual father and, Jean said, the person who called him to found L'Arche. In 2015, twenty-two years after his death, the Federation learned that Father Thomas had abused adult women, without disabilities, while he was in L'Arche, Trosly (France) and exercising his ministry as a priest. On many occasions Jean had asserted his ignorance of this abuse and he never disclosed the reality of his close relationship to Father Thomas during the 1950s.

- Indeed, Jean Vanier who was still a young man at that time, was in a close and trusting relationship with Father Thomas Philippe, and would have shared some of the sexual practices initiated by Father Philippe, with women who described themselves as consenting by various consistent sources of evidence to which we have had access.

- In 1956 Father Thomas Philippe was condemned by the Church and was banned from further contact with a small group that included Jean Vanier. Despite this, Father Thomas Philippe, Jean and several women remained connected until the founding of L'Arche in 1964. Some of the members of this group were in our community in Trosly at the very beginning of L'Arche and participated in L'Arche for many years without ever revealing the nature of their original relationships.
- In addition, the inquiry received credible and consistent testimonies covering the period from 1970 to 2005 from six adult women without disabilities that were not related to the above group. The women each report that Jean Vanier initiated sexual behaviours with them, usually in the context of spiritual accompaniment. Some of these women have been deeply wounded by these experiences. Jean Vanier asked each of the women to keep the nature of these events secret. They had no prior knowledge of each other's experiences, but these women reported similar facts associated with highly unusual spiritual or mystical explanations used to justify these sexual behaviours.
These actions are indicative of a deep psychological and spiritual hold Jean Vanier had on these women and reveal his own adoption of some of Father Thomas Philippe's deviant theories and practices which he continued over a very long period of time.

We are shocked by these discoveries and unreservedly condemn these actions, which are in total contradiction with the values Jean claimed and are incompatible with the basic rules of respect and integrity of persons, and contrary to the fundamental principles on which L'Arche is based.

For many of us, Jean was one of the people we loved and respected the most. Jean inspired and comforted many people around the world, both inside and outside L'Arche, we are thinking in particular of the members of Faith and Light, and we are aware of the deep confusion and pain that this information will cause. While the considerable good he did throughout his life is not in question, we will nevertheless have to mourn a certain image we may have had of Jean and of the origins of L'Arche. Whatever Jean Vanier understood or believed about these relationships or the different perceptions the women who provided testimony had of them, the inquiry has established that some of the women were deeply harmed by these events and experienced long-term negative impacts.

Jean hid part of his identity and his silence, for whatever reason, allowed unacceptable practices to persist and gave us a distorted view of our founding history. We want to emphasize that there is no evidence that Jean Vanier may have engaged in similar behaviour with people with disabilities.

It will take more time and work, with help from outside L'Arche, to try and understand this part of our history and the roots of such behaviours. It is also possible that additional information will come to us and add to our understanding of these events. We will continue this research and keep you informed of our ongoing efforts and the findings.

As planned at the outset of this work, we will also undertake a thorough evaluation of our current measures to prevent abuse and protect persons with and without disabilities, including the way in which reports, past or recent, have been handled in our federation. Furthermore, in addition to the existing reporting procedures already in place in our communities or countries, L'Arche International has set up a centralized reporting procedure to which all our members can have access in a secure and confidential environment. A task force, composed in part of people from outside L'Arche, is in charge of collecting this information and determining what to do with it.

We will continue to develop and implement our safeguarding policies and procedures so that they become an integral part of our community life and contribute to the safety and growth of all our members.

In the weeks and months to come, we will be asking our leaders to organize spaces for dialogue and support so that any and all members with or without disabilities will have the opportunity to express their feelings, thoughts and questions. For those that wish you can also find a summary of our work on the website. The summary report, which sets out the main findings, has been developed from the historical research and the more detailed confidential inquiry report that we have shared with the International Leadership Team and the International Stewardship Board.

Although the results of our research and this investigation affect us deeply, both individually and collectively, we have a duty to those who have been hurt by these events and a duty to ourselves; L'Arche will not have a future if we are not able to look at our past with clear eyes. What we learn today is a huge blow and a cause of great confusion but what we lose in certainty, we hope to gain in terms of maturity, and to step into the future of L'Arche with greater justice, insight and freedom.

We want to pay tribute to the women who gave us their testimony. As leaders in L'Arche, our job is not to protect ourselves against painful truths, but to be faithful to the principles that guide us and to affirm *"the unique value of each person"*¹. We recognize the courage and suffering of these women, and of those who may remain silent. We also want to express our gratitude to the women who, a few years ago, broke the silence about Father Thomas Philippe and thus helped others to speak out about the undue burden of shame and pain. Because these events took place in the context of L'Arche and some were brought about by our founder; to all of you, we ask forgiveness.

If the words of those who testified bring to light a troubled part of our history, their efforts give L'Arche a chance to continue on its journey, to become more aware of our history, and, ultimately, better able to face the challenges of our time. We understand - that this was also their intention, and we are grateful for it.

To all of you, members of L'Arche around the world, we reiterate our strong bonds of friendship, our concern for each other and our confidence in our collective ability to get through this ordeal. It is with trust in God and the support of our friends, that we continue to strive, in our communities, our neighbourhoods, our cities and our countries, *"to work together, [people with and without disabilities], towards a more humane society"*¹. It is our hope that the work we have just shared with you will contribute to this.



Stephan Posner
International Leader



Stacy Cates-Carney
Vice-International Leader

¹ *Identity and Mission Statement. March 2007