



Historical benchmarks and chronology of  
the investigations initiated by L'Arche  
International concerning Father Thomas  
Philippe and Jean Vanier.

# Summary of the document

Many of you may not be familiar with the different stages that led to the setting up of the Study Commission.

This document introduces you to:

- A brief reminder of the historical background and a chronology of the investigations that preceded the creation of the Study Commission.
- A reminder of the results of the 2020 inquiry.
- A presentation of the Study Commission.
- Some key points from the Study Commission's report.
- A reminder of the safeguarding actions that have been taken.

This presentation can be of help to you in sharing information with your community.

# Historical benchmarks

- **1946:** Father Thomas Philippe founds L'Eau vive, an international training centre in Soisy-sur-Seine (France).
- **1950:** After leaving the navy, Jean Vanier comes to L'Eau vive. Father Thomas Philippe becomes his spiritual father.
- **April 1952:** Father Thomas Philippe, after two testimonies from women accusing him of having sexually abused them, has to leave L'Eau vive. The investigation is entrusted to the Holy Office (the Vatican court of appeal for the Catholic Church). Father Thomas Philippe appoints Jean Vanier as director of L'Eau Vive to replace him.
- **May 1956:** Father Thomas Philippe is condemned by the Holy Office to the penalty of deposition: he is deprived of teaching, exercising his ministry, administering sacraments. The Holy Office also decides to close down L'Eau Vive and to disperse the group, of which Jean Vanier is a member, under strict prohibition to reform again in any other place.

# Historical benchmarks

(continued)

- **1963:** Father Thomas Philippe is authorised to return to France. He goes to Trosly and becomes chaplain at Val Fleury, an institution for people with mental disabilities.
- **1964:** Jean moves to Trosly to be with Father Thomas and founds L'Arche.
- **1993:** Death of Father Thomas Philippe.
- **May 2019:** Death of Jean Vanier.

# Chronology of the investigations initiated by L'Arche

- **June 2014:** L'Arche International and the Catholic Church receive testimonies from two women alleging serious sexual abuse from Father Thomas Philippe in a context of spiritual guidance in the 1970s/80s.
- **December 2014 – March 2015:** a canonical investigation is carried out at the request of the Leaders of L'Arche International under the guidance of Mgr d'Ornellas, counsellor bishop of L'Arche International.
- **March 2015:** L'Arche International receives the conclusions of the canonical investigation which confirms the veracity of the testimonies and identifies other victims. The International Leaders share these conclusions with the Federation as a whole.  
The Dominican archives relating to Thomas Philippe are not made accessible despite requests from the Leader of L'Arche International.
- **May 2016:** the Leaders of L'Arche International receive the testimony of a woman, a former member of L'Arche, who questions Jean Vanier's behaviour towards her during her years in L'Arche.

# Chronology of the investigations initiated by L'Arche

(continued)

- **May 2016 – October 2016:** Review of the testimony with the help of external expertise. The International Leadership Team and the Chair of the International Stewardship Board are informed of the case. Jean Vanier acknowledges this relationship, which he says he thought was "mutual". He asks for forgiveness from this woman, who is kept informed of L'Arche's actions.
- **March 2019:** L'Arche International Leaders are informed of a new testimony from a woman implicating Jean Vanier.
- **April 2019:** Decision to commission an investigation by an independent body.
- **May 2019:** Death of Jean Vanier.
- **June 2019:** The investigation is entrusted to GCPS, a UK-based organisation whose mission is to help institutions to improve their safeguarding standards. During the course of investigation other similar cases are reported.

# Chronology of the investigations initiated by L'Arche

(continued)

- **May - June 2019:** L'Arche International has access for the first time to some archives of Jean Vanier and to those of the Dominican Province of France relating to Father Thomas Philippe.
- **July 2019:** Antoine Mourges, historian, is commissionned by L'Arche International to write a historical note in complement to the work of GCPS.
- **February 2020:** Results of the inquiry are made public by a communication from L'Arche Internationale.
- **October 2020:** At the request of L'Arche International a Study Commission is set up.

# 2020 Inquiry results – Excerpts

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“In the course of this inquiry, sincere and corroborating testimonies relating to the 1970-2005 period were received from six adult women without a disability. They indicate that Jean Vanier initiated sexual relationships, generally as part of a spiritual accompaniment, which have left some of these women with deep wounds. The women, who are not connected to one another, report similar incidents, which were associated with a language that was supposedly spiritual or mystical and intended to justify them. These actions indicate that Jean Vanier had a psychological and spiritual hold over the women and underline his adherence to some of the deviant theories and practices of Father Thomas Philippe.

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The GCPS investigation was complemented by a major historical research project initiated by L'Arche International based on unpublished archives to which it had access for the first time. The analysis of the various archives has made it possible to uncover the roots of Jean Vanier's attitude towards these women and highlights his adherence to some of the deviant theories and practices of Father Thomas Philippe.

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There is nothing in the inquiry to suggest that people with a disability were involved.

# 2020 Inquiry results –

## Excerpts (continued)

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Indeed, at the end of this inquiry and historical work, the information gathered indicates that:

As early as the 1950s, a decade before the founding of L'Arche, and contrary to what he has stated publicly, Jean Vanier was mostly aware of the reasons for the canonical trial and condemnation by the Catholic Church in 1956 of Father Thomas Philippe, due to his theories described as "false mysticism" and the sexual practices that followed. Father Thomas Philippe was the one whom Jean Vanier recognised as his spiritual father.

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Historical research tells us that in the 1950s Jean Vanier was part of a small underground group that adhered to and participated in some of Father Thomas Philippe's deviant sexual practices rooted in so-called "mystical" or "spiritual" beliefs that had been condemned by the Catholic Church. This group was composed of Father Thomas Philippe, Jean Vanier and some women."

# The Study Commission

The Study Commission was asked:

- To shed light on the history of our foundation and its driving forces, particularly through the life of Jean Vanier.
- To analyse the cultural and institutional dynamics at work within L'Arche.
- To assess the potential systemic nature of the situations of abuse implicating Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier.

The Study Commission is composed of experts from the following fields:

- History: Antoine Mourges and Florian Michel
- Sociology / anthropology: Claire Vincent-Mory
- Psychiatry / Psychoanalysis: Bernard Granger and Nicole Jeammet
- Theology: Gwenola Rimbaut

# The Study Commission

(continued)

Some points of reference on the sources and working methods of the Commission:

- A large amount of archives from various sources, some of which are unpublished.
- 1400 letters received or written by Jean Vanier.
- 119 interviews with 89 people, i.e. over 200 hours of listening.
- Monthly meetings of the Commission members throughout the two years of work.
- The Commission regularly reported on the progress of its questionings, its methodological choices and its analyses to the Scientific Committee.
- The Commission worked independently. L'Arche was not involved in its methodological choices or in the drafting of the report.

# Why this report?

We commissioned the report from the Study Commission for the following reasons:

- To have the necessary elements to understand our history and the reasons that made possible these abuses within L'Arche.
- To answer more confidently the questions asked in 2020:  
What was the extent of the abuse? Did some L'Arche members cover it up? Were there victims among people with disabilities?
- To provide the victims with elements that would help them understand the deviations to which they were exposed.
- Finally, to learn from this report how to re-read our history, prevent abuse and better fulfill our mission.

# Why this report?

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This analysis is a contribution to the understanding and therefore the prevention of abuse in a variety of contexts. We hope that this work will be useful beyond the sole case of L'Arche.

## The report

- A 900-page report in French in 7 parts, translated into English.
- A 57-page summary of the report in French, translated into English and Spanish. Other translations are also available.
- The report and summary are posted online and made public by the Study Commission.
- The report is not a biography of Jean Vanier. It focuses on that aspect of his life which had remained inaccessible to us and which clearly played an essential rôle even though his life cannot be reduced to this.

# Some key-points from The report

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The report confirms what L'Arche made public in 2020. Jean Vanier adhered to the deviant theories of Father Thomas Philippe, his spiritual father, from the early 1950's. This relationship with Father Thomas, his doctrine and the practices related to it were structuring éléments of Jean Vanier's personality.

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Until the end of his life, Jean Vanier concealed this part of his life and lied about the real nature of his relationship with Father Thomas. While fully acknowledging our institutional responsibility in these matters, we also feel the adherence to Thomas Philippe's theories and the reproduction of his practices, their concealment and the lies related to them represent a serious breach of trust towards L'Arche and its members.

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The Commission underlines that the number of women having had these experiences is likely to be higher.

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We learn that 25 single, married or consecrated adult women without disabilities have been identified as having experienced situations involving sexual acts or intimate gestures at some point in their relationship with Jean Vanier between 1952 and 2019. Some presented themselves as victims of an abusive relationship, others as consenting partners in an abusive relationship. Some of these women are deceased. In their diversity, these relationships, sometimes concurrent, are all part of a continuum of confusion, control, and abuse.

# Some key-points from The report (continued)

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The report describes the existence of a sectarian nucleus centered around Father Thomas as the origin of the history of L'Arche, formed by a few people, one of them Jean Vanier. This sectarian core formed a microsystem at the origin of L'Arche. It did not spread beyond a small circle of a few people whose situations are detailed in the report. The Commission did not identify any evidence to suggest that these abuses proliferated within L'Arche from this circle.

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There is no indication either in the Commission's work, or in the interviews with people with disabilities led by a psychologist, that Jean Vanier initiated abusive relationships with people with any of them. We feel confident that no person with disabilities was victim to Jean Vanier's abusive actions, as no evidence was found of this during the various investigations.

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The Commission did not identify any individuals, (beyond those associated with this microsystem ), who were sufficiently informed to be accused of deliberately covering up these facts. Piecemeal information does seem to have been circulated, sometimes in the form of rumors, without any mechanism being in place to make sense of it.

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The sociological part of the report, in particular, takes an unprecedented look at relationships of authority, modes of spiritual expression and methods of accompaniment or supervision that were present at a certain point in our history. It analyses what in our functioning may have contributed to the existence of a breeding ground for these abuses and their concealment.

## **Some key-points from The report (continued)**

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With the conclusion of this Report, L'Arche acknowledges its responsibility for not having been able to prevent, identify, or report these abuses, and consequently, for not having been able to put a stop to them. L'Arche renews its apologies offered in 2019 and sincerely ask forgiveness from the victims of these situations of abuse. It reiterates its gratitude to those who, a few years ago, broke the silence about Father Thomas Philippe, and later about Jean Vanier, thus helping others to free themselves from an intolerable burden.

# Safeguarding

- As we committed to in 2020, we undertook a thorough Federation-wide evaluation and redesign of our safeguarding measures for people with and without disabilities. All Federation representatives and Community leaders have been involved in and committed to this process.
- This work led to the establishment of a reference framework, drawn up in collaboration with an external consultant and inspired by British safeguarding standards. The framework was finalized and validated in 2022 and translated into the 17 languages of the Federation.
- The deployment of these measures is still on-going, and in accordance with the specific modalities of each country in which L'Arche is present.
- In all countries where regulations have been established, our communities are aligned with those standards. A new audit of all our communities will be undertaken in 2023 to measure their level of compliance with the standards defined in the reference framework.
- Since 2020, the Federation has set up an abuse reporting unit to investigate situations referred to it. This unit is composed of people outside L'Arche or of people within L'Arche who are not in positions of authority. Similar mechanisms exist in a growing number of our countries and communities.

Contact for L'Arche International : [ireport@larche.org](mailto:ireport@larche.org)

Local contact:

