

# Jean Vanier's model for inclusiveness

EUREKA STREET

- [Justin Glyn](#)
- 09 May 2019
- Image:: Jean Vanier shaking hands with one of the core members of L'Arche Daybreak, John Smeltzer



**Jean Vanier (1928-2019), sailor, academic, companion and man of boundless hospitality, died on 7 May, leaving behind him not only many communities in grief but also a model for how a world free of discrimination might look.**

Jean was born to the Canadian Governor Georges Vanier and diplomat and Privy Councillor, Pauline Vanier, both renowned for their saintly lives, with their causes for canonisation having begun. When he took office as Governor-General, Georges [prayed a prayer that might have been a premonition of his son's life](#):

'May almighty God in his infinite wisdom and mercy bless the sacred mission which has been entrusted to me by Her Majesty the queen and help me to fulfill it in all humility. In exchange for his strength, I offer him my weakness. May he give peace to this beloved land of ours and, to those who live in it, the grace of mutual understanding, respect and love.'

After the young Jean resigned his commission in the Royal Canadian Navy in 1950, he felt driven towards something more. He studied philosophy in France, published works on Aristotle and briefly explored the possibility of becoming a priest.

Vanier found his true calling in his 1963 encounter with two young Frenchmen with intellectual disabilities, Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux. These men's need for companionship and empathy touched his heart when he visited the institution in which they were confined. Vanier realised that the first response of society, when confronted with people with disability, was to shut them away in fear. His response instead was hospitality.

He invited the two men to live with him in a home he had bought, beginning the first L'Arche (The Ark) community in Trosly-Breuil in Picardie. In return, the men opened his own heart to a greater understanding both of what people cast onto the margins of society could offer by way of love and a broader understanding of all of humanity as limited, powerless, vulnerable and in need of mutual support.

Today, L'Arche has 154 communities and 21 community projects in 38 countries on five continents. While the philosophy of the movement is grounded in Vanier's Catholic faith, it is open to all and eschews discrimination on any grounds. Although the exact structures differ from place to place, 'core' members (with an intellectual disability) live with others ('assistants') in homes which offer mutual support and friendship.

**"All of us begin life incapacitated — unable to speak or see or reason — and most of us, if we are lucky to live so long, will leave it that way: with mental or physical limitations. Limitation and disability is accordingly not something foreign, to be feared or locked away."**

One of the great gifts of Vanier and L'Arche has been to subvert the understanding of 'disability'. Vanier's key insight was that:

'When we start helping the weak and the poor to rise everyone will begin to change. Those who have power and riches will start to become more humble, and those who are rising up will leave behind their need to be victims, their need to be angry or depressed ... This is the spirituality of life, that helps people to rise up and take their place. It is not a spirituality of death. Jesus wants those who have been crushed to rise up and those who have power to discover that there is another road, a road of sharing and compassion.'

It is very easy for people without a disability to see those who have one as 'the other', as strange because the workings of their bodies or minds are so manifestly different or apparently deficient. This is particularly so in the case of people with an intellectual disability, where cognitive processes which many of us take for granted may be a foreign territory, leaving them open to exploitation, neglect or exclusion.

The fact is, as Vanier recognised, that all of us are partial, incomplete beings. His '5 Principles of Humanity' include the sacredness of all people, the constant evolution of people, the corollary realisation that maturity comes in working with others, the need for people to make choices for the benefit of themselves and others and the universal search for meaning.

It follows that the myth of the self-made person with flawless body and mind is just that. Vanier pointed out that it is in our very vulnerability and woundedness that we display the form of Christ. Indeed, it is appropriate that Vanier went to meet his God at Easter, a time when Christians celebrate Christ meeting his disciples — and proving his identity and triumph over death in the face of their disbelief by showing them his wounds.

All of us begin life incapacitated — unable to speak or see or reason — and most of us, if we are lucky to live so long, will leave it that way: with mental or physical limitations. Limitation and disability is accordingly not something foreign, to be feared or locked away, but is in fact an essential part of the human condition. What is more, as Jean Vanier has demonstrated in a life lived for others, it is in that limitation which we shall see the face of God.



**Fr Justin Glyn SJ has a licentiate in canon law from St Paul University in Ottawa. Before entering the Society he practised law in South Africa and New Zealand and has a PhD in administrative and international law.**