

Jean Vanier's life and legacy as remembered by fellow Canadians

'In a world that increasingly pushes us to gauge worth by what we own, he reminded us that authentic love, friendship and community are what we need'

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Jean Vanier at the Thanksgiving Mass for the 50th anniversary of l'Arche, May 3, 2014. (Photo by UZOUNOFF/CIRIC STÃ©PHANE)

My first encounter with Jean Vanier was at age 18. Like many millions of young Canadians, it was through his books.

Struggling with many doubts about my faith and those existential questions that afflict all teenagers, I turned to *Be Not Afraid*, his 1975 reflection on how to be disciples of Christ. I won't say it answered all my questions, but it opened my heart and mind to the possibility that the Jesus I grew up with as a cradle-Catholic could remain real and vibrant to a young, intellectually curious — and often cynical — young adult.



Vanier spoke with authority and compassion, reminding me that the faith I knew best could not possibly be fruitful unless it was lived out in a community of believers. He was very persuasive. I abandoned any thought I could have a relationship with Jesus all on my own and, slowly and fitfully, returned to the fold.

His death this week at the age of 90 reminded me of the gentle yet powerful influence he had on me and whole generations of fellow Canadians.

It's true, Vanier belonged to the world. His work spanned continents and his 40 or so books have been translated into numerous languages. But the life and work of this native son lives on in my country in a unique way, having shaped within us the very notion of what it means to be Catholic in the modern world.

This year is the 50th anniversary of l'Arche in Canada. The organization Vanier founded in Trosly, France, in 1964, took deep root here, starting with the community of Daybreak, just north of Toronto. Today, 29 of the more than 150 l'Arche communities are in Canada. Among my circle of young adult Catholics, Jean Vanier was, along with Mother Teresa, a modern-day saint. We avidly read his books and listened attentively during discussion group videos of his live presentations.

If we were lucky, we had a chance to hear him in person. Even before large groups, he seemed to be talking to each of us individually, directly confronting our deepest longings and fears in that soft confiding voice.

Vanier would be the equivalent of a moral rock star in Canada, becoming a Companion of the Order of Canada, delivering the prestigious Massey Lectures on CBC Radio to the entire country, receiving the Templeton Prize and being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Despite his exalted reputation, he continued to spend large portions of his time with ordinary people — teachers, volunteers in his communities, health-care workers, social workers and, most of all, his beloved core members of L'Arche.

"Jean Vanier has shaped my whole adult life inspiring me through his writings, retreats, Gospel of St John course, and his life with his companions in Trosly," he wrote John Guido, a veteran l'Arche leader in the Toronto area:

"Today I think of the personal encounters: inviting me to go to Daybreak in 1985, encouraging me to commit my life to l'Arche in the early 1990s, apologizing on a bus to Canterbury for calling me Guido for years instead of John. I was delighted that he even knew my name," he said in an online tribute to Vanier on the l'Arche Canada website.

I recall interviewing Vanier in 1995 as a journalist working for *The Catholic Register*, Canada's English Catholic national newspaper. We spent an hour together in the north Toronto living room of one of his many friends.

We talked about "family values," a phrase already emerging as shorthand for a harkening back to 1950s ideas about the definition of family and sexual morality.

Vanier came from one such family. Former Governor General Georges Vanier, a war hero and pious Catholic, and his wife Pauline were one of Canada's best-loved couples. And they raised five children, among them a Trappist monk, a hematologist, an abstract artist and a translator.

"If there were an aristocracy in Canada, the Vanier family would be prominent on the list," writes Michael W. Higgins, the Canadian author of *Jean Vanier: Logician of the Heart* (Novalis 2016).

Then there was Jean, who became a Canadian navy veteran, a philosopher and, for a short time, a teacher at the University of St. Michael's College, known internationally for its Faculty of Theology.

However, this Vanier's notion of family was expansive. It included the poor, the helpless, the disenfranchised and outcast. It was shaped by Vanier's embrace of mercy as a core virtue and his growing insight that those who have least offer profound lessons in love to those who have everything.

This notion would be at the heart of the l'Arche phenomenon — and counter to what he saw happening in the world around him.

"There's a movement to the right, a rejection of welfare, a rejection of immigrants, a rejection of the different," he told me.

"There's a whole movement of the rich wanting to protect themselves and that's different than it was. Very different."

For Cardinal Thomas Collins, archbishop of Toronto, Vanier taught us to uphold the dignity of every person.

"In a world that increasingly pushes us to gauge success and worth by what we own or who we know, he reminded us that authentic love, friendship and community are what we need," the cardinal said in a prepared statement.

Indeed, Vanier's words are prescient when viewed through the lens of 2019. In an age of uncontrolled anger and fear of others, his legacy is both a challenge and an inspiration.

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