

FR RONALD ROLHEISER

Jean Vanier revisited

Like many others, I was deeply distressed to learn of the recent revelations concerning Jean Vanier. He was a person whom I much admired and about whom on numerous occasions I have written glowingly. So the news about him shook me deeply. What's to be said about Jean Vanier in the light of these revelations?

First, that what he did was very wrong and deeply harmful, not least to the women he victimised. Without knowing the specifics of what happened (and without wanting to know them) enough is known to grasp that this was a serious abuse of trust. No cloak of justification can be placed around it.

Second, what he did may not be linked to or identified with clerical sexual abuse. Vanier was not a cleric, or indeed a canonically vowed religious. He was a layman, a public celibate admittedly, but his betrayal of his commitment to celibacy may not be identified with clerical abuse. He broke the sixth commandment, in a way that merits a harsh judgment, given his public stature and the abuse of a particular kind of sacred trust. However his breaking of his professed

celibacy doesn't put into question the legitimacy and fruitfulness of vowed celibacy itself, any more than a married man being unfaithful to his wife puts into question the legitimacy and fruitfulness of the vocation of marriage.

Third, Vanier's transgressions do not negate the good work of L'Arche or cast any negative shadow on the dedication and good work of the many women and men who work there and who have worked there. By their fruits you shall know them: Jesus taught that and no one – no one – can deny or question the good work that L'Arche has done and continues to do in more than 30 countries. L'Arche is a work of God, of grace, of the Holy Spirit. It turns out now that its founder had some flaws. So be it. Jesus is the only founder who had no flaws. Indeed, the good work being done by L'Arche attests too to the fact that Vanier is and was bigger than his sins. Nobody who is *essentially* duplicitous can leave behind such a grace-filled legacy.

Finally, the disillusionment and anger we feel says as much about us as it does about Jean Vanier. In Luke's Gospel (18:18-23), a young man comes up to Jesus and says to him: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus immediately challenges the way he is being addressed by saying:



*These sins do
not negate the
good work
of L'Arche*



"Don't call me good! Only God is good." That was our mistake with Jean Vanier, just as it's our mistake with other persons whom we cloak with divinity in an idealisation that's supposed to be reserved for God alone. And whenever we do that – and we did it to Jean Vanier – we cannot not ultimately be disappointed and disillusioned. Nobody, except God, does God well; all the rest of us eventually disappoint.

What Jean Vanier did to us was unfair. We cannot *not* feel betrayed. Conversely, though, what we did to him was also unfair. We asked him to be God for us and that's also not a fair request.

When I was a 21-year-old seminarian searching for mentors, one of my seminary teachers came back from a Vanier retreat gushing with superlatives as he described Vanier as the "holiest, most wonderful, most single-minded, spiritual man" he'd ever met. My critical faculties immediately put me on guard: "No one's that good!" So I deliberately didn't look to Vanier for mentorship.

However, in the 50 years since, I did look to him for it. Though I never met him personally, I read his books and was much influenced by numerous people who counted him as a formidable influence in their lives (including Henri Nouwen). I wrote a preface for one of his last books and a glowing tribute to him for the newspapers when he died. So I was by now also sufficiently besotted by him that I too felt dismayed and disillusioned when I learned of his moral lapses.

Disillusionment is a curious phenomenon. After the initial shock, you soon enough realise it's a positive thing. It's the dispelling of an illusion, and an illusion is always in the mind of the one who's doing the perceiving rather than on the part of the one being perceived. With Jean Vanier, the illusion was on our part, not his. There was, as we now know, a certain falsity in his life – but there was one on our part too.

Yes, the revelations about Jean Vanier shook me deeply, but not to my core because at our core, when we touch it, we know that no one, except God, is good, at least with a goodness that has no imperfections. Once we accept that, we can accept too that nobody's perfect, even a Jean Vanier. At our core we can accept that, despite this betrayal, Jean Vanier did a lot of good and that L'Arche is clearly a graced reality.

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