

An article by Fr Jock on Jean Vanier published in this week's Tablet

FEATURES Jean Vanier

A parish priest and an academic reflect on the lessons in living they drew from the life and presence of the founder of L'Arche, who died in Paris last week.

A vision of life for everyone

JEAN VANIER (inset) offered a vision of the life of Jesus, and of how we, who seek to follow him, could or even should live our lives, writes *Jock Dalrymple*. When I heard him talk about these things, like many others, I experienced that Emmaus hearts-burning-within-us experience. Like Jesus in the gospels, people hung on his words because he taught with authority.

As a parish priest, I have been inspired by Vanier's vision of the tenderness of Jesus, of the preciousness of each person, of the invitation and challenge to take the downward path, of how we are all wounded and broken, and of how those who are most fragile have a particularly important part to play in the

life of a community. It gives a wonderful ideal to try to encourage people to aspire to.

Jean has said that he was a type six on the Enneagram, instinctively law-abiding and respectful of authority. And yet, because of his openness to people and to the Word of God, his thinking continued to change and develop. For over thirty years I have listened to him giving retreats and one-off talks - often speaking for more than an hour at a time without notes. Almost always, while there was much that was familiar, there was also something new and stimulating.



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One example of change and development in his thinking can be seen in the difference between the first and second editions of his book on sexuality and marriage, *Man and Woman He Made Them*. The first edition, published in 1984, contained a rather harsh critique of homosexuality, which caused considerable hurt to some people. In the second edition, retitled *Man and Woman God Made Them*, after consultation and discussion, he decided to leave those sections out. And in the years that followed, he began to give retreats for gay couples at La Ferme, the retreat centre at Trosly, reflecting privately to friends his deep sadness at the depth of suffering through marginalisation and discrimination that he encountered during them.

Some of his particularly illuminating insights were offered in private conversations. In the early 1990s he reflected on the concerns of "restorationists" dismayed by the loss of a distinctive Catholic identity after the second Vatican Council, expressing his sadness that so many chose to base this reassertion of identity on personal morality rather than on service of the poor.

He himself stressed the importance not just of service but of mutuality. We are called always to relationships, and through relationships - especially with people with learning difficulties - we are enabled to grow and change and develop.

Similarly, over two decades ago, I heard Jean reflect wryly - anticipating Pope Francis, whose advent thrilled him - that while the Gospel consisted of Law and Spirit, the Church was much better at the former

than the latter. (Nor was Pope Francis - who rang him a few days before he died - the only radical elderly Pope to show him affection. Sixty years earlier, in July 1959, Jean and his parents visited the Vatican for a private audience with the recently elected Pope John XXIII - whom they had known well when he was Nuncio in Paris. As his father Georges Vanier's biographer, Robert Speaight, recalled, on entering the room Jean literally "fell into the arms of the Johannine embrace", after which Pope John exclaimed, "I love Jock" - the name Jean was known by in his family.)

But Jean was much more than just a teacher and philosopher. Twice, at times of personal crisis in my own life, he was there for me - as he has been, when needed, for so many others - giving time and gently offering his wisdom, but first of all listening, and listening with an attentiveness I have never experienced in anyone before or since.

One image of Jean remains particularly vivid in my memory. In 2000, he came to Scotland to give a series of retreats. After one in my parish in Fife, he stayed in the parish house for the night. I saw Jean to bed at 11, and sometime after I was called out to a dying parishioner. Returning at 2 a.m. I was surprised to see that the light was on in the living room. Opening the door I found Jean sitting contentedly in his pyjamas (blue of course), poring over the Gospel of John. He'd woken up, he said, and, unable to get back to sleep, had decided to rest instead in the gospel he loved most.

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