

The secret of real happiness is following your deepest dream

At the recent Flame 2019 young Catholic convention at Wembley Arena, Jean Vanier (right) sent a video interview to encourage the young Catholics present to “discover how beautiful they are.” During the message he answered some questions about his life and his answers proved illuminating to all the young people watching.



Q: The theme for Flame this year is ‘significance’ and you have lived what many would call a significant life. Could you tell us how it began?

It’s a long story, particularly as I’m 90 now. My father was in France during the war, so when the Germans invaded Belgium and then France, we were in France and we became refugees.

I felt something inside of me, a certainty, that I must get to England because I had heard there was a naval college for young people. I was 13 years old, and I wanted to join the Navy.

My father questioned me and did everything he could to dissuade me, because it meant leaving the family. But the conversation ended with his words: “I trust you. If that’s what you want, then you must do it.”

So I’d say everything begins with that: my dad trusted me when I was 13, when I was asking to do something which appeared crazy.

So, over to England from Canada, time in the navy, but then the time came. I felt called to do something else. I felt called to follow Jesus – but where and how?

In 1960, I began discovering a world of people with disabilities. They were locked up in institutions, pushed away, and in drastic situations. Somewhere inside of me I knew that Jesus was calling me to something, but where and how? Then everything sort of fell into

place. I visited an institution. There were people with disabilities, Down syndrome or other people who were pushed away into asylums and so on. I was attracted and shocked at the same time. Attracted because these are my brothers, human beings, and shocked because of the violence, the crime and everything I saw.

I was fortunate enough to have friends, and was able to buy a small house in a small village, and welcome two people to stay with me: Raphaël, who had meningitis when he was young, and Philippe, who had had encephalitis and one leg was paralysed. Their parents had died. The leader of this institution said, ‘Well, you could maybe begin caring for them.’

So that was the beginning of a whole story.

I was living with two people who had been rejected, humiliated, terribly hurt in every way, not wanted by society. But I got support, in financial and many other ways. I found a very good psychiatrist through the church and we began to live together. And that was super.

Raphaël and Philippe were so happy to find freedom and we lived together. We did the cooking together – that was a mess, because I didn’t know how to cook!

Somewhere it helped me discover home. It felt like coming home and this was my new family. And I felt

very blessed by Jesus and by the whole reality.

We had such fun together. People with mental disabilities are not governed by ‘normal’ things. They’re seen a little bit as crazy – and they are super crazy. They are wonderful people, because what they want is maybe what we all want. They want to be recognised as important, as significant, as a person with value, to be loved just as they are.

And maybe that’s what we all want – to be loved, accepted and respected, just as we are.

I’m now 90 and my life is over! Your life is beginning and that’s super.

You can do beautiful things and discover that you have a secret in your heart, I hope you discover someone who trusts you – the church, Jesus, or your family – say to you: ‘I believe in you, and you are more beautiful than you dare to believe.’

So I hope you find the secret of your life and discover how beautiful you are.

Everyone here wants their life to be significant, but how do we deal with the pressures and the negative realities that are so much part of society today?

We’re in a world of competition. What is important in school? Is it really just to succeed in studies? Yes, it’s important. But isn’t it even more important to learn to accept people – others – as they are? Each one of you needs to be accepted with your gifts, your qualities. What strikes me is the number of people today who are humiliated, pushed aside, no good because of sickness, because of all the reality of life – they just didn’t succeed.

Sometimes, during the day, try to take a moment of ‘interiority’ – where is your deepest dream?

Listen to what is coming up from

within you and maybe you can share this dream with someone – a priest, a friend, some wise person – who says, “Your dream is a beautiful dream, go ahead, I trust you, you can do beautiful things.”

Follow Jesus: do something beautiful for our world, where there are so many divisions, hatreds and broken things. Maybe our world needs people who are a bit more prophetic, who believe in Jesus, the One who calls us to work to be peacemakers.

Find the secret of your own beauty – that you are more beautiful than you dare believe. Discover the dream of God, that we shall all be one and love each other whatever our religion or culture, that we can work for oneness, for peace.

You’re a very happy and joyful man, and today happiness is the goal of everybody. Often we’re told that the ingredients of happiness are drugs and alcohol. How do we become happy and joyful?

You see, somewhere there is something missing. People have felt unloved and unwanted but drugs and alcohol lead us away from reality.

So, happiness is to find the sense of what it means to live happiness to be on the path with others – together, hand in hand, working together to find that inner reality. We get upset when we have this tension between what I dream and the crushing of the dream.

And the crushing of the dream can be because I want success, I want power, I want all things and what normality says. So happiness comes as I find unity inside of me, between my faith, learning, and my experience. Happiness will come as we find unity and peace, as we discover that we’re not alone and we’re loved. Then we are happy.