COMFORT FOR THE AFFLICTED

By WILLIAM CLARKE

LAST SUMMER I had the great joy and privilege of spending some time in the newly-born l'Arche home in Haiti. When I arrived at this little house on the outskirts of Porte-au-Prince there was just Robert and Jean-Robert living there, and Helen who came each day to cook the meals. Robert, a former philosophy professor from Quebec, had spent a year in Jean Vanier's original l'Arche community in France before going on to begin this work in Haiti. Jean-Robert, a young Haitian, is mentally handicapped, with only limited use of his left side and very limited speech; and Helen a rather poor, very generous haitian woman, travels across the city each day partly on foot and partly by bus to cook simple but excellent meals on a little charcoal fire. Here were the essential ingredients for a l'Arche community – communities where men and women who are mentally handicapped and those who are not, share life together in mutual respect.

Soon Jolibois came to join us. Jolibois is only about ten years old. This was a new precedent for l'Arche, which generally has received only adults. Robert had asked Jean-Robert who should be the next person they should bring into their home. (Jean-Robert himself had been many years in a huge asylum for incurables, where a number of orphans seem somehow to end up because there is no other place for them.) He said at once: 'Jolibois'. Jolibois had been found naked, terrified and dumb in the streets of Porte-au-Prince. It was the director of the asylum who named him Jolibois. Most people in the asylum had no use for him. He had been deeply traumatized by whatever history had preceded his coming to the asylum. Frightened and distracted, he would walk around naked and dazed, his fragile legs often giving in and sending him tumbling into the open gutters that criss-cross the asylum property. 'Why Jolibois?' Robert asked. 'Because he is the one most in need', Jean-Robert managed to explain with grunts and gestures. Jean-Robert had already grasped the spirit of l'Arche that seeks to welcome those most rejected. And he was entering into its most important aspect:

no longer is he just the 'cared for', he is sharing in the decisions, and he is himself being called to care for others. So Jolibois came to live at Kay Joseph, as their little home is called (Kay being simply the haitian word for house). Soon he began to rediscover his vocal chords. He began with frightening, high-pitched squeals, repeated incessantly. Then he moved to grunting sounds and occasional words. His total silence was replaced by almost total noise. But we could quickly see a personality emerging from what at first seemed almost like a helplessly terrified animal.

Jolibois brought an extraordinary presence to Kay Joseph. I have met few people with such presence and such power to bring people together. How beautiful at night to watch Robert and Jean-Robert putting their little brother to bed. Jean-Robert would gently stroke his legs and Robert would lean over his trembling body and sing gentle lullabies to him. Slowly, Jolibois would cease his mysterious prattle, become calmer and lapse into silence. His fear would subside enough to risk closing his eyes, and finally he would fall asleep.

Then the rest of us would gather in the next room, light a candle, and with singing, words and silence, give thanks to God for another day, all of us feeling a kind of divine presence emanating from the other room where Jolibois was sleeping, all of us knowing how temporary this peace would be. At least once during the night, and sometimes several times, Robert and Jean-Robert would be up again with Jolibois as he would awaken screaming in the midst of some horrifying nightmare. They would change his wet sheets and again sing and caress him back to sleep. The prayer-time was one that carried us deeper into the experience we were living. It helped us to realize that the simple encounters with each other, around the table, doing dishes together, the caring for Jolibois, the tensions and the joys, were somehow all a meeting with the living God. And the prayer carried us beyond our little house to the wider world. We prayed for all those still in the asylum whence Jean-Robert and Jolibois had come, for the hungry and the homeless. It was a time when I felt very close to the other l'Arche homes throughout the world. I was carried back to the people I had come to know and love during my two years in the original l'Arche community in France, to my friends in Calcutta, in Bangalore, in England and Scotland, Belgium and Denmark, in Africa, and in the many homes across Canada and the United States. Even Jean-Robert, who has never been off the little island, seemed to have a sense of this larger family to which he now belongs. In the flickering light of the candle

I could see his gentle face, his eyes heavy with sleep still fixed with grateful love on Robert. A face showing both the simplicity of a child who lives out of his heart, and the wisdom of one who has learned that life is truly a struggle, who at only twenty-one years of age has still lived very deeply the mystery of loneliness and rejection.

The mentally handicapped person is doubly afflicted. He is afflicted by some wound in his brain or nervous system that limits his power of reasoning. He is even more deeply afflicted by the rejection he experiences. Our society especially makes it quite clear to such a person that he should never have been conceived, or that he should have been destroyed in his mother's womb. There is no work, no place for such a person in our society. So powerful is this rejecting attitude that even the parents of such a child are often made to feel deep guilt. It is only by great courage and grace that they can withstand such social pressure, and not in some subtle or unsubtle ways also reject this child or smother him with over-protective love. How often I have heard people say in the very presence of such a person, 'Oh, the poor thing, but he really does not know any better'. Yet, of course, he does know. Even the new-born baby knows whether and to what degree he is loved and accepted or resented and rejected, whether he is looked on with love or pitied as a 'poor thing'. There is, of course, some effort to help such people – schools and special classes. But many when they reach adulthood have no choice but to be consigned to some large institution which can never be much more than a kind of prison.

It was to these afflicted people that Jean Vanier felt called to bring comfort. So in 1964 he bought a little house in the village of Trosly in France, and took Raphael and Philippe out of the institutions to which they had been condemned. Vanier had first given up a promising naval career to follow a longing for community and desire for poverty of spirit. In committing himself to live with Raphael and Philippe, he was giving up an equally promising academic career as a philosopher. His friends and family could not understand such a renunciation. For it was not just an interesting experiment that he was trying. When he said to Raphael and Philippe, 'this is our home', he was making a deep and permanent commitment to them. He knew that he could not send them back to an institution once he had given them the warmth and freedom of a home.

He called his little home 'l'Arche', the Ark. He first conceived it as a place of refuge for mentally handicapped adults, a place of comfort for these deeply afflicted people. Soon, however, he began

to discover the beautiful gifts of Raphael and Philippe – their capacity to make friends, to bring joy to people, to be deeply compassionate themselves. He began to realize that those who are limited in intellectual capacities tend to be especially gifted in the capacities of the heart. Raphael, who can only speak a couple of words, had very quickly become friends with most of the old people and the children of the village. Philippe began to show himself as something of a philosopher also, but with the marvellous child-likeness that made him the centre of many a joke. His slide-collection became a way to entertain others, something for which both he and Raphael had a capacity and great longing. L'Arche grew quickly as many came to share in the rich quality of this simple living and working together.

Only months after its beginning, it had become evident that l'Arche was not just a place of refuge for the handicapped; it was a community of mutual respect, where all could progress together towards greater wholeness. They worked together in the various workshops that were created, or in the gardens, or in maintaining the homes with all the household duties. A few managed to hold down jobs in local factories, hotels and the like. Others lived at home or in foster-homes, and came to share especially in the daily work, because they were unable to work in 'normal' society. 'The aim of the community', however, as Vanier began to formulate it, 'was not to be efficiency and productivity, but human and spiritual progress, which necessarily ought to be founded on openness and mutual respect, and the desire to see others achieve the greatest possible progress'.

L'Arche was indeed created to bring comfort to the afflicted: those profoundly scarred by mental retardation and all the deeper wounds of rejection that this entails. Truly to bring comfort to the afflicted means to draw them out of their affliction. There is no way to draw someone out of the affliction of rejection except by ceasing to reject him, and trying truly to accept him as an equal, as a friend. Perhaps this is a paradigm for most comforting-the-afflicted relationships, since almost all human afflictions are either directly those of rejection or bring rejection as an inevitable consequence. Surely this is true for those afflicted with serious physical disabilities, for the aged, the alcoholics, the imprisoned, the poor, the various minority groups within countries, and even for entire countries that form what we call the Third World.

It is relatively easy to create institutions to care for the handi-

capped, precisely as handicapped. In the richer nations these institutions are usually highly efficient and antiseptically clean. The distinction between the cared-for and the caring is very clearly defined, sometimes with the aid of uniforms, lest anyone should momentarily be confused and treat one or the other as equals. The financial costs here may be quite high, but the cost in human and personal giving is kept fairly low. The staff tend to hold themselves back from becoming too closely identified with the inmates. They are often very dedicated and generous people, but the structure of the institution dictates this holding back from over-involvement. For if the primary aim of an institution is to care for this or that particular group of afflicted, then the survival of that institution depends on its inmates always being there precisely as the cared-for, and its staff always being there as the caring. This works well in most hospitals, since there are always new patients coming along to fill the beds of those who respond to care to the point of ceasing to need care: that is, who cease to function according to this primary aim. However, most hospitals tend to deal very inadequately with dying patients, since they fail to respond to the caring, and so violate the primary aim of the institution. Also for the chronically ill there is a very deep suffering in such institutions, where they are condemned always to be the object of care and nothing more. It was in response to this suffering that Leonard Cheshire created his homes, where the chronically ill are no longer just the objects of care, but take an active role in the administration and direction of the home. Here they become persons with responsibility for their own lives and the lives of those with whom they share their home. I have yet to see a correction-institution that goes beyond being anything but a prison. The basic model is that of one group dedicated to maintaining another group as inferior to itself, as delinquent and in need of retention and correction. Only as minimal and condescending exceptions have I seen glimpses of another possible model in this area. This has been where prisoners have been allowed to function as persons who could use their own experiences of alienation and rejection to show their deep and tender compassion for other rejected people, such as seriously retarded children. Truly beautiful things have happened to both prisoners and the mentally handicapped in these situations.

To create an establishment that minimizes the total institutional dimensions of caring, one that seeks as much as possible to minimize the distinction between the caring and the cared-for, is to run some

very serious risks. This is precisely the challenge that the l'Arche homes try to meet. Jean Vanier claims that 'This folly is the very basis of our community: to accept to live with the handicapped and in a certain way to identify with them, without renouncing our responsibilities'. This may sound like an impossible ideal, and to some extent perhaps it is. But it is an ideal towards which the l'Arche homes struggle, and their success is certainly noteworthy.

There has been no lack of people wanting to come and live this adventure. After only eleven years there is now an international federation of some fifty l'Arche houses, mostly in France and Canada, but scattered too in many other parts of the world. Many of the assistants receive only board, lodging and pocket money, yet there are enough to provide a ratio of helpers to handicapped people which is nearly one-to-one. In the village of Trosly where the enterprise began, some three hundred people now come to work daily in its workshops and gardens from the fifteen or so ordinary houses scattered through the village and neighbouring villages, as well as from their parents' homes or foster-homes. Two other centres in France, La Merci in the Cognac district, and Ambleteuse near Boulogne, are becoming centres of similar size to that of Trosly. At the other end of the scale, in Calcutta, about a dozen people live virtually on a platform of the city's busiest railway station and work in a church basement. Then there is the tiny Kay Joseph in Haiti, which as yet has only a projected workshop, for perhaps the weaving of mats and baskets, on the front porch of their house. L'Arche takes its organizational form from the society in which it finds itself. Most of the communities get some government grants. In Copenhagen and Victoria (British Columbia), however, they support themselves by their own work. In Third World countries they tend to rely on the support of friends in richer countries.

All these communities are held together mainly by the bonds of friendship and by a common belief in the unique value of each individual, whatever label society may put on him, and by a common desire to create authentic community. They are each in their own way committed to this 'folly' of breaking down the barriers between 'rich' and 'poor', between the 'comforter', rich in physical and intellectual gifts and formation, and the 'afflicted', limited in their capacities to reason and to take responsibility for their own lives, and deeply marked by the wounds of rejection. One need not be a christian to live these values; but they are certainly the values of the gospel. They cannot easily be lived without the support of

deep faith and a life of prayer. For many of these communities, christian worship, and particularly the celebration of the Eucharist, is a focal point and source of daily nourishment. For almost all of them there is some form of daily prayer together, though this is not of obligation for everyone. In the homes in India, the prayer combines elements of the traditions of both the christians and the Hindus who compose these communities.

The communities try to remain very open to and involved with the surrounding neighbourhood and other parallel works, and to the wider world. They welcome visitors, who come in an almost disconcerting number. There is a quality of life here that seems to attract people. Visitors are struck immediately by the spirit of joy and simplicity. They are touched by the friendliness, openness and freedom of the handicapped people; and also the quality of their relationships with each other and the assistants – if you can tell the two groups apart. More than once, while I was living at Trosly, some visitor spoke to me in those condescending tones, 'and how are you today, and what do you do here?' I was always delighted to be considered one with my dear friends Raphael, Lucien and the others. And it helped me to understand their own anguish at being treated so often as some 'poor little thing' who has no sense of what life is all about. These people, in fact, have a very deep sense of what life is all about. It is they who primarily create the spirit of openness, welcome and joy in these communities. Being limited in their capacities to reason, with all that this implies with regard to organizing, planning and the like, they tend to be gifted with qualities of the heart, with freedom and spontaneity in expressing their feelings, with a desire to be with others rather than to compete with them, with a capacity to live more fully in the present moment. The unique gift of those whose powers of reasoning are limited, tends to be the gift of making friends, of creating community. These are gifts desperately needed in our technological societies, which place such a high priority on efficiency and economic success. The l'Arche communities are giving these people a chance to make their gift to society. In a very real way, minute and modest thought it may be, these communities are revealing that there is an option to the alienating tendencies of competition and excessive efficiency characteristic of consumer society. Vanier states it very strongly:

> More and more the world seems to be dividing itself into two. On the one hand there are those motivated by the accumulation of riches, by the need to possess, and by the need to dominate and be above others.

> On the other hand there are those who live in involuntary poverty and misery and who are in some way marginal to society (the aged, the handicapped of all kinds, the alcoholics, the mentally ill, and so forth, and those who live in misery in developing countries). Is not the great challenge of the day to create communities which by their joy and simplicity of life draw the 'rich' towards a life of greater simplicity and self-gift, and that draw the miserable towards a new hope? . . . Do we not need communities of those who choose poverty, happy to share their lives with the rejected, in order to create a bridge between the two worlds?

Truly to comfort the afflicted is somehow to become one with him in his affliction. For if I remain just the 'comforter', he must necessarily remain the 'comforted', the needy, the afflicted one. But to become one with him costs a great deal. If there is a spirit of joy that characterizes the spirit of l'Arche and quickly touches those who visit, there is also a deep suffering that one will begin to sense if one stays in a l'Arche community for any length of time. There is the suffering of the handicapped, who have often experienced very deep rejection, and are also condemned to a life of radical dependence on others. Most will never be sufficiently autonomous to marry and raise their own families. The awareness of this is a source of great suffering. They are indeed the poor in spirit who, because of their suffering, know their need for others, and often very explicitly their need for God. The assistants frequently discover that many of those whom our society rejects are, humanly speaking, very rich, and sometimes even more gifted than the assistants themselves. This is a humbling and purifying experience. Usually, they are forced to accept their radical equality with the handicapped, and hence a similar equality with everyone. If this is a suffering it is also a liberation. It helps them to accept themselves and others, for whom they are most simply and radically children of God, who some day will have to let go of everything and return to him. Once a person identifies with those who are rejected, he is freed from the fear of being rejected. Once he identifies with those who evidently bear the signs of death by their suffering, he is freed from the fear of death. Then the other, because he is different, is no longer a threat that turns one away in fear. The other, precisely because he is different, becomes a source of enrichment that can release great creativity. To enter into the world of my afflicted brother and become one with him is to discover a simple truth. I am indeed and always have been one with him. This is the truth that makes us free.

This truth is operative on a wider scale than just dealing with the handicapped person. One day I was walking in the hills above Porte-au-Prince. They were speckled with the shacks of the desperately poor. These shacks had no panes in the windows and no doors on the doorways. There was nothing to keep out the intruders because they were too poor to have anything to lose. The families were usually clustered outside beneath some tree or bush that provided a little protection from the scorching sun. They would all smile and wave at me as I passed. Their simplicity and openness reminded me of many of the 'poor' I had come to know at l'Arche. Then I passed a convent, a beautiful white establishment built by a congregation of Sisters from Canada who were, I learned, doing some very fine work for the people there. I was struck by the high stone wall topped by pieces of broken glass to keep out all intruders. Such a contrast with the openness of the homes of the truly poor! The wall was necessary because these Sisters had something that others did not, they had something to lose. So they were imprisoned behind their wall, which made it clear that all were not welcome here. That evening a taxi driver in the city, discovering I was from Canada, asked me: 'why is it so hard to get into your country?' I knew that our immigration laws were equivalent to that convent wall topped with broken glass. In the face of the Third World, our country has so much to lose that we have had to wall ourselves in.

When we as individuals discover ways truly to comfort the afflicted close to us, the aged, the lonely, the handicapped of all kinds who often live in our own homes and communities, we discover a freedom that brings deep joy even perhaps in the midst of great suffering. We also discover something of our own poverty and loneliness, and maybe the possibility of letting others comfort us. When we as social classes or groupings discover ways of truly comforting the minority groups around us, we will discover something of the poverty and limitations of our own groupings. We will also tap unsuspected well-springs of life and creativity. Surely, this is beginning to be discovered with respect to the black communities and the native people of North America. When we in the wealthy nations of the world discover ways to comfort the afflicted nations of the Third World, we will become very much less comfortable ourselves. We will discover how much we have been enslaved by our wealth and false need for comfort. And finally we will experience a most liberating truth which we now only know in theory: that all men are brothers and God is truly our Father.