

# RELIGION AND JUSTICE

## The Faith-Based, Intercultural Peacemaking of L'Arche and the Community of Taizé

*Carolyn Chau*

**I**N 1942, AT THE HEIGHT of the Second World War, a community named Taizé was founded in France by Roger Schütz, a man now known around the world simply as Brother Roger. He believed that if a community of Christian brothers lived according to the gospel, in simplicity, worshipping and following the call of the Holy Spirit, the world might begin to see that peace is truly possible.

In 1964, also in France, a Canadian Roman Catholic layman named Jean Vanier created a home for two men with disabilities. Through the experience of founding a home in which the men could live with those who cared for them, Vanier discovered a source of God's light in people with disabilities, and became much more deeply aware of God's love for each of us in the midst of our weakness.

Both of these communities have gone on to become worldwide movements, acknowledged by many as genuine witnesses to the gospel and to peace in the world. Most recently, Vanier's work has been recognised by the John Templeton Foundation, with the award of the 2015 Templeton Prize which 'honors a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works'.<sup>1</sup> No one doubts that L'Arche has been a force for social innovation. At the most basic level, it has been a leader in the care of persons in society who live with physical and developmental disabilities. Before the establishment of L'Arche communities, it was not often thought that such people could become important contributors to social and human flourishing; they were seen, at best, as

<sup>1</sup> See <http://templetonprize.org/purpose.html>, accessed 23 May 2015, and the text of Vanier's acceptance speech at <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2015/05/20/the-disabled-are-not-a-punishment-of-god-but-rather-a-path-towards-god/>, accessed 25 May 2015.



*Jean Vanier and the L'Arche community at Trosly*

being worthy of basic care and assistance, but they were not considered to be prophets, teachers and sources of God's light. The fact that L'Arche began, and that Vanier learnt to see and to name the deep need and capacity and gift for friendship that persons with disabilities have, has gradually enabled society, and the Christian tradition in which Vanier is rooted, to recognise these people's worthiness not only of institutional care, but also of a real life: a life of work, celebration, responsibility and creativity. In many ways, this is in itself a form of peacemaking.

Taizé has helped make the path of ecumenism a kind of reality—religious communities of countless different kinds incorporate the music of Taizé in their worship—and has helped to bring hundreds of thousands of young people into church to sing and pray over the past seventy years.

However, these movements, inspired by Christ, are also innovators in the work of fostering intercultural peace. A couple of years ago I visited both communities, and had the privilege of speaking with Jean Vanier, assistants at the original L'Arche in Trosly, a few of the brothers at Taizé and some of the young people who were visiting the Taizé community about their understandings of peace and peacemaking. Based on this experience, I should like to explore how each community, in its way, has found a

distinctive, innovative path that shows us how peace may be achieved. L'Arche and Taizé together exemplify insights about peace, rooted ultimately in Christian beliefs about God, community and the human person, that invite our societies to reimagine what work for peace entails.

### **What Is L'Arche?**

L'Arche began in Trosly, a small village in the north of France, as a single home, where Jean Vanier lived with two men he effectively rescued from a nearby institution. Vanier has often recounted the story of how he left a career in the navy and then in academia to join his friend Père Thomas Philippe in France because he felt called to live a life more deeply reflective of the gospel.

Père Thomas was a chaplain at an institution for people with mental disabilities. The circumstances in which people with disabilities lived in France at the time when L'Arche was founded were tragic and horrifying for Vanier. The idea of L'Arche, according to Bénédicte Millet, a long-serving member of staff at Trosly, was *to provide a normal place to live for people who have been excluded: a place of warmth, a familial place, a place for the future, and for projects, for people who have no place.*

In his accounts of the genesis of L'Arche, Vanier makes it plain that he began the adventure with Père Thomas with a great deal of naïveté. Eventually, over time, Vanier discovered through caring for the men who lived with him that they sought much more than he had anticipated. Initially Vanier understood his duties in a very traditional way: he made sure that the men were fed and clothed. Only very gradually did he realise that the men sought friendship with him; they were unique persons who had preferences of their own about how to do things.

Over time, Vanier came to see how persons with disabilities reveal the truth about who we really are: precious, unique and unconditionally loved, despite our weaknesses and our brokenness. The communities of L'Arche believe that persons with mental and physical disabilities have a unique gift for the communion described in the Gospels. They are close to Jesus and have a way, in the transparency of the cry of their heart, to help us to hear the universal human cry for love.

*When we begin to see how that cry can either be answered in a way that does violence to others or in a way that allows life to flourish, and when we come to recognise the violence in our own hearts, it is then, and only then, that we have begun the journey of L'Arche.*

At the heart of L'Arche's mission is to share life with those who have developmental disabilities. This sharing includes eating together, doing chores together, praying together and celebrating together. There is a lot of celebration and laughter at L'Arche. However the life is not always easy. People with disabilities often come from contexts of neglect and abuse. An assistant from Canada, who has been with L'Arche in Vancouver for over thirty years, shares her experience of the journey of L'Arche:

*Jane talked about her 'teacher' Edith: 'Many of these people come from institutions and have been neglected or abused, so they can have a lot of anger, a lot of violence. Edith would bang her head against the wall at 2.00 in the morning sometimes, and she wouldn't stop. And when this banging starts you want to hit her.' Jane felt the violence in herself, which was shocking at first. 'What happens is as you help these people you discover what is difficult in you ... the suffering in you comes out. And you're helped by them. As we grow together, we find we need each other.' Through Edith, Jane became conscious of the violence in her own heart, which allowed Jane to begin to work through it.*

Life together with people with disabilities is a risk. When asked what he thought were the sources of conflict and division in our world today, Vanier responded, *Love of victory, love of violence, love of the clan; these are the roots of conflict today.* He speaks of how the idea of L'Arche was not always welcomed in the beginning and how, even today, seeing persons with disabilities as precious and as prophets is not accepted by many people. 'Breaking into the new', as Vanier terms it, is the real challenge of peacemaking.

Moreover diversity makes the challenge even greater. Within a year of L'Arche's foundation, a new community began in Bangalore, which was predominantly Hindu. A charter was drawn up to help communities

**How to  
welcome  
differences of  
all kinds**

to understand how to live together the newness that they were now living. Eventually, other communities developed, in England, Canada, Burkina Faso, Bethlehem. People of different Christian traditions were drawn to share in the life of L'Arche, as were those from all over the world who were concerned with the welfare of people with disabilities. L'Arche learnt, as its history unfolded, how to welcome differences of all kinds: people from different cultures and religious traditions, religious people and nonreligious people, single people and, eventually, families.

L'Arche has gone on to become an international federation of over 140 communities around the world, and Vanier believes that the work of L'Arche is indeed 'the work of peace'. L'Arche does not bring people of different backgrounds together with the explicit goal of working together for peace, in the way that bodies such as the UN do. Rather, it goes about building peace in the world through welcoming people to come and live a community life of risk, fragility and friendship, centred on the care of those who are most weak and fragile in our society. In and through the invitation to encounter personally the one who is poor and different, peace emerges.

Another assistant at Trosly said, *The person with disabilities is at the heart of the community. We find our unity in and through them. There are lots of differences between persons, but the person who needs us brings unity.* When we open ourselves to relationship with the vulnerable, weak person, he or she becomes a way of befriending the weakness in each of us, and overcoming hostility to those who are different.

L'Arche thus helps societies to see that transformation at the personal level is part of the work of peace. We cannot be content with agreeing not to kill each other; according to Vanier, we need to address our need to prove we are the greatest, to assert the superiority of our culture over that of others. Confronting the love of violence and victory in oneself is the beginning of becoming a peacemaker.

### **Forms of Fruitfulness**

Undertaking the long journey of personal growth brings various forms of fruitfulness. While Jean Vanier is Roman Catholic, and L'Arche communities are understood as a form of lay ecclesial movement within the Church, L'Arche also has in its international federation ecumenical and interfaith communities.

L'Arche did not set out to be an innovator in the area of resolving religious conflict, but by following the Spirit in its mission, it has in fact become a source of human relationships of friendship and solidarity between persons belonging to religious traditions that are often at war with one another. An Iraqi assistant in Trosly, who has been with L'Arche for over twenty years, speaks about her time in the Bethlehem community, where Christians and Muslims live together, and also about the situation in Syria and Lebanon now, where L'Arche assistants come together, passing through several checkpoints daily, risking their safety to work in

the workshops with the core members. She speaks, too, of her experience of living together with an assistant from the US in the wake of the Iraq war, living together and sitting down together at a common table with someone who would have been an enemy, but for their call to serve persons with disabilities at a certain point in both their lives.

L'Arche brings people of different cultural backgrounds together in and through the call of caring for persons with developmental disabilities. Intercultural relationship has happened because the original mission of L'Arche, which centres on showing persons with developmental disabilities that they are precious, has a ripple effect. The trust and recognition at the heart of L'Arche, that the one who is different is a gift, and that recognition of each person as precious is paramount, enables people to meet one another in their difference. Helping people to 'get out of the clan' is the method of peacemaking at L'Arche. In bringing down the walls of separation between people by allowing them to meet and by enabling the inner journey to unfold, L'Arche is a peace movement.

### **What Is Taizé?**

Taizé is a monastic ecumenical community of Christian brothers who seek to live according to the gospel. Today there are about 100 brothers from 25 countries around the world who live a life of simplicity together in the French village of the same name. Their life is organized around prayer. Initially, Brother Roger, who was a Swiss citizen, bought a house in Taizé to harbour Jewish refugees who were hiding from the Nazi regime. At the time some parts of France, including Taizé, were treated as neutral by the Nazi occupiers, and officials did not search there for Jews. Brother Roger did this until he was warned that it was no longer safe, and advised to return to Switzerland for a period. In Switzerland, he and a couple of other men decided to form a community, and they returned to Taizé to do so.

The basic vision of Taizé is to be 'a parable of community'.<sup>2</sup> The First World War, during which his grandmother had provided help for refugees, had a great influence on Brother Roger. With the start of the Second World War, he became convinced that all that could be said about peace had been said and all that could be thought about peace had been thought. The only thing left to convince the world was the

<sup>2</sup> Roger Schütz, *A Heart that Trusts: Journal 1979–1981* (London: Mowbray, 1986), 113.



*Brother Roger (right), shortly after Taizé was founded*

example of a life of peace. The community Brother Roger founded set out to model a life of peaceful communion. In the words of Brother Benoit, a younger community member who has been at Taizé for about ten years, *We want to live a parable of community to find out what presence of Christ can mean to people who want to be reconciled to each other.* Although ecumenism was not the first intuition it soon followed. The brothers who lived together were from both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions.

Prayer at Taizé is essentially the liturgy of the hours, but because of Brother Roger's love of music, and the various different backgrounds of the brothers, musical pieces from the French and German traditions became incorporated into their worship. Then, in the mid-1960s, the young people came. This was not anticipated by Brother Roger, and according to Brother Emile, a Canadian who has been at Taizé for over thirty years, his initial reaction was one of reticence. Brother Roger was concerned that their interest in Taizé was a fad that would soon end, and that they might disturb the community of the brothers. But the young people kept coming, and the question for discernment became how would it be possible to continue to live in the community and also to welcome them.

In light of the experience of Vatican II, Brother Roger, who was invited to the council and attended all four sessions, felt that something

more was needed at Taizé. He announced the Council of Youth, which was how the meetings started. Young people who are only seeking to experience Taizé briefly tend to come to Taizé for one week. The week is filled with the regular rhythm of communal sung prayer several times a day, meals together and work together. Each week ends with a Service of Light on the Friday, which celebrates the resurrection of Christ, the apex of Christian hope. Part of the evolution of the prayer chants into different languages arose out of Brother Roger's desire for the young people who came from all over Europe to participate in the singing, rather than just observing the brothers.

Today, hundreds of thousands of young people make a pilgrimage to Taizé each year. Taizé chant, which is developed by the brothers, is sung in as many as 25 different languages. Life at Taizé remains simple. The food is simple: it is prepared simply and eaten simply. At Taizé one receives a bowl, a plate, a spoon and a tray; there are no other utensils. Showers are taken in stalls within a common bathroom. Most pilgrims sleep in tents, though older pilgrims have the option of staying in dormitory rooms which have eight beds to a room. Everyone in the community has a job, from food preparation and distribution, to washing dishes, to cleaning the bathrooms. The brothers do not accept donations, but sustain themselves with the work of their hands, selling pottery, craftwork and musical recordings in the community's gift shop.

In addition to the community at Taizé itself, there are Taizé brothers in Kenya, Senegal, Bangladesh, Korea and Brazil. The idea is that one needs to be with people in order to understand them from the inside. The community reaches out in what are known as Pilgrimages of Trust. These have been held in the USA, Bosnia, India (at Chennai, Kolkata and Mumbai), the Philippines, South Africa, France, Bolivia, Kenya and Rwanda, often in places where there has been social division owing to cultural bias, racism, poverty or war. Taizé was invited to both Kenya and Rwanda as part of an effort to bring reconciliation and healing to those places.

Taizé also convenes European meetings each year between Christmas and New Year, for five days during which young people are hosted by families in the city where the meeting is held. Prayer and meals take place at an exhibition centre; in the afternoon, there are workshops on themes such as faith, art, music and social justice, translated into some twenty languages. Their host families are waiting for the pilgrims at the end of the day. For Brother Emile the meetings are,

*... a lot about discovering that there is a place for me ... you don't have to fit into a format, there is a place for you. On New Year's Day there is Prayer of Peace and then a party, but it is different: it is a sharing of cultures. On January 1st, each pilgrim has lunch with his or her host family. This tradition has been happening for 35 years.*

In 1992, 106,000 young people took part in the Vienna meeting, though around 40,000 is more typical.

At Taizé, one opens oneself to God's time and God's peace through regular prayer each day. Life at Taizé begins with the realisation that God's reconciliation with us requires us to be reconciled to one another, and that God has already offered this gift to us in and through God's Spirit. The communities of Taizé believe that welcoming everyone, and going out to live with people in their home countries, living a life that is immersed in an endless song of love and trust in God, is how we will have the strength for the long road to peace. According to Brother Emile, there is:

*... no pretension to have an answer. You go into complex situations with empty hands. Faith pushes you to do that. You believe that God is at work. The second part—you believe the Kingdom of God is there. If you invite them to discussion, to pray, to eat simply together, share cultures—and the international context helps—then you realise that prayer, simplicity of life, is really effective. Sharing personal relationships, being together in joy .... This is how Taizé builds peace.*



© Brother Emile, Taizé

Taizé European meeting

### ***Shared Innovation***

L'Arche and Taizé build peace through breaking down the barriers that separate people and cultures in a very personal and concrete way. My initial hypothesis was that the innovation shared by these communities was the manner in which they build bridges between cultures by fostering friendships between individuals from those cultures. However, I have found through my visits to the original communities in France and interviews with their members that, in many ways, the freshness of their approach to peacemaking is more basic than that. While it is true that they build peace by allowing people to meet one another, the intercultural relationships that have sprung up are an offshoot or fruition of a more basic approach of life together of radical hospitality and trust in God. Three aspects seem to characterize the communities' particular approach to peace: peace requires people to meet and to be together; peace takes time; and, above all, peace is a gift from God and involves trust. Their form of peacemaking involves facilitating encounter: with God, with ourselves, with one another.

In a world where peacemaking is often treated as a technical term naming a particular function exercised by national departments of defence, it is radical and innovative to effect peace through profound personal hospitality to the stranger. The innovation of L'Arche and Taizé is that they dare to propose that peace happens through trust and through being vulnerable to the other, through becoming open to the gift of difference that inevitably emerges in living with and being with others. In the process of friendship, peace happens organically, often unmediated by words, though not without difficulty.

For both Jean Vanier and Brother Roger, their communities of peace and of peacemaking were the fruit of following. They did not foresee that those communities would become what they are today. Temporal peace is not only human, but also divine. In an important way, peace is also about celebration. When asked what peace meant to her, Marie-Jeanne, a core member of L'Arche community at Trosly, said that it was the party we had all had together the previous evening. Widad, the Iraqi assistant who had lived in the community in Bethlehem, said that peace is about living with joy.

Rather than believing the notion underlying conflict—that the stranger is a threat—these communities practise radical hospitality to the stranger, to every stranger, such that they build roots in the human

heart of a deeper ‘force of loving kindness’, which is the real antidote to war and genocide. The innovation of these communities is that there is a profound openness to what is different and a faith that they will be enriched by their encounter with those who are different. L’Arche and Taizé refuse to take shortcuts to attaining peace. It is, as Vanier says, a ‘long road’. Peace is not the achievement of a discussion or negotiation around a conference table but, rather, the arduous work of personal conversion.

This is not to say that there is no room in peacemaking for official treaties negotiated by the high-ranking officials of the world’s nations. The aim of looking to the signs of L’Arche and Taizé is simply to point out another way to understand peace and peacemaking, a way that is more human, more embodied and, arguably, more stable, in that it is the peace that works to overcome the roots of conflict in human hearts. The assumed working definition of peace in the world of national security is the absence of violence (not killing, maiming, or raping), but this definition is in many ways inadequate to clarifying what the life and work of peace really entail. Communities such as L’Arche and Taizé seem to be able to recognise that the real source of all conflict, whether political, cultural or familial, is the conflict of the human heart. The real healing of conflict comes, then, when people are healed within, in their hearts. That happens when we meet in the Spirit of God in community, in a context where the Spirit of God is welcomed and is the One who guides us to encounter one another at the level of the heart.

***To encounter  
one another  
at the level of  
the heart***

### ***A Parable and a Sign***

When asked about how L’Arche might help to meet the challenge of peace in our world today, an assistant quickly clarified with a quotation from Vanier, that the call of L’Arche is to be a sign and not a solution.<sup>3</sup> Taizé’s aspiration to be ‘a parable of community’ expresses a similar humility.

These signs and parables show us that true peace cannot come without truly meeting the other and welcoming the other as precious. It cannot come without honesty about one’s own violence. Peacemaking requires a spirit of trust, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit and life in the Spirit. Peace takes time more than it takes strategy. Through the human, through

<sup>3</sup> See Jean Vanier, *The Heart of L’Arche: A Spirituality for Every Day* (London: SPCK, 2013), 10–11.

communion rather than the head alone, and ideas, peace is the long road of working to live together. Building peace happens through forming peacemakers, who are able really to encounter another culture, even an 'enemy' culture, with joy and welcome.

The original and intentional goals of L'Arche and Taizé were not to create opportunities for intercultural exchange, but, in living an incredibly fragile life of radical hospitality to all who would want to discover what the community is about, they have enabled people to open themselves to others of different cultural and religious backgrounds, and, in so doing, are helping to build bridges between warring groups in our societies today, 'one heart at a time'.

*Carolyn Chau* is an assistant professor at King's University College, at Western University in London, Ontario. She completed her theological training at Regis College, University of Toronto and Yale Divinity School. She has worked as a chaplain, lived in a L'Arche community, and serves as a theologian on the Roman Catholic–Evangelical ecumenical dialogue for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.