

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Aug. 29 & 30, 2015

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L'Arche of Syracuse
All Saints Parish, Syr, NY.

“What you do for the least...”

Hello. Peace be with you. My name is Bob and I have been with L'Arche for the past 27 years. I've been a community leader, a regional coordinator and director of vocations for L'Arche USA. Today I have the great honor to be the Pastoral Minister for L'Arche Syracuse. I want to tell you about L'Arche.

The word L'Arche is a French word. L'Arche means the Ark, like Noah's Ark. The Ark is a place of welcome, and of refuge from the storm. It is a place of great diversity. You really can't get more diverse than the Ark. There are two of every animal on earth. It is also a place of covenant relationship and of promise. Like the rainbow, L'Arche is a sign of hope.

L'Arche started in a small village in France 50 years ago. At that time Jean Vanier, our founder, welcomed two men from an institution to come share life with him in a small home in the village of Trosly-Breau. There are now 146 L'Arche communities in 35 countries. There are 18 L'Arche communities in the USA. L'Arche Syracuse started in 1974 and is now 40 years old. Our communities are made up of people with and without developmental disabilities sharing life (working, living, praying, celebrating and being) together in communities that belong to an International Federation.

Our mission is amazing. Our mission is unbelievable. Our mission is to reveal the giftedness of persons with developmental disabilities. What we have discovered is that when individuals with developmental disabilities are put at the center of relationships; when we enter into real, sincere, honest, mutual relationships with our people, everyone is changed. Transformation takes place.

Over and over again people come to join us and they say I am here to help. I am here to serve. I am here to make a difference. And that is all true. But after a period of time those people say to me, I am the one being helped, changed, and called to growth. I see now that our people have gifts to share and something very important to offer. They have gifts to share with me and with our world and with our churches. L'Arche is a sign of hope.

Our founder is a philosopher and spiritual writer named Jean Vanier. He recently received the Templeton award. This award is given to a person who makes a contribution to the spirituality of humankind.

In giving the award, Templeton noted that Vanier discovered those people who society typically considers the weakest enable the strong to recognize and welcome their own vulnerability. In responding to this award he said:

“(The people of L'Arche) have brought me so much over the past 50 years, and have taught me more than all those teachers and professors in schools and universities that I have attended. They have taught

me about what it means to be human and about how our societies can be transformed to become more peaceful and unified.”

Vanier, who has a degree in Aristotle and taught in Universities, is saying people with disabilities taught him what it means to be human and how our world can become unified and peaceful.

L'Arche is not just a group home for persons with disabilities it is a sign of hope. L'Arche is a sign that when the littlest are put at the center, our society and our own hearts can become places of peace.

Our society has made a huge mistake- we have put the rich and famous at the center. That leads to gaps and to conflict. The greater the gap between those who have and those who have not, and the more potential there is for conflict. Put the littlest at the center and find hope. Put the so called littlest at the center and find the reign of god.

I want to say something about Eugene, one of the first people L'Arche welcomed in 1974.

Eugene was one of our founding core-persons. He had been in the institution long enough to have lost touch with his family and long enough to feel the sting of institutionalization. When he was welcomed from the Developmental Center the paperwork indicated his IQ was around 20. He seemed almost non-verbal and had some extreme mood swings.

It didn't take long to discover his love for cooking and baking. He liked to bake cookies and was good at watching over the grill on those summer nights when the home cooked out in the yard. We also discovered his affinity for animals and his love of prayer. He never really liked the large numbers of people at prayer nights, but he did love God.

One night at our weekly Tuesday prayer meeting the theme of the night was that “L'Arche is impossible.” We were discussing the impossibility of living in so many relationships and the many difficulties with our model and the demands of living in community. Near the end of evening the prayer question was presented: What can we do? Eugene, who had not said a word during the evening, looked up and said so simply and so succinctly, “We need the Holy Spirit.” The whole room turned and looked and Eugene. They all knew he had nailed it.

This man, who was labeled with an IQ of 20, not only knew exactly what we were talking and praying about, but he showed deep wisdom in leading us all to the answer we needed to hear. Eugene, “the client,” had become Eugene the Teacher.

The message of L'Arche is that every person is important. Every person is of unique and sacred value. People who have developmental disabilities often possess many gifts of the heart. They can be open and honest, and spontaneous. I can say, along with many others, living in L'Arche has made me more patient and gentle. Sharing life with people with a disability can open and change our hearts. Their acceptance empowers us to be more loving and compassionate.

Jesus is so clear when he says whatever you do for the least you do for me. We are sharing life with Jesus.

In L'Arche we don't just feed people, we eat with them at the table!

In L'Arche we don't just care for people, we enter into mutual relationship with them!

We don't just teach people, we learn from them. They are our teachers.

L'Arche is a sign of hope.

“People with intellectual disabilities are not able to assume important roles of power and of efficacy.” We have a culture that is about winning and success but our people's fundamental cry is for a relationship, for love. If we get in touch with our fundamental cry we will find it is the same.

As Jean Vanier writes: “They are essentially people of the heart. When they meet others they do not have a hidden agenda for power or for success. Their cry, their fundamental cry, is for a relationship, a meeting heart to heart. It is this meeting that awakens them, opens them up to life, and calls them forth to love in great simplicity, freedom and openness. When those ingrained in a culture of winning and of individual success really meet them, and enter into friendship with them, something amazing and wonderful happens. They too are opened up to love and even to God. They are changed at a very deep level. They are transformed and become more fundamentally human.”

L'Arche has taught me the so called strong need the so called weak. I'm thankful to our core people and to the community of L'Arche because I am the one called to deeper tenderness and compassion.

L'Arche is a sign of hope.

Our people are able to say I need you. They teach us it is Ok to say I need you. In our society it is hard to admit I need another. Once again our people are the teachers. I'm here today to say we, L'Arche, needs you. We have had a death in the community and had two of our core people in the hospital. We get no money from our funders when this happens. We need help with funding our spiritual activities and we need help with funding our support of our sister communities in Latin America. We need you to live these relationships and our mission. We also invite you to join us, to be in relationship with us at prayer or potluck or in any way you would choose. Thank you.

Peace to you.