

Trosly, June 2005

A few weeks ago we were in Assisi for the meeting of the Family of L'Arche: 350 delegates from all the L'Arche communities throughout the world. A radiant sun warmed our hearts and spirits in this city of "Il Poverello", the poor one. We felt the presence of Francis and Clare. This gathering in Assisi at this moment was prophetic. L'Arche is at a turning point. We realise more and more the challenges facing L'Arche. So many changes have taken place in our societies. We need to rediscover how to live L'Arche today. Our communities, our shared life with people who are fragile and vulnerable, want to be places of mutual friendship, affection and commitment. That means that we have to respond to state requirements and be competent; competence and friendship call forth one another.

Francis was transformed from a rich, young man into "Il Poverello". His transformation took time. A decisive moment in his growth was his encounter with people with leprosy. At that time lepers were rejected and separated from the rest of society. They symbolised all that was dirty and despicable. In his *Testament*, written just before his death, Francis tells how it was the Lord Himself who led him to the lepers and that after he had taken care of them, what had seemed bitter to him before was turned into something gentle and warm for his body and heart..

Another decisive moment was in the church of San Damiano, when he heard Jesus call to him from the Cross: "Francis, go and rebuild my church that has fallen into ruins". Il Poverello took these words literally and, with a few companions, began the physical labour of rebuilding the dilapidated church of San Damiano. Later he discovered a deeper meaning to these words: he was called to rebuild and reform the Church of his time that was ridden with scandals of power and wealth.

Two years later, he received his mission, when he heard the words of Jesus in Matthew's gospel calling his disciples to go out into the world and announce the Kingdom of God, in poverty, with no money, no spare clothes. That filled his heart with a tremendous joy. He knew then what God wanted of him. Under the guidance of God, Francis rebuilt and reformed the Church of his time and helped people to rediscover the way of the gospel, of the beatitudes.

We also believe that L'Arche was born of God through the encounter of Père Thomas, myself, Raphaël and Philippe. Meeting with people with learning disabilities transforms us and makes our communities a sign for our society, a sign that peace and love are possible. We too have received a call to rebuild the Church and to work for unity between churches and between all people. We too have been sent forth on a mission today, with all our limits and fragilities, to announce the beauty and importance of people with disabilities, the importance of each person.

For me Saint Clare represents all those inside and outside l'Arche, sometimes hidden in monasteries or on beds of pain, who pray for us . In all our needs and shortages, we cry out to God and God hears the cry of the poor.

Much was given during this meeting in Assisi. It would be good to read the talks on the mission of l'Arche today given by Gerald Arbuckle, a Marist priest, Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. Each one was very affirming of l'Arche.

We left Assisi more conscious that l'Arche is a family brought together by God. God continues to watch over us so that we become even more a sign for our times. God will give us the wisdom and the strength we need to meet the new challenges. We had the joy of renaming Jean-Christophe and Christine as International Coordinators. We expressed our thanks to Colin and said Good bye. Mireya from Honduras was named new International Board President.

The meeting in Assisi was an important time for me but also a bit tiring. It was such a joy for me to see that our communities want to remain faithful to the initial inspiration of l'Arche lived out in new ways. The world has changed so much!

With my 76 years I feel more fragile and have to be careful. I am happy to use these last years of my life to announce the vision of Jesus: his love for the weak and the poor. I love spending time in my foyer "Le Val Fleuri". Before I used to carry responsibility for the foyer, taking care of each one. Now, I am touched by the way each one cares for me, giving me the best chair in the room, suggesting that I get some rest or read the newspaper instead of doing the dishes, etc. etc. I am happy to give formation sessions for L'Arche and Faith and Light and to have more time for prayer and to work on myself, so that I may grow in love, patience and truth.

In spite of my vulnerability, I was still able to travel to Chile, Madagascar, Portugal and Lebanon where I gave retreats. I met many families that had been transformed by Faith and Light. Mothers who had lived great pain at the birth of their child with disabilities and known anguish and rejection, testified to how Faith and Light is a place of resurrection for them and for their families. As I listened to them, I remembered the words of God through the prophet Jeremiah: "I will change their mourning into joy" (Jer. 31:13).

The death of John Paul II affected me more than I expected. I knew and loved him personally and felt that he understood, loved and supported l'Arche and Faith and Light. Benedict XVI is, I sense, a spiritual son of John Paul II and will continue his work. He will be a good shepherd who will nourish the flock. John Paul II was extraordinary in the way he called people of his church to be for both "rooted" and "open". We are all called to be rooted in our faith, in the gospel, in our particular church, and at the same time open to other churches, other religious traditions, other men and women of good will and to discover and appreciate the gifts of each one.

Isn't that a question for each one of us and for each one of our communities? How to be rooted in our Christian faith, in our love of Jesus, in our specific church and also be open to others who do not share the same faith; to meet and listen to them and receive their gifts.

I was also deeply affected by the fire at “La Vigne”. Anne-Lise and Michel lost their lives in it. We do not yet know the cause. Anne-Lise and Michel were deeply loved and their death has left a great wound, great pain in us all.

L’Arche and Faith and Light are founded on pain. We are called to welcome those who suffer from rejection and disabilities. To create community together, with the strong and the weak, communities of faith and thus be a sign for our world. We will always be fragile communities. We are learning to live together with the pain, to welcome it, accept it and to respond to it, to change pain into joy and to make it prayer.

In many ways we are like the poor, crying out to God. Our needs are great, especially our need for people who want to share their lives and be committed with us in order to be healed and transformed by those that society puts aside.

There is so much more I would like to share but most of all I want to share my gratitude for l’Arche and Faith and Light, for the way they are deepening and growing, often in poverty. I would also like also to share with you my hope.

Much love,

Jean