

Dear Friends,

At present I am in the monastery at Orval: a gentle time of quiet, of peace, of prayerfulness. A time to assimilate all that I have lived these last few months and particularly Barbara's death. I still have difficulty realising that she has gone.

Bill Clarke was able to be with her a day before she died. She was so present at the Eucharist he celebrated in her hospital room. It was a real gift for her that he was able to be with her. For me, I had the grace of being with her, holding her hand, during her last two hours. She opened her eyes, looked at me, we prayed, her breathing and her heart stopped. Her departure was gentle and peaceful; she left without a groan, without a murmur, no word of complaint, no apparent agony; a falling asleep as a little child in the arms of God.

Her last breath was for Bill when he arrived to say mass a second time. Barbara died as she had lived, humbly and silently.

We were able to bring her body back to the community where we could all pray beside her. The evening before her funeral mass many of us from the five communities of l'Oise and many friends from near and far came together to celebrate her life, her gifts, to give thanks for all she had been for l'Arche since her arrival in August 1965 ...

She had been so much at the heart and the centre of all that happened as l'Arche grew throughout the world. She had welcomed so many of the new assistants and so many that remained, some going on to found new communities of l'Arche. Bill with nineteen priests who had come from different parts of the world celebrated her funeral mass. He reminded us how she had formed the hearts of many of us, the hearts of many of the priests.

Not long before her death she quoted someone who had said, I don't mind suffering as long as it doesn't hurt! She always had her sense of humour.

While here in Orval I have been reading the proofs of a book which is the collection of all my letters to our communities and friends since 1964 and which will be published in Canada (in English only for the moment) by Harper Collins in October of this year, 560 pages! The previous books edited by John Sumarah 10 years ago, contained the letters up until 1994.

The letters tell the story of the beginnings of l'Arche and of my many travels: sometimes a day by day account of l'Arche in India, in Haiti, Honduras, the Ivory Coast, and then in Burkina Faso ... It tells of the growth of l'Arche and of Faith and Light in our world. I was moved as I read the story of 43 years. In fact I was amazed by all that has happened. It seems so clear that God had been there guiding us all on this journey, in the discrete way that God does such things: giving the impression that we are doing it all, whereas in reality it is God who is shaping, guiding things through us all, inspiring people to be committed to the vision.

In our world where people with intellectual disabilities are so often seen as a problem and a hardship (which of course they can be for some parents) the book shows an expanding vision of how God has chosen them to be in all our churches, religions and in our very different cultures, a sign of contradiction but also a sign of peace. If in our world and in all our societies, we take the time to be with them and enter into a true relationship with them and with others who are weak and vulnerable such as old people and people who are mentally ill, they will change our hearts from being closed on themselves, hard and protective, to become open and loving towards them. In this way they can become our wonderful teachers: teachers who through and in places of belonging can help us understand the real purpose of our world and our lives: not to seek for ourselves more wealth, more power, more acclaim, more security and more pleasure, but to make of our societies a better place, where each person whatever his or her culture, abilities or disabilities can grow more humanly, in peace and in freedom. Where difference is not seen as a threat, but as a gift.

L'Arche and Faith and Light as they spread over the world can become a sign of a new world which is being born. But of course that means that all of us in all our communities must "work at it". This transformation towards a greater love does not come easily. It is not easy to open up to others in love and particularly to those with whom we have difficulties. It is never easy to become vulnerable to

them. It is not easy to be faithful to community life. We are all a bit frightened of being diminished and hurt. Obviously for this transformation we need the power which flows from our loving God, from the gift of the Holy Spirit. I wonder if Jesus today is not crying over our world as he did over Jerusalem as he said: “If you had but recognized the message of peace but it was hidden from your eyes ...” Luke 19, 41

Here in Orval I am relishing the new book by David Ford: “Christian Wisdom”. (Cambridge University Press) There is a beautiful chapter in it about the wisdom of l’Arche: communities founded upon interpersonal relationships, seeking their way through transforming relationships that can become a sign to our world.

In this book he seeks first of all the wisdom through scripture and quotes the words of Jesus: “Blessed are you Father, Lord of heaven and earth for having hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to mere babes. (Luke 10). David Ford calls us (and me) to read scripture for God, where we give thanks to God, to read scripture in a spirit of prayer, where we grow in communion with God and in greater love for our fellow human beings and where we discover more and more the purpose or the designs of God for our world of today. It is a beautiful book.

I am trying to follow these wise counsels of David and am reading the Bible in a new and deeper way and I am discovering the extraordinary goodness of God – a God who is full of tenderness for those who are down and out, weak and vulnerable, hungry for food and for affection, or who have been misled because they have never known the things of love. Scripture, as religion, can be a source of division: “My religion is better than yours” attitude gives a feeling of superiority. Or scripture and religion can be a link with God – a channel of communication with God which leads us to greater humility, poverty and unity with the God of love and to love others as God loves them. As I get older I realise how much I do not know about scripture and how little I understand, but there is a great desire to have my heart open to the wisdom of love.

In a year I will be 80! I can hardly imagine it. Time goes by so fast! I want to give thanks for all those who carry responsibilities in Arche and in Faith and Light today and in a particular way to Jean-Christophe Pascal and Christine McGrievy. Yes I feel that our two Federations are in good hands, heads and hearts. They are together growing in a common spirituality of love and of compassion. As founder (with Marie-Hélène in Faith and Light) it is such a gift to be able to withdraw in such peace and trust. Yes, God is good.

I will return to Trosly in a few days. Barbara is not there to type this letter. But with Christine McGrievy we will find new ways of how to live her departure. This year will be less full: I will continue giving retreats in La Ferme of Trosly” and now and again in other places. In September I will be in Lithuania and in October in Ukraine for retreats for Faith and Light and young people and for those who are preparing l’Arche. My joy is to announce how people with disabilities can be a source of transformation for us all and a road to the heart of God and so teachers of peace. And my great joy is to be in my home with Albert and André and so many others. The work of transformation of my heart continues day by day in the celebrations and the hurts of life.

I finish this letter with a word of thanks. So many of you wrote to me and to the communities to express your sorrow at the death of Barbara, to say how much she had meant to you. I am afraid I cannot answer each of you; I just want to say how much I was touched by so many letters (e-mails). Together all of us we can give thanks to God for her life. She will continue -discretely as before- to watch over me and us all.

Peace and love to each one of you,

Jean Vanier