

Trosly, January 2003

My heart is filled with gratitude in the beginning of this New Year. God is watching over L'Arche and Faith and Light with such kindness and solicitude. In September, we had an international meeting of Faith and Light in Rome where the national coordinators and chaplains from 65 countries met with the international council. It was good to come together for a time of nourishment, sharing and celebration. Viviane Le Polain (from Belgium, the mother of Laurent, with severe disabilities) was elected international coordinator and Roy Moussali (from Syria) as vice coordinator. The time is drawing near for my departure from the international councils of L'Arche and Faith and Light (as I said I would leave when I was 75). I am confident because I see that our two families are in good hands.

It is true though that they are quite fragile in many ways. They have a great need for God's Providence. But since they are founded on those who are weak and vulnerable, and who cry out for presence and community, they are quite solid. Our communities receive their strength from the fact that each member is precious, created *by* God and *for* God. Everything in our community life is geared to the human and spiritual growth of each member and their union with God. As I grow older, I love to be with the weaker members of our communities who are often so simple, loving and peaceful, accepting their reality. Maybe it is because I myself sense more my own weaknesses. Their presence gives me peace.

We are living in troubled times. So many people feel insecure and are worried for the future. Even as I write this letter people are frightened that the American government will soon be triggering off a new war in Irak...with what consequences?...for oil?... for the whole Middle East?...And in the midst of this vast world there are great numbers of very vulnerable people, with no work, no lodging, no money, no protection...

And yet we have just celebrated Christmas: "Do not be afraid. I bring you news of great joy...Today a Saviour has been born to you." And the angels sing: "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to all people of good will". War and peace. Despair and hope.

I have been reading Andrea Riccardi's book, "They died for their faith". It tells how hundreds of thousands, even millions, of men and women were imprisoned, tortured and killed for their faith during the twentieth century. The book shows the horror, the sadism, the brutality and the hatred of so many who sought to destroy those who believed in God, in human beings, in Love. At the same time this book reveals the beauty of all those men and women who dared to say "yes" to all that is deeply human, to freedom, to love and to God; to say "no" to evil. They refused to let themselves succumb to fear or to the pressure of ideologies which awaken, maintain and sustain hatred.

Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewish woman who died in Auschwitz in November 1943, never condemned those who were cowards or those who tortured others; she never felt sorry for herself and her tragic fate; she never despaired of the goodness and beauty of life: "I am ready", she wrote, "to accept everything, every place on earth where it pleases God to send me, ready also to give witness in all situations, even until death, to the beauty and meaning of this life. If life has become what it is, it is not God's fault but ours. We have

received all the possibilities for human fulfillment but we have not learned how to exploit these possibilities". In that desert of love, she discovered Love; she discovered hope; she discovered God. Etty and all the martyrs of our times have brought forth in me a new trust in the message of Christmas. Yes, there is truly a good news: "A Saviour has been born". Are we not all called to be "witnesses", (in Greek the word for "martyr" and "witness" is the same), witnesses of peace in our societies of extreme individualism, by living simply and by the way we share our lives with the weak? I remain deeply moved by John Paul II, this elderly pope, suffering from severe disabilities, who continually cries out: "Peace..." "Trust..".

L'Arche is faced with a number of difficulties today: lack of assistants, lack of money, pressure coming from new regulations of legal authorities who want to "normalise" us. But perhaps the greatest difficulties come from our own lack of confidence in l'Arche, in the gospel message, in the value of the people we have welcomed and in the value and importance of our community life. Isn't the lack of faith in what is truly human one of the greatest dangers of our times? The wealth and comfort in our Western countries may fill our pockets with money and our lives with opportunity but they can also fill our hearts with gloom and empty them of any desire to live in truth.

Personally I am quite well, thanks be to God. I am learning how to live my age (74) my weakness, my fatigue, my desires. I still have a lot to learn and to welcome! I am aware of the weaknesses and flaws in L'Arche and Faith and Light but I see even more their beauty and their meaning in God's plan.

I would like to thank each one who has written to me for Christmas and the New Year. I feel happy and my heart is full of trust and thanksgiving for this family God has given to us, for the deep bonds that unite us, the communion ...Together may we be faithful to love, to mutually supporting one another and become a tiny light of hope for our world.

Jean