

August 2003

Another year has passed and a new one is beginning. And here I am once again in the monastery for a month, time to offer up to God all that we have lived during this past year and all that will be given this year. When we look at the world over this last year, we see the painful situations in Israel and Palestine, the war in Irak, the fear of terrorism everywhere, the rise of religious fundamentalism, civil wars in Africa, poor countries becoming poorer. And if we look at L'Arche? In many countries there is a tension between the legislative and social requirements and the prophetic vision of our communities, a vision that is so essential to all of our lives. The shortage of assistants, of leaders, of financial resources.....the list of difficulties in our world and in our own communities would be quite long!

At the same time, more and more people are searching for a way of life that is more deeply human, closer to the ways of God and of the gospel; they refuse to let themselves be drowned in a sea of noise and agitation, in a sea of new technologies which develop often at the expense of personal relationships. And in front of all the outbursts of violence and conflict, more and more people are actively working for peace; more and more people are becoming committed to the weak. In L'Arche the "Identity and Mission" process has started off very well with small groups meeting to share their "sacred stories". Likewise members of Faith and Light are reflecting together on what is essential. In spite of all the shortages and needs, our communities continue to deepen and members with disabilities are growing in maturity...there is such a mysterious wisdom in them. I am touched also by the growth of assistants in their love of God and in their commitment to the gospel.

What is this "essential" of our communities? Presence: being present to people who are fragile; being present to one another. To live fully the present moment and not to hide behind some past ideals or future utopia. Our human hearts are thirsting for presence: the presence of a friend; the presence of someone who will listen faithfully, who does not judge but who understands, appreciates, and through love lowers the barriers of inner fear and anguish. This presence implies compassion and tenderness as well as competence.

Above all being present to God, listening to God. It is important not to be afraid or to feel paralysed in front of all that is so painful in our world and in our communities. We need to discover the presence of God in the actual reality of each day. God is not to be found in the ideal but is hidden in the poverty of the present moment, in all that is broken and inadequate in our communities and in our own hearts.

In July I went to Zimbabwe and South Africa where I was so warmly welcomed by our communities of Faith and Light and L'Arche. It was a joy to be with them again. . During my visit in Zimbabwe, I went to speak in a prison. I found myself in a courtyard facing a thousand men squatting on the ground, shoulder to shoulder, squeezed together row after row. I was very moved. (I would think that they were forced to come and listen to me!) I spoke to them about the L'Arche community in Harare, and about Moses, a boy with profound and multiple handicaps whom we have been welcomed into the community. I told them how important and precious Moses is because he is a human being created by God and for God; and that he needed to be accepted and loved if he was to flourish. I also reminded them that "each one of you too is precious and important. Maybe whilst you are here in prison you cannot be in touch with your families, but you can be in touch with God, with the God hidden in your hearts; and you can try to love those amongst you who are the "most suffering". They listened so intensely. I was not able to visit their cells nor see what they were given to eat but I could

well imagine the depth of suffering in that prison, a sign of the unbearable suffering present throughout our world.

The secret of peacemaking is to help each person discover that he or she is unique, God's dwelling place; that in each one of us there is a deeper self, a personal conscience, a sacred place, which allows us to be free, not governed by fear, and to live in communion with God, with universal truth and justice. We know peace when we discover that over and above all that is so terribly painful in our world, there is a God of Love who is close to each one of us.

I am still reading Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch, Jewish women killed in Auschwitz in 1943. At one point she writes in her diary that she cried out to God, asking Him to come and "fix" everything, to come and comfort all those who were suffering. Then she realized that "It is not me who needs God but God who needs me". God knocks on the door of each of our hearts. God waits patiently for us to open the door so that He can come and dwell within us and through us bring comfort to those in pain.

Here in the monastery I try to keep my heart open to God. It is my longing and hope that during this last period of my life I shall be able to live with my heart more and more open to God, and ready to welcome with tenderness and gratitude the changes and weaknesses that will come. Can I ask you to pray for this? The best gift that you could possibly give me for my 75th birthday is to pray for me, for each one of us, that we might live in communion one with another. I love to read again and again Paul's words in his letter to the Philippians: "Let us be of the same mind, have the same love, be in full accord and of one mind. Let us do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regard others as better than ourselves. Let each of us look not to our own interests but to the interests of others" (Ph 2:2-4).

My heart is full of thanksgiving for all that Jesus has given me during these 75 years of my life, the 40 years of L'Arche and 32 years of Faith and Light. I have also taken time these days to reread some of Père Thomas' writings. I sense so deeply how much my union, my communion, with him in 1950 and even more since 1964, is the ground in which L'Arche and Faith and Light have grown. I have no idea what this new year will bring us, what joys and what difficulties...but I am full of confidence. I trust in God, in the folly of l'Arche and Faith and Light. I trust that God is at work in our world in and through the poor and the weak. I trust in our leaders and in each one of you. In advance I give thanks, and in particular I give thanks for the weakest and most suffering members (who are sometimes assistants) at the heart of our communities. They are a source of life.

With love,

Jean Vanier