

September 14, 2004, in the St Thomas Retreat house (Syria)

I am with the International Council of Faith and Light in this retreat house 30 kms outside of Damascus. We are told that the prophet Elijah stayed in a cave near here, (see the First Book of Kings, ch 19), where he waited for the presence of God. God came but was not in the hurricane nor in the earth quake nor in the fire. God, the God of Tenderness and Compassion, was present in the gentle evening breeze. It is good to be here on this little mountain and to sense the gentle presence of God in the quiet evening breeze.

I am impressed by the unity and wisdom of the International Council around the Coordinator, Viviane Lepolain, the Vice Coordinator, Roy Moussali, Marie-Hélène Mathieu and Fr. Josef Larsen. I am happy to be with the Council (even if I am not in all the meetings). My programme has been full. I had the joy of visiting “Al Safina”, the small l’Arche community in the old part of the city: to see those I have known from other visits, to meet the new members and to be with with the Board and friends. It is such a gift for me to witness the growth and deepening of our communities, especially this one in Damascus.

I visited the main Mosque which is an amazing place of beauty and grandeur. Many people were there, sitting on rugs, talking or praying or reading the Koran; children playing quietly together. It was good to pray at the tomb of John the Baptist, that humble witness to Jesus, who is venerated by Moslems in this Mosque, and with so many men and women to ask God for peace: that the walls that separate cultures and religions might be lowered and that we, with all our differences, may learn how to dialogue with one another and live in communion.

The 38 Faith and Light communities in Syria are full of life: many young people sharing the joy and pain of people with disabilities and their parents. They are a mixture of Catholics and Orthodox, encouraged and supported by their respective bishops. They form a real family. It is beautiful to see how people who are weak can be a source of unity between churches. Peace and unity do not necessarily come from “the top”, but from “the bottom”, through those who are humble and call forth our hearts. I gave two short days of retreat for l’Arche and Faith and Light and their friends. I was touched by the pilgrimage to Homs with all the Faith and Light communities in Syria, (about a thousand people in all), the four bishops (2 Roman Catholics and 2 Orthodox) leading a procession. A real testimony to unity. I gave two public talks, in Damascus and in Alep, which brought together about 700 people each time, mainly Muslim. After my talk in Alep, the Mufti gave a testimony on how people with disabilities are a path to God.

In the desert, in the monastery of “Mar Moussa”

We have all come to “Mar Moussa”, in the middle of the desert. We had quite a walk through the mountains to get here. Roy helped me all along the way so that I wouldn’t fall! “Mar Moussa”, a monastery built on ancient ruins, is a new community of men and women, monks and religious sisters, who live, work and pray together, striving to be a place of dialogue and communion between Christians and Muslims. In the midst of so much fear in our world, where so many walls are being built between cultures and religions, the Holy Spirit is bringing to birth communities of peace. They do not

make much noise nor the headlines; they are like gentle breezes, signs that love and peace are stronger than hatred and war.

I think a lot about “Il Poverello”, Francis of Assisi, while I am here. In the midst of the crusades, in 1213, Francis, with another Franciscan brother, crossed over the line between the two enemy armies, to visit the Sultan. Barefoot, with no money or food, like a beggar, Francis went to the Sultan in Damietta (Egypt). The two men truly met and appreciated each other. It was a gesture of peace in a world at war. In the Franciscan Rule of life, Francis urges his brothers, in their relationship with Moslems, to be like Jesus who came humbly to serve.

Retreat-pilgrimage to the Holy Land

Last June, I had the joy of making a retreat-pilgrimage following the footsteps of Jesus in the Holy Land, which is also a land of conflict and violence – as it was in the time of Jesus. There were about forty of us, an English speaking group, coming from l’Arche in Canada, the United States, England and France. It was an important time for us, which began on the Mount of the Beatitudes, near Nazareth and ended at the St. Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Before separating, we celebrated the Eucharist of the Resurrection. It was a time of deepening in our unity and in our vocation of Covenant in l’Arche. It is always difficult to share in words an experience like that. We were especially touched by the immense pain and anguish people are living there. We listened to the personal stories of some people living this pain and yearning for peace: Rabbi Levi, in charge of a synagogue in Jerusalem; Little Sister Chiara, responsible for the Little Sisters of Jesus in Palestine; Abouna Raffic, a Palestinian priest; David Neuhaus s.j., a Jew and citizen of Israel; Jacqueline Sfeir, former board President of the l’Arche community in Bethany that had to close. Kathy Baroody, from l’Arche, living near Bethlehem, was with the group all the time. Some of us visited the workshop she opened for 15 men and women, Christian and Moslem. We saw the new wall in construction, 8 meters high, which separates Israel from Palestine: a wall of pain. We saw and heard about so many painful situations that are difficult to talk about. Our world is so full of such places of suffering. How can we live in solidarity with these people? We want our communities to be places of peace, by our welcome of those who are different, and places of hope in a world where many have lost hope.

Ecumenical retreat in Northern Ireland

After that pilgrimage to the source of our faith, I gave a retreat in Northern Ireland, another place where two cultures have difficulty understanding one another and are in confrontation. Participants came from both cultures and from different churches. In Northern Ireland, in the midst of all the difficulties, people like Ruth Patterson, work day in and day out for peace, trying to help people to know one another, to lose their fear, and to begin to appreciate and forgive each other. That takes time! People have been so hurt! Forgiveness does not come easily. Hatred and vengeance seem to come more naturally to us poor human beings who tend to close up in ourselves, behind the walls of “our group”. But through the prophet Ezekiel, God promises to send a new Spirit to change our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. We need the Holy Spirit so much today in order to see others, who are different, as a brother, a sister, a friend, and not as an enemy. We need the Holy Spirit in order to reach the deepest person of others, hidden behind the disability or underneath the label we stick on them. We need the Spirit of God in order to see the beauty and the light in others rather than all that is negative and wounded.

Pilgrimage to Lourdes on the 14th, and 15th of August

I was invited to participate in the Pope's pilgrimage to Lourdes on August 14th and 15th. I was asked to give short meditations on the Luminous mysteries of the rosary: the Baptism of Jesus, the Wedding Feast in Cana, Announcing the Kingdom, the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mt Thabor and the Eucharist. During that time I walked close to John Paull II. I was moved by the seriousness of his disability, his speech difficulties due to Parkinson disease. One person told me after the pilgrimage: "It was too hard to watch him on the television. He should retire – or die – soon!" How many times I have heard that said about people with disabilities. It is an attitude that humanly speaking is understandable! It is hard to see and be close to people in pain. Through his physical poverty, the Pope reveals a mystery; he is a living symbol of the presence of God in weakness. Even more than by his words, through his fragile body, he is teaching us now the value of each human life; he is showing us a path towards holiness. I was also touched by his humility and courage, the spark of life in his eyes, the way he accepts the humiliating reality of his condition today and his extreme tenderness. In all his weakness and old age, he calls us to tenderness. He is a sign of the glory of God who is manifested in and through his poverty and vulnerability.

Our societies exalt physical strength and beauty. But is that what it means to be human? Who, in fact, inspire us to become more human? The beautiful and the powerful? Or, those who call forth what is deepest in us, the goodness and compassion in our hearts?

L'Arche began forty years ago. I give thanks to Jesus for all those years of amazing, surprising, and un hoped-for gifts and fruits. My heart is full of thanksgiving in a special way for Père Thomas who led me – and many of us – to the treasure of people with disabilities. He opened up a new path of spiritual life for us and accompanied many of us on this path for years. The whole community of l'Arche-Trosly will be going on pilgrimage to Lourdes October 30th-November 4th to celebrate our anniversary.

I feel happy, even if sometimes I have less stamina and my legs feel like cotton! I had some rest and renewal in Orval in August. My joy is to be more present in my community and in my foyer "Le Val Fleuri", but also to travel to announce Jesus and his good news, as in the retreats I gave in Prince George, B.C. and Erie, Pa. I am happy that I am no longer in the decision-making bodies of l'Arche and Faith and Light and I have great confidence in those who are called to carry responsibility today. My joy is to speak about l'Arche, Faith and Light, the beauty of people with disabilities, who, in all their vulnerability lead us to God. I am happy to continue my journey with Jesus and to pray with you with confidence for the future. Finally, I would like to thank each one for your greetings and prayers for my 76th birthday. It is good to grow older and to be in communion with each other.

Love,
Jean