

Trosly, April 2003

Everything that is happening in our world is deeply troubling. And yet my heart is full of trust. Many governments, many groups, many hearts are hardening, closing up in themselves; they need to affirm their identity through force, to prove that they are the best. At the same time, more and more people belonging to diverse groups and religious traditions are standing up to affirm that it is possible to resolve conflict through dialogue; that universal justice does exist; that together we can live a commitment to the work of peace. They believe that we find our fulfilment in cooperation, compassion, mutual acceptance; they put their gifts and competence at the service of the weakest and the most needy. That is why my heart is so full of trust. Each one of us is called to be competent; we are all called to make real efforts to grow humanly and spiritually and to serve others. That requires humility, openness and a desire to listen to others. To be together to serve the good of all, not to prove that we are superior.

Community life in L'Arche and Faith and Light is showing us how weakness can be an opportunity for sharing, personal encounters, cooperation and friendship. René Leroy from l'Arche in Compiègne said one day: "Me all alone, can't do it". To welcome our weakness is a sign of maturity. "Yes, all alone I cannot do everything. I need you". A community lives and thrives because we need one another. Peace in our world cannot come unless we discover, welcome and respect the gift of each culture.

Our human hearts are so wounded that we often find it difficult to say "I need you". We are frightened to admit our incapacities and our limits. In order to bring down the walls we have created around us, to be disarmed and to welcome each other just as we are, and become vulnerable to one other, we need a new force that comes from God. Jesus says to Paul "My strength is manifested in weakness" (II Cor 12). But in order for us to find our strength in God, to distinguish between a weakness that opens us up to God and a weakness that is fear and depression, that can close us up in ourselves, we need to be loved and well accompanied.

Jesus shows us the way to love: "Love one another as I have loved you"(Jn 13:14). Love heals our hearts and enables us to love others. Love permits us to welcome and accept our weakness. When we manifest our force, we so often break, push down, destroy, frighten and awaken feelings of revenge. Love helps a person to discover *who* he/she is, his/her fundamental goodness. It is only then that what is most beautiful in them can emerge. It is true that Jesus who loved people was himself rejected, wounded, arrested and finally put to death. His weakness and his suffering are however a source of life. We need these waters flowing from his pierced heart, a sign of the Holy Spirit, so that we have the courage and the strength to take the path of disarmament, vulnerability and openness to others.

The moment of Jesus' greatest weakness and pain was followed by his resurrection. That was not a visible, spectacular event for all but a humble, small, hidden event. He did not want to humiliate those who had humiliated him. He appeared to Mary of Magdala, then to a few of his disciples; he did not judge or

criticize them for their lack of trust at the time of his distress, but he gave them peace: "Peace be with you". Then, he sends them into the world so that they in turn be a sign of peace and forgiveness. L'Arche and Faith and Light, as well as many others, want to be little signs that love, peace and community are possible.

The world's great religions all remind us that we have to be stripped of our fears and of our self-centredness in order for our deeper self to emerge, so that love can spring forth from the depths of our hearts. Jesus reminds us often that in order to live and bear much fruit we have to die to ourselves. He promises to send us the Holy Spirit so that we can be born anew, in love and in the Spirit of God. It is a long but beautiful path for all of us so that our communities radiate peace.

With Odile Ceyrac I just finished giving a retreat for first year assistants in l'Arche. There were 85 assistants coming from 40 communities. For nearly twenty years now we have been giving this kind of retreat. With the group of organisers and the accompanying priests we remarked that we have rarely seen in these retreats such a mature group of men and women, capable of silence. Being with this group gave me hope for l'Arche. These young men and women were so open to the word, to sharing, to the mystery of the weakness of God which is stronger than human wisdom. The path towards welcoming the weak is not a utopia; it is a path towards peace that more and more people are taking today.

And our brother Raphael has left us! He joined Père Thomas and many other friends of L'Arche and Faith and Light. He, with Philippe was the first person I welcomed. Raphael has entered the Kingdom of God, the Banquet of Love, before us! He who would repeat so often: "get married; get married" and who, looking at his watch, used to complain "too late; too late"; he who, after an act of violence knew how to ask for forgiveness, sometimes in tears; he who used to look at each one with such tenderness and who often broke out in great laughter and made everyone laugh; he has entered into the eternal wedding feast. He loved his community "La Rose des Vents" in Verpillières. He loved l'Arche and was deeply loved in l'Arche. He will watch over us now. God truly blessed us by sending him to l'Arche. He opened up a path of love. I give thanks for his life and for all that I personally have received from him. His weakness helped me to welcome my own weaknesses and to say "I need you." At the time of his death, many sent messages of peace, communion and tenderness. Thank you. I sense how much we are a family created by God, where we need one another. May the God of peace be with each one of you.

Love,

Jean Vanier