

Marie-Hélène Mathieu - the light of an encounter

François has an intellectual disability. He has just done his first communion. Family and friends have been invited to his home. His Godfather remarks "It was a beautiful ceremony, it's a pity that the poor little boy didn't understand anything." His mother was close to tears. François did perhaps not understand everything, but he did understand that his mother was sad. He kissed her and said "Don't worry Mummy, God loves me just as I am." For Marie-Hélène Mathieu, François recounted what is essential in the Good News announced by Jesus, that which we find so difficult to believe in.

For more than 40 years, Marie-Hélène Mathieu has been fighting so that people with intellectual disabilities and their families are better integrated in society and in the Church. She is the founder of two associations which try to meet the immense need for recognition and the deep distress in which families with a disabled child find themselves : the OCH, *Office chrétien des personnes handicapées*, and the international association "Faith and Light".

Back to the beginning of the sixties - an event, the trial in Liege, was the trigger. Marie-Hélène Mathieu: "A little girl called Corinne, born without arms and legs, had been eliminated by her parents with the assistance of a doctor. The couple was acquitted and this provoked a demonstration of joy among the crowd, who carried the parents in triumph. At that time there was a kind of awakening of consciences everywhere, those of parents, educators, doctors, theologians. Campaigns in favour of all life, however damaged, happened in succession. Over a few weeks, we had written up and published a collective work "They have the right to live" of which I was the kingpin. The director of Radio Luxembourg launched a vast programme to create a centre for children suffering from malformations like those of little Corinne. The funds gathered by this kind of exercise went beyond all our hopes. The director proposed that I should create a large association at the service of disabled people, their families and their friends. This project appealed to me. I was on the point of accepting when it suddenly dawned on me very clearly that what I could bring, the depth of what I could contribute to the service of injured people, could only really take root and develop in the light of my faith."

The OCH, with the support of Father Bissonnier, was created in 1963. Its objectives are to welcome, inform and support intellectually disabled people and their families, but also to make their immediate circle aware of their needs : schools, parishes, working milieu, general public. The OCH collaborates with the training of specialised professionals and helps Christian associations and establishments. The first actions were aimed at serving parents' needs : the magazine "Ombres et Lumière" and conferences to reflect, support each other and act.

Faith and Light Feeling welcome in Lourdes

At the origin of this new movement, two encounters were determining factors.

Marie-Hélène Mathieu: "In November 1966, I met Jean Vanier, who two years previously created the first Arche Community, a small home where he lived with Raphaël and Philippe, two persons with intellectual disabilities. I was deeply touched by the atmosphere of friendship, simplicity, joy and faith that radiated in his home. The second encounter was with Camille and Gérard, a couple whose two children, Thaddée and Loïc, were severely disabled and who felt rejected and misunderstood at a pilgrimage they undertook with their children to Lourdes."

Lourdes was at that time more a pilgrimage destination for "the sick and physically disabled. In good faith, people thought that those with an intellectual disability, despite a few exceptions, were incapable of understanding the spiritual aspect of the pilgrimage and could even perturb it for others".

Everyone leaves for Lourdes

Marie-Hélène Mathieu, Jean Vanier and two couples then had the idea of creating a pilgrimage specially aimed at and prepared for people with intellectual disabilities, accompanied by their families and friends. “Three years later, in Easter 1971, there were 12 000 pilgrims, 4 000 of whom had an intellectual disability. We came from 15 countries. The pilgrimage was such a time of grace that on the last day the pilgrims said “’Faith and Light” must continue! According to the priest of the sanctuary “ we had knocked down the wall of ignorance and opened hearts””. Since then, an international pilgrimage has been organised every 10 years in Lourdes. 1500 “Faith and Light” communities exist in 78 countries.

Founder of the OCH, the magazine “Ombres et Lumière”, and “Faith and Light”, Marie-Hélène Mathieu considers above all that she has “tried to respond to the suffering of parents and their children. It was like a mission that we had been entrusted with, and that was far above our means. A gift received that didn’t belong to us, of which we were not the proprietors but the managers. This feeling of having received a mission constantly gives us new forces to continue advancing through the difficulties, the fatigue, the failures and times of trials.”

Faith and Light Disabilities in the light of Faith

“When John Paul II said to the disabled people: “Come and take your places in the heart of the Church” he was simply using Jesus’ words: “When you are preparing a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind”. People with a disability reply spontaneously to the invitation because their hearts are not encumbered with themselves or all of things they have to do. They simply have a desire not to be alone, to have a friend. They are in a way predisposed to welcoming Jesus. He told us “ It is to the smallest among us that the Father reveals the mystery of his love”.”

And thus, people with an intellectual disability, limited as they may be in their autonomy and their capacities, do have something else to offer. The great number of people, often youths, who invest their time in “Faith and Light” communities, discover what this “something else” is. “When people stay and commit themselves to a community, it’s because they have discovered that the disabled people has more or less transformed them by his authenticity, his simplicity his desire to be loved and to be able to give that love back. Another set of values, different to those of money, prestige, and power appear to them and sometimes this brings about changes to their future.”

Neither gold nor silver

“’Faith and Light’ does not have the vocation of providing material support. Our arrival in countries where they are lacking everything - food, medicine, a roof over their heads etc. sometimes causes great disappointment. We have to look again at the Acts of the Apostles and the words that Peter said to the crippled man who was begging at the temple gate called ‘Beautiful’ - “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you : get up and walk.” We try to give parents confidence in the abilities of their child and in their own abilities as parents and educators. Above all we incite them to come out of their isolation, to join other families, a prayer group etc., to dare believe that without Jesus we can do nothing but with him, everything becomes possible.”

Service - the essentials

After forty years of service, actions, decisions to take, MARIE-HÉLÈNE MATHIEU prefers to refer to it as a project for life. She is leaving the action for those who have taken up the torch of the OCH and of ‘Faith and Light’. Father Bissonnier once said to me “It’s better to die worn out rather than rusty”. I like this proverb. Jesus expresses it in the Gospel by this saying “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning”.