

Trosly, Easter 2004

I recently gave four retreats and two « Katimaviks » (weekend retreats for young people). I love to announce the message of Jesus, the good news of love and the mystery of L'Arche and of Faith and Light, because it is truly a mystery: those who are rejected heal and transform us, if we enter into relationship with them. Last January, in his message to an International Symposium in Rome on the dignity of people with disabilities, John Paul II brought out this mystery when he said that:

*“People with disabilities are humanity’s privileged witnesses.  
They can teach everyone about the love that saves us;  
they can become heralds of a new world,  
no longer dominated by force, violence and aggression,  
but by love, solidarity and acceptance...”*

I am happy to devote these last years of my life announcing this mystery that Père Thomas had sensed when he inspired me to begin L'Arche in 1964.

One of the retreats was for 50 people from our L'Arche communities in Ambleteuse, Paris, Ecorcheboeuf and Aigrefoin, (25 assistants accompanied by 25 core members). We lived something very important during those five days together: people with disabilities showing so clearly that they have been chosen by God to confound the powerful and the intellectually capable, through their simplicity, openness and love. In these retreats, called “Arc en Ciel” in France, I sense more and more the vocation of our people and the mission of L'Arche and Faith and Light in our churches: to create communities, networks of friends, with and around the weakest. There we learn to love and carry one other, to share our life together and thus become a sign in a world of competition and individualism, that love is stronger than hate. This is our way of struggling for justice and peace day after day.

In April, with Odile, I gave talks at a five-day retreat in Nevers (France) for 85 assistants who have been in L'Arche for less than a year. They came from 35 communities in Europe and the Middle East. I was touched by their thirst to know the message of Jesus and the message of L'Arche better. The retreat was in silence. And it was impressive to see the number of people who came to the times of quiet prayer before breakfast. This retreat confirmed for me that many people in L'Arche are searching for a way of life different to what our societies propose: a shared, community life which is not always easy but which gives meaning to their lives.

One of the young woman retreatants came to see me during the retreat. Her story resembles the story of many others. She comes from a happy family background. She had succeeded in her studies and found a good job, but she did not feel happy. A part of her was dissatisfied. One of her friends suggested that she take a year off “to waste time” for others because she had a tendency to be hyper-active. Through the internet she found a L'Arche community. She went there and is living a time of real transformation. She is discovering

more and more how much her hyper activity was a flight from relationship. All relationships provoked a certain anguish and unease in her. She used to fill her life with projects. In her community she cannot run away from relationships and is obliged to take off her “masks”, to welcome the person in front of her and to discover *who* she is. She is on a path of growth and new life, a path of peace and truth. It is a path where she is discovering the presence of God hidden in the depths of her own being and within others, a God of light and of love. This young woman is discovering not only generosity but the communion of hearts which transforms us.

Then from April 1<sup>st</sup> to April 4<sup>th</sup>, I gave a retreat in Worth Abbey in the south of England. There were 270 people, about 120 from L’Arche and Faith and Light. I see how vital it is for assistants - and for us all – to take time away from our daily routine in order to discover the meaning of what we are living, to renew our vision and find the necessary peace and wisdom to continue our way. Our danger is fatigue, stress, the “too much to do”. We need to delve into the Gospel in order to discover – rediscover – who we are and that we are loved by God and sent by God to build community. We need rest and silence, exterior silence as well as inner silence, in order to listen to what God wants for us today and so that each day we *choose* what is given to us and not just *submit* to it.

We need times of silence in order to accept the changes we are called to live in and around us. Our whole life is made up changes...sometimes major ones, like a new life commitment or a new responsibility, an illness or a time of loss and grief. Sometimes we are called to make little inner changes where we grow in the way we listen to and love others. Each one of our lives is a mystery of growth, change and transformation. From birth until death, we are in continual movement, growing towards what is new and then giving way to decline, welcoming new joys and new pain, the planned and the unexpected. Each day we are called to adjust to what is new, new crises, new shortages, new gifts. We have to learn to live in the “now”.

What does not change is the importance of the word of God, words of wisdom, truth and justice, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the need for others in order to be able to continue to grow and be faithful in our commitment to one another, and thus to be a sign in our world.

During this Holy week, I am giving a talk each day at La Ferme in Trosly. We are following Jesus on his downward journey into weakness and poverty. Jesus was rejected because he called for change: he invited people to change their hearts, to change their way of living and of welcoming others – especially those who are different. We cannot remain static. Changes, times of grief, or the call to new responsibility, are often difficult because there is such powerful resistance in us that prevents us from growing. This resistance keeps us behind the walls and barriers of our own group, family or community in order to feel secure, holding on to the familiar, the “*déjà vu*”, what we have known and always done. The passion of Jesus is a passion of love, a gentle passion, a passion that is patient. Jesus has a deep thirst to live more fully in us so that we live out the gospel and serve each other. And the great desire of Jesus is for peace and unity. He yearns to bring down the barriers around our hearts. On the cross, his final gesture was to unite Mary and John in a relationship of love, a love that transforms.

The peace of Jesus is his presence, a presence that unifies us: “I am with you always...be not afraid”. We are living in a time of great insecurity. Everything seems so fragile in the world, in our countries, in our communities. We can plan things but we cannot control the future. How can we live this insecurity with trust? How can we welcome conflict – and we are sure to encounter conflicts everywhere and at any moment. Peace is something we all need to build each day in our communities. But to work for peace means letting go of our weapons and defence mechanisms. As the former Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras said:

*“I have waged this war against myself for many years.  
It was terrible, but now I am disarmed.  
I am no longer frightened of anything  
because love banishes fear.  
I am disarmed of the need to be right  
and to justify myself by disqualifying others.  
I am no longer on the defensive, holding onto my riches.  
I just want to welcome and to share.  
I don't hold onto my ideas and projects.  
When we are disarmed and dispossessed of self,  
When we open our hearts to the God-Man  
who makes all things new  
then he takes away past hurts  
and reveals a new time where everything is possible.”*

I would like to follow his inspiration and accept to be more disarmed.

I remain in communion with each one of you, giving thanks for this communion that unites us and allows us to be instruments of peace together.

Jean