



EXCLUSIVE – Founder of the Office chrétien des personnes handicapées (OCH) and, with Jean Vanier, of Faith and Light, Marie-Hélène Mathieu is a bright woman. She welcomed us at the time of making a fresh start in her life.

“Welcome to my abode! “Apartment” isn’t very pretty, is it? Abode sounds so much better! It is almost a small hermitage.” Marie-Hélène Mathieu has just moved into her new “home” with the Petites Sœurs des Pauvres (Little Sisters of the Poor). At 88 years old, she has left her apartment for what she calls *“the life ahead of me”*. A big decision for her as she was fond of her neighbourhood in the 15th arrondissement of Paris but she did not want to burden her loved ones when the dependency of old age struck. She talks of her life with a gentle smile: *“Let’s say that I have been lucky enough to have an exciting life”*. Her great discovery? God reveals his mysteries to the poor. At each stage, over the course of meetings with the very great and the very small, Marie-Hélène Mathieu has continually repeated her mantra: disabled people have *“an irreplaceable place in the heart of God and deserve to be loved.”*

Yet nothing destined her for such a vocation. The daughter of a farmer and a woman *“with gifts of the heart and spirit”*, happy to be at home, she happily imagined being mother to a large family in the country. However, at age 11, her heart was touched in the classroom. She met Alice there, a young disabled girl who incurred the ridicule and taunting of her friends. *“One day when we were making fun of her, I saw her curled up by the radiator. Large tears were rolling down her face, whilst she never showed any sign of emotion. I met her heart, her indescribable suffering. I said to myself that I would like to comfort her.”* The young Marie-Hélène was convinced that when she grew up, she would choose a job where she could help *“unfortunate children”*.

This governing principle was going to guide her life. Marie-Hélène has met people like Alice by the thousand in all continents. At 20 years old, she went to train as a specialist teacher. There, she got to know Father Henri Bissonnier, a professor of special needs education and a pioneer of the specialist catechesis. On leaving school, he suggested that she work with him at the International Catholic Child Bureau. A great challenge for her. *“He was a sort of saint ... who was unbearable. He had these temper tantrums! She laughs. I accepted knowing that there was a risk of it being a bit of a nightmare... and in fact, it was a nightmare!*

But it was also an opportunity to benefit from his abilities and his fire. Caritas Christi urget nos: the love of Christ urges us on." These words of St Paul were written on a mosaic square on the desk of Father Bissonnier. Today, Marie-Hélène has them on her own.

In 1956, when she was 27 years old, the Association catholique des éducateurs spécialisés (the Catholic association of special needs teachers) asked her to be their president. *"I refused. I knew that I was not able to do it."* At their insistence, she accepted for six months and stayed for... fifteen years. *"It was my first great "yes" to an impossible mission. I built up my knowledge there."* In November 1962, the Liège trial into the Thalidomide affair took place. A child born without limbs was killed by her parents and doctor. The scenes of jubilation on the announcement of their acquittal served as a wake up call: *"Even if the body and the psyche of a child are severely disabled, his/her heart isn't."*

The director of Radio Luxembourg suggested that she create an association to support the parents. Convinced by the project, Marie-Hélène went to ask the advice of Marthe Robin, in Chateauneuf-de-Galaure. As was her way, Marthe answered with a question: would she have the freedom to give this work a religious dimension? For Marie-Hélène, it was obvious: the answer was no. Marthe had closed one door and opened another. On 13 October 1963, on the feast day of Our Lady of Fatima, [Office chrétien des personnes handicapées \(OCH\)](#) was born with these objectives highlighted by Marthe Robin: *"It is important to help parents to change their view of their disabled child and appeal to all society."*

Three years later, her journey with Jean Vanier began. She had heard about this Canadian Navy Officer who had become a professor of philosophy and theology. He had discovered intellectually disabled people and their great misery, locked away in asylums, and had created a small community, the first Arche, à Trosly-Breuil (Oise). *"The Christians that I mixed with had reservations: I too found his experience rather dubious, she laughs. A friend who admired Jean Vanier pestered me to go to Trosly. To get rid of her, I ended up giving in."*

Fifty one years later, she still remembers, with visible emotion, 7 November 1966: *"The weather was frightful, Compiègne forest was sinister! I entered a small chapel with about fifteen people who were singing so out of tune that you could not imagine it, but what enthusiasm! After the meal, everyone did the washing up together. And we met to pray around an icon and candles. This was not an institution. This was a family. I had found a precious treasure."* In the evening, she proposed to Jean Vanier that they work together to set up a conference for the Union nationale des assistants et éducateurs de l'enfance (National Union of youth workers and assistants).

Madness! *"I did the one thing you should never do: make a decision in the heat of the moment."* The young woman, aware of her reckless enthusiasm, hoped that he would not contact her. She cheerfully laughs: *"Boom! The following morning at 10am, he called me to announce his agreement! The cork was out the bottle and it had to be drunk!"* Her presence at the conference was vital. A short while afterwards, Jean Vanier proposed that Marie-Hélène become a member of the management association of L'Arche in France, then join the international team. It was the beginning of an extraordinary friendship and the start of Faith and Light.

At the beginning: Lourdes

This international large-scale movement began in 1968 with a couple of friends, Camille and Gérard. Their two sons were severely disabled. First of all, banned from the diocesan pilgrimage, they went to Lourdes, where they were made to feel very unwelcome. *“They were allowed in the hotel but asked to go out when the corridors were empty. In the centre of the Shrine as well as in the streets, they were cruelly stared at... What the mouth didn’t say, the gaze expressed”*, lamented Marie-Hélène. On being told of this by the hurt parents, in the town where the Holy Virgin had chosen the poorest and the smallest of her children to announce her message, Marie-Hélène and Jean Vanier were inspired to create a pilgrimage for intellectually disabled people to testify to their place in the Church and tell of their spiritual abilities, to a real holiness. And so that they were not alone, young friends would also be invited. Everyone prepared together in small communities. There was no shortage of reservations and obstacles, [particularly in the town of Lourdes](#). *“The intellectually disabled people had never been welcome there and here was Lourdes faced with a whole pilgrimage of them!”* quips Marie-Hélène. However, the founder was not overwhelmed: *“It was the era where difference was hidden. It was not just in the Church, it was the whole of society. In the past, it was believed that having a disabled child was a curse. Henceforth, it was known that he/she was beloved of God.”* After three years of intensive preparations, 12000 pilgrims arrived in Lourdes for the Easter celebrations of 1971, including 4000 with a disability. They came from fifteen countries. At the time of farewells, came the shout of: *We want Faith and Light to continue!* In front of the Massabielle grotto, the movement was born.

“God deals with the impossible”

Today, there are 1500 Faith and Light communities lighting up 83 countries. Marie-Hélène, with Jean Vanier, tells [this astonishing story in a book](#) that has been translated into six languages. The OCH continues to be a light for so many families and movements. [Its Ombres & Lumière magazine](#) is preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary. Marie-Hélène Mathieu reflects on her destiny with astonishment: *“I wanted to get married and have lots of children; I have done neither! Today, I really see the hand of God in the flow of my life.”* Regrets? *“I would have liked to spend more time with my parents as they got older. You know, we have done much work, how many times while preparing for the first pilgrimage, have I dined on a piece of cheese! How many books have I not read, how much will my Guardian Angel remind me of when I am in Heaven.* A mischievous joke that gives way to thanksgiving: *“We who have given so little, we are astonished to see how much we have received. Jesus asks only one thing of us: our five loaves and two fishes. We do not have to bother with the multiplication of the bread that is his job. Each time we do the best possible, God deals with the impossible.”*

From her “abode”, Marie-Hélène Mathieu is grateful to any person who continues the actions undertaken and remains certain that God does not abandon his small ones: *“The hand of God never shortens especially when it comes to the most fragile of his children. It was the last promise of Jesus before leaving us: I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

A full life

- 4 July 1929 Born in Tournus (Saône-et-Loire).
- 22 July Christening at the Saint-Philibert Abbey.
- 1950 Entered specialised teaching school in Neuilly-sur-Seine.
- 1953 Collaboration with Father Henri Bissonnier at the International Catholic Child Bureau.
- 1956 President of the Association professionnelle catholique des éducateurs spécialisés.
- 1957 Retreat at Châteauneuf-de-Galaure. First meeting with Marthe Robin.
- 1963 Founding of the Office chrétien des personnes handicapées.
- 1968 Decision, with Jean Vanier, to have an international pilgrimage to Lourdes under the name of Faith and Light and the launch of *Ombres & Lumière*, the OCH magazine.
- 1971 Faith and Light international pilgrimage to Lourdes, which gave birth to the movement.
- 1975 Faith and Light international pilgrimage to Rome.
- 1976-1981 Vice International Coordinator of L'Arche.
- 1984-1989 Appointed by John Paul II as a member of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.
- In 1988, first woman to give a Lent address at the Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris.
- 2001-2004 Expert for the Holy See at the Council of Europe on the "People with disabilities" commission.
- 2005 [Appointed auditor to the synod on the Eucharist by Benedict XVI.](#)

Three associations

Each one has its own history. With a man and a woman who dared to brave the looks and prejudices. L'Arche, Office chrétien des personnes handicapées (OCH) and Faith and Light were all founded in the name of love. The love of others, of the smallest and the conviction that the unhappiness of disability can be changed into grace when it is accompanied by tenderness.

OCH Born in 1963 from the boldness of Marie-Hélène Mathieu, the foundation is at the service of all sick and disabled people, their families and friends, institutions and educators. It aims to welcome with its listening and advice teams, to enlighten with the *Ombres et Lumière* magazine and to support many projects in France and abroad.

L'Arche With the same boldness, Jean Vanier created L'Arche in 1964. This is sheltered accommodation with a family dimension where those with an intellectual disability and the assistants live. Together, they share life and work. Fraternal relationships are at the heart of their commitment. They affirm the unique value of each person and our need for one another. La Ferme, situated in the small village of Trosly-Breuil (Oise), is a community within L'Arche that has a specific vocation of prayer and welcome. L'Arche, today, has 149 communities in 37 countries, including 35 in France.

Faith and Light This blend of the charismas of Marie-Hélène Mathieu and Jean Vanier allowed the spawning of Faith and Light in 1971. After a pilgrimage to Lourdes, this movement, that has become international, brings together those with an intellectual

disability, their parents and their friends, especially young ones, in meeting communities. Once or twice a month, they celebrate life, pray and share their joys and their problems together in a loyal friendship. They also meet during weekends, pilgrimages, holiday camps, retreats... Today, Faith and Light is made up of 1500 communities in 83 countries. However, behind this figure, Faith and Light is first and foremost a family. For many, it is their second family. For many others, it is their first family, when the blood one is frightened or has given up.

Sophie Le Noën Famille Chrétienne N° 2078, 3/11/2017

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