



Trosly, January 2010

Dear friends,

I like this time of Christmas. God becomes flesh. He becomes small to teach us to love and to be open to those who are suffering and who are in difficulty. Of course God is in our world but he waits silently for us to turn to him and call him to our help. In the book of the Apocalypse we read that God stands at the door and knocks. If anyone hears and opens the door, God will come in and eat with them. In the Biblical sense, eating with someone means becoming their friend. God wants to make us his friends. But there can be no love or friendship without freedom. If we turn God away, he still waits for us to open the door to him. God is a prisoner of our freedom. The God of compassion cannot exercise his compassion in the world without going through our intelligence, wisdom, capacities and heart. God is not a God of violence but rather a God who invites and who waits with love to give his love to everyone.

Our God of tenderness who loves us, wants to reveal to each of us that we are important and precious. So often, we believe we are important because we do “great” and admirable things. We must then be strong, courageous, competent and show how capable we are. Our God of compassion loves us at a much deeper level, in our weaknesses, our vulnerability and our smallness. Our God welcomes us in his arms and says: “I love you as you are”. He raises us up so that we can all be instruments of his justice, his peace and his love.

I like to tell the story of a little boy of eleven years old who had real intellectual difficulties and whose mother was crying because of him. He said to her, “Don’t worry Mummy, Jesus loves me as I am”. This little boy did not need to be what others wanted him to be. He could simply be what he was and then respond to the love of Jesus.

I realise more and more that loving means welcoming other people as they are, with great respect because they are different; they are someone, they are a child of God. Others have their gifts, their vulnerability, their beauty and of course their fragilities. When we welcome others, we free them so they can be themselves.

I am attracted by non-violent communication, or rather, communication that is *deeply respectful*. This communication involves listening to others, not to show superiority, that we know more than them, that we are right and they are wrong, but rather to enter into communion with them. Communion is not a merger in which one “eats” the other; rather it gives freedom and raises the other person up so that they can fully be themselves. This respectful communication is based on humility. Saint-Paul wrote to the first Christian community in Europe at Philippi: “Regard one another as more important than yourselves”.

I like these words of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Athénagoras:

*“I have waged this war against myself for many years. It was terrible.
But now I am disarmed.”*

*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.*

*When we are disarmed and dispossessed of self, if 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 like this text but I fall so quickly into the trap of needing to show that I am superior, or of belittling the other person. Some time ago, I was giving a conference on violence to the first year assistants in L'Arche communities. During the questions, an assistant said to me, in an aggressive tone: "I don't agree with you." She then explained how she saw forgiveness. As I listened to this young woman I felt my defence system rising up inside me and I told her: "You haven't understood what I said." I then realised quite quickly that I was defending myself, as if I were saying: "You're wrong, you haven't really listened to what I said". If I had been more respectful of her and if I had wanted to really meet her in a spirit of communion, I would have said: "Perhaps I didn't explain myself properly." That is where respectful communication really lies. I still have work to do on myself, to ensure I do not dominate but rather that I am in communion.

Let us neither be a hedgehog nor a doormat! Not crushing others, nor letting ourselves be crushed by them. Being true. Trying to see in the other person somebody important who has their own relationship difficulties. Acting with respect and love to help bring down the walls of protection in the other person, and trying to bring down our own walls. Seeing all the positive and beautiful things in the other person, before seeing the negative. That does not prevent us from being prophetic and from saying things which may upset others. What is important is that we live in truth with each other. We create a path of peace when we are loving and true.

God became flesh so that we would not be afraid, nor would we need to show how we are good. God who became small calls me to be poor and small. God who comes to welcome us calls us to welcome those who are poor.

I like this prayer to God, sung by Tagore:

*Here is thy foot-stool;
And there rest thy feet
Where live the poorest and lowliest and lost.*

*When I try to bow to thee,
my obeisance cannot reach down to the depth
where thy feet rest among the poorest and lowliest
and lost.*

*Pride can never approach to where thou walkest in the clothes of the humble,
Among the poorest and lowliest and lost.*

*My heart can never find its way to where thou keepest company with the companionless,
among the poorest, the lowliest and the lost.*



Tagore

Loving others means welcoming them as they are so that they can welcome others as they are. That is Christmas! And Christmas is every day. We can show love through little gestures every day. Changing the world, one heart at a time. Welcoming God as a child, to become a like a child.

Yes, I still have work to do on myself, I still very much need God's grace to become like a child.



three days with the Office Chrétien des personnes avec un handicap © OCH

Since my last letter there were three marvellous days of the *Office Chrétien des personnes avec un handicap* - Christian service for disabled people - (founded by Marie-Hélène Mathieu in 1962 to be a source of life and hope for people with a disability and their families). The three days in Paris showed how life can grow from fragility, and how hope can spring from the depths of suffering. Three days of reflection and celebration.

I recently gave a retreat (a Katimavik) in Agen in South West France. There were 150 of us, some young and others not so young, mainly from our communities in the South West, Cognac, La Merci, Les Sapins, La Rebellerie, Agen and Faith and Light. There were also representatives of communities

being founded in Bordeaux, Bayonne and Toulouse. It was a weekend filled with joy, song, celebration, prayer and friendship. The heart of our communities is the heart to heart relationships which bind us together, the strong and the weak, what is weak in the strong and what is strong in the weak. My heart is so thankful for our communities. Yes, I feel happy in L'Arche and all that I want is to help others to be happy.

L'Arche is evolving in its structures but the heart of L'Arche is the same. It is in loving and authentic relationships with those who are weak. I give thanks for Jean-Christophe and Christine and for all who carry responsibilities, for the wisdom with which they are guiding L'Arche.

Last week, a retreat was held at La Ferme, the spiritual centre in Trosly, for homeless men and women from the streets of Paris. They were accompanied by some people working with them. It was so good to be together: we washed each others' feet on our last day all together. As it was very cold, this retreat which warmed hearts and bodies was much appreciated. Such joy for La Ferme to welcome them!

Thank you to each of you who have written to me. I apologise for this circular letter. I just want to tell you my joy at being in communion with you during this New Year and with the God who became poor and little so that we are not afraid of him, and can welcome the love that flows from God.

Best wishes,

Jean