



Letter of Jean Vanier



Trosly, January 2011

Dear friends,

You wouldn't believe it! Trosly is buried under 30 cm of snow. It's wonderful and it's terrible! Snowball fights and snowmen as well as dangerous roads, people slipping on icy sidewalks, cancellation of community events... Trosly is even cut off from Cuise la Motte and Pierrefonds. Since arriving in 1964 I have never seen such snow here. And yes, it's Christmas, and in the stable a tiny light appears – a sign of hope.

At La Ferme we celebrated the birth of this light with a retreat for about forty homeless women and men (and those who accompanied them) from Paris. It was a genuine Christmas for everyone! They were very content to be in cosy warm rooms with clean sheets on the beds. They loved the opportunity to sing and pray together. We took time to wash each other's feet with respect and tenderness, as Jesus asked us to. It was an experience of grace and of incarnation, a time of utter silence that was filled with the gentle presence of God.

Sue Mosteller once told me about something that happened in a maximum security prison. The chaplain and his wife had wanted their child to be baptized inside the prison. After the baptism, the mother held the child in her arms. The prisoners were sitting in a circle around her. The man sitting next to her asked if he could hold the baby. He took the child with great tenderness and looked directly into his eyes. As he smiled, the baby smiled back at him. The prisoner broke down in tears.



A baby so tiny, so fragile... whose body and entire being call us to tenderness. It's not possible to be afraid of a baby. It's as though the child has a magical power over us. The way she looks at us, her smile, her eyes, even her fragility, her trust, her purity, and her innocence seem to touch even the most profound places in the hearts of us adults. The child is able to penetrate the walls that we have constructed around our hearts to defend ourselves, to protect ourselves, to prove that we are independent, competent, and strong. A child reveals the child who is hidden inside each of us, the child whom we have buried behind these impenetrable walls of protection, of strength, and of our need to win.

Within our societies based on rivalry, we are often afraid to show our weakness. Admitting weakness can be dangerous since it might lead to rejection. Instead we feel that we need to show our competence, our capability, our power, our knowledge. If not, we risk begin wounded, rejected, isolated, and scorned.

The weakness of the child – especially of a very young child – does the opposite: it attracts us and makes us smile; it leads us to tenderness and communion. It awakens kindness. This is possibly the only time in a person's life when weakness more often than not elicits a positive and loving reaction. Unfortunately, there

are also children who are abused. Their crying and anguish are too disturbing. We can only hope that these situations are rare.

Culture and religion have no impact on a child's ability to attract. The child is somehow able to enter into the corners and deepest recesses of the human heart in order to awaken what is most beautiful and most human: the desire to be accepted and tenderly loved. It's clear that the child in the prison experienced a sense of real security with his mother, in whose womb he lived for nine months. Only if a child is secure in his relationship with his parents is it possible for him to be content in the arms of a stranger.

This is a magical power – yes, magical – because it seems to touch us at a level that is much deeper than that of will or reason. It's like a gift that is free and unexpected. It's impossible for me, by myself, to awaken the heart that is hidden within me... This secret heart is awakened by something outside of me, and yet it is what is deepest within me. It is "me."

The man in prison – through the look of a tiny child – discovered who he truly is. At the most profound level of his being he is a child who is looking for love, but he doesn't dare to admit it. All of us, at the deepest level of our being, are wounded children who are searching for love, for tenderness.

If God were a mother who says, *"I love you just as you are, with your history, your wounded heart, your shame, your guilt, your failures, and also your successes"*; and if this mother were to take us in her arms and tenderly caress us; and if God were a little child... Isn't it in Isaiah (9:6) that we read: *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and upon his shoulders power rests, and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."*



In order to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus tells us, we must become like little children, open to tenderness, able to trust, and willing to listen; no longer hiding behind the adult who wants to be strong.

L'Arche and Faith and Light are places where we learn to welcome the child within us and within others. But often we must pass through all sorts of difficulties in order to reach this child and find joy and peace.

Yes, Christmas is a very gentle time. I'm reminded of the film *Joyeux Noel* which tells a true story about the war in the trenches in 1915. On Christmas Day, British soldiers, on one side, and German soldiers, on the other, start to sing Christmas carols. Little by little, as one risky gesture leads to another, the soldiers dare to offer each other not bullets but handshakes and little gifts. In the midst of a terrible war, there were signs of friendship and love between these men – gestures that were much stronger than the desire to win a battle and kill others. This is Christmas! To embrace each other rather than to hurt each other. Isaiah tells us that God will send a sign: a child will be born. It's the child who will smile at us and heal us.

This past autumn there was a film in France that attracted more than three million people to theatres – clearly a record crowd, which says a lot about people's search for truth and hope. *Of Gods and Men* («Des hommes et des dieux») is the story of Trappist monks in Algeria. They were in the midst of a civil war between the armed Islamic group and the military, both of which were proficient in violence. The monks wanted to stay in their monastery despite the threats. They wanted to remain close to their Muslim neighbours with whom they had created links of friendship, of faith, and of work over a period of many years. These neighbours implored them to stay. The monks' faithfulness to these links led them to be kidnapped and



'Des hommes et des dieux' © D.R.

killed. Without over-spiritualizing, this very sobering film shows the humanity of these monks – with their doubts and their inner struggles. Through their own wounded humanity there emerges a desire for fidelity, truth, and faith in God.

In a world that is often divided into terrorists (of all types) – those who seek riches at any price, those who use violence and force to crush the weak – and legislators who are oftentimes super-rational and lacking in compassion and understanding of people's basic needs, there are many men and women of peace who risk their lives and disregard their own interests in order to affirm that beyond

all the injustices there is the dream of a new world where we will all have respect and love for one another.

A happy and blessed New Year to friends everywhere and to members of Faith and Light and L'Arche. Thank you for all your letters and cards with wishes for a year of peace and joy. I am in profound communion with each one of you and I send you my love. I am deeply grateful for this communion and unity that exist between us and for our hope that the child and the one who is weak can heal us and lead us to peace.

Jean