



Trosly, September 2009

Dear Friends,

I was deeply happy in the monastery of Orval in August. The silence, the monks' singing and praying, the Eucharists, the forest, my bedroom at the end of the corridor: so many things delighted me and brought me peace. I liked being there, having the time to pray, read, write, rest and walk in the woods. I loved to give thanks, for L'Arche, for Faith and Light, for life, for my life. This monastery is one of these small places that are so essential in our wounded world, which is in continual movement and change, so absorbed by individualism, personal success and the values advocated by the media. The monastery evokes peace, a place where God is, and reveals that love and universal brotherhood and sisterhood are possible.

On 15th August, the feastday of Mary, the Mother of God, my time of retreat and prayer at Orval was marked by the news that Jacqueline d'Halluin was dying. She was somebody precious, both to myself and to L'Arche. I had known her since 1950, when I arrived at l'Eau Vive from the Canadian Navy. She was then Father Thomas Philippe's secretary. Later she helped me as L'Arche began. The very name of L'Arche was given to us when we were together, at the start of the first home; and it was she who wrote the prayer of L'Arche. She was wonderfully practical, she looked after the renovation out of the decoration of all our homes; a woman of prayer who was so creative in all our celebrations, full of joy and wisdom – the wisdom of love. So many events brought us together, but above all our love for Father Thomas and the many things we lived together, at the heart of L'Arche.

I left Orval immediately to see her, Odile driving me. Yes, Jacqueline was dying, she was so poor, so weak, struggling for breath. She had suffered dreadfully with Parkinson's disease for the past four years. I was able to spend several hours with her; I know that she recognised me. She knew that I had come to say goodbye and "A Dieu" to her, but she did not die straightaway. She held onto life for several days more, in great human frailty. She did not suffer physically thanks to strong doses of morphine, but I think she was suffering as she waited Jesus' coming.



Jacqueline d'Halluin, with Father Thomas, in 1974

I returned to Orval to be close to her through prayer, so that her final passage be enveloped in God's gentle presence. She went to God on August 24th. What joy for Father Thomas to welcome her in Heaven.



With Raphael Simi, in 1989

During my time in Orval, I realised how much I love L'Arche and Faith and Light and how God has called me to live so many deep relationships of communion that flow from His heart, not only with people who have a disability but also with the assistants and so many friends who carry also their fragility and weakness.

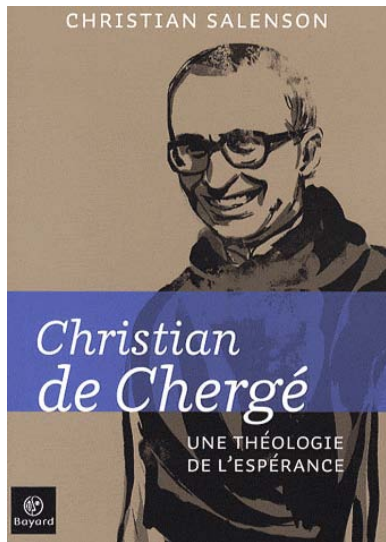
I am happy to be back in my home of Val Fleuri, happy to be with my brothers and sisters and to witness together to our world the importance and the value of those who are the weakest, if we listen to them, respect them and have a genuine relationship with them.

All this leads me to think about the evolution of L'Arche itself: it has been a gentle evolution. At the beginning I wanted to live in a small community that witnessed to Jesus, in the Catholic Church. I wanted to live generously with people in difficulties, living together as a sign of the Gospel and of the presence of Jesus among people in need.

Gradually, L'Arche discovered that it was called to witness, not just to the goodness and the faith of assistants, but to the value of people with disabilities. Over the years, many of them, still with their serious disabilities, have reached a real human and spiritual maturity. Their spontaneity, their inner freedom, their joy in relationships and "joie de vivre", their simplicity which flows from these relationships, reveal another way of living in our society. Many people in our society have had enough of a stressed, competitive life, marked by strong individualism and the weakening of the links inside of family and elsewhere. They are seeking a different way of living, less consumption and more relationship life, less individual success, more time spent being and living together and less of a pyramid where a few strong and competent people climb towards the top. They seek the creation of a body where all, the weak and the strong alike, find their place and celebrate their shared humanity together, thereby witnessing a path of peace.

The fact that L'Arche welcomes men and women from different Christian churches, different religions, different cultures (assistants and disabled people) and the fact that our communities are present in many different countries has accentuated this evolution. This is not the result of a well-thought-out desire or an intellectual vision, but rather the fruit of our experience in L'Arche of the universal human suffering in our world. L'Arche does not exclusively bear witness to the christian faith, but to the transformation of weakness and suffering into life, through God's grace. This is not to diminish the role of faith, of union with God and spiritual growth. On the contrary! In order to live in a community where there are people of different cultures, religions, abilities and disabilities, each person is called to deepen their own inner life and their own faith supported by life in the community. L'Arche is a school of love where we learn to love others who are different. This requires each person to grow in humility and to work on themselves. It means learning to see each person as somebody in whom God dwells, a person from whom we can receive gifts and who can help us to grow in love.

I am in the middle of reading a fascinating book written by Christian Salenson, it is opening my heart and my spirit and reveals a vision of the evolution of mankind today. A prophetic book which gives hope. It is called "La théologie de l'espérance de Christian de Chergé" (Christian de Chergé: A theology of hope). Christian was a Cistercian monk, (like those at Orval and like my brother Benedict in Quebec,) in a small abbey in Tibhirine, south of Algiers. He lived a deep experience of prayer with a Muslim man, who actually saved his life during the war in Algeria and who was murdered for doing so. As a monk and with his brothers, Christian shared a life of work with Muslims; he also shared



times of prayer with the members of a Sufi brotherhood. He and his brother monks were kidnapped by terrorists in 1996 and murdered.

His theology is based on profound spiritual experiences, on the gestures and words of John Paul II and on the teachings of Vatican II. It is a theology of a vision of God, thirsting for unity among all human beings. This book, together with others on and by Christian de Chergé, opens new doors to the profound meeting of the differences between people, differences which are respected and loved in a search for communion in God. Differences can enrich us all instead of dividing us.

Christian's life helped me to sense the need for what I call "intermediate communities", where very different people with vulnerable and humble hearts can meet as human beings and as

seekers of God, justice and peace.

At the root of these meetings is humility, which implies a loss of fixed ideas and certitudes and from our need to show that we are superior, an elite. One day someone asked Martin Luther King if there would always be groups who believed themselves to be an elite and who despised other groups. "Yes", replied Martin Luther King, "unless we all become aware of what is wounded within each of us, of our fears, our underlying handicaps and inner darkness." The question then is how to grow in humility and see all that is from God in other people. What transformation must we undergo and how? Is this not the issue at the very heart of L'Arche?



Martin Luther King ©Flip Schulke/Corbis

An assistant at L'Arche (whom I shall call Louis) shared the following with a group of people a few months ago. He was at la Forestière with people who have serious disabilities. He was asked to take particular care of Françoise, who is known as "mamie" in the home. She is 76 years old with a very serious disability, bedridden and blind, unable to communicate through words. Louis was disappointed because he did not feel drawn to her. Faithfully, as he was asked, he fed mamie, but he found it tiresome. Then one day, she placed her hand on his hand and smiled. It was, he said, a special meeting, a magical moment, a moment of transformation, a moment of grace. From that moment on, he loved being with her. What he had found tiresome and difficult became a blessing. Is that not what we want to witness in L'Arche and in Faith and Light? There is a mysterious power which flows from the hearts of weak people like Françoise and which calls us into a relationship, which transforms us. It is this transformation which can be at the root of a new way of living in our societies.

Intermediate communities do exist everywhere. In Israel, there are groups of Palestinians, of Jews, who meet to share together. In Rwanda and Burundi, there are Hutus and Tutsis who meet to share and to pray. In Northern Ireland, Protestants and Catholics meet to talk about how their churches help them to live closer to Jesus. These small communities, like L'Arche, witness to the unity of human nature; we are all part of the big human family. When we welcome those who are different we are enriched.

Intermediate communities, few as they are, point to a path of peace; they are built on the desire to love each other, irrespective of our differences. They are a beacon of hope. Jesus, to show who our neighbour is (Luke 10, 29), talks of the love between a Samaritan and a Jew; two groups who hated each other. Jesus reveals that the other person, who is different, is a brother or a sister in humanity: we are called to learn not to hide behind certainties and the safety net of a group which condemns others, but to open up to others who are different.

My health is good. The monks of Orval told me that they thought I looked younger! I don't know if that's true. However, I am beginning to feel the weaknesses of my 81 years. I would like to give what is left of my life to announcing this mystery of L'Arche and Faith and Light, through retreats at la Ferme and elsewhere: to announce the value, the importance of weak people who are a sign of God's presence. Perhaps my own weaknesses will help me to better understand the Good News of Jesus, who Himself became weak and vulnerable. Through his weakness, He give us life and calls us to love more. We possess in our communities a wonderful treasure and I have such a desire to communicate it so that others can discover and live it.

Pray for me, that I learn to age slowly and gently, with joy.

I feel deeply in communion with all the communities of Faith and Light and of L'Arche and with so many friends. I carry all your worries and your joys in my heart and in my prayer. Thank you for your letters; I am unable to reply to each of you individually, but each letter expresses the communion which we are all living together.

Together with you in the joy of God,

Jean