



Letter of Jean Vanier

Trosly, January 2012

Dear Friends,

At last, it is over! The trip from 31 rue Louis Marillac to 19 rue d'Orléans is finished. It meant moving furniture, books and papers, more papers and books, my bed, my toothbrush (even though I don't have many teeth left to brush) and finally me. I have settled into my new surroundings, near the Farm (where I am still giving retreats).



It is a beautiful place... my office has a big bay window overlooking the L'Arche chapel and a garden with a small house just for birds. The birds will come, soon I hope, to pick seed, fighting and playing among themselves. Right now the birdhouse is empty. I will contemplate all of their colors – those of the robins, titmice, small sparrows, pigeons and all the other species when they become less suspicious. I can't wait until they come, but maybe they will keep me from reading or doing other things. Birds are so beautiful, so light, so happy to live, sometimes a little noisily... they sing God's glory and they laugh with joy. How beautiful creation is! It reveals the joy and bondless creativity of God. I understand Francis of Assisi who seemed to have a gift for understanding birds and attracting them. Sadly I don't have that same gift. Birds will not be attracted to me, but rather to the seed I will be giving them!

This year Christmas will be associated for me to the joy of birds rejoicing before a new birth in Bethlehem: birds who sing around the manger, along beside the ox and donkey, small lambs and probably a goat.

A new birth. Yes, for me it really is a new birth. 36 years spent in my small house where I knew every nook and cranny: it is now full of memories, of silent encounters, of times of listening to words of truth and of God spoken by one person or another, as well as words of suffering and concern... and times of laughter and joy, without forgetting times of work and creativity. And most especially there were times of encounters with Jesus, of life and of plenitude. There were also times when I turned around in circles or when I felt lost, times of emptiness and of poverty.

We do not know what new birth will bring. Little ones are in the womb of their mother for nine months. And then there is the surprise. For the little ones, it is also a time of mourning because they have had nine months of a protected life (in my case, 36 years). So it is for me, living a time of surprise and mourning. Pray that I will welcome everything with joy.

I am deeply grateful to Jean-Christophe and Christine who had the idea of changing homes. They started the wheels in motion so that the idea would become reality. Thanks also to Jean Lanier, Jean-Claude Mallet and to the Foundation that bought the former Rameaux home (which was founded by Steve and Anne Newroth in 1966 before they founded Daybreak) and transformed it into a very beautiful house. For a few months part of the building served as a chapel where Father Thomas celebrated Sunday mass. Yes, the former Rameaux home has now become a very lovely hermitage where I can live the last years of my life on the path of weakening that leads to the final and first encounter face in face and heart to heart with God. I also am grateful for Odile, who followed me as community leader for L'Arche in 1980, and who has accepted during her retirement

to watch over me, over my health and everything else. The house has been transformed into a duplex – one part for Odile, the other for me. I will sometimes eat here but I will also continue to go to le Val to share meals with my brothers and sisters, some of whom I have known for over 40 years.

I feel small in front of this new stage that has begun with Christmas, where we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the birth of a Savior who has come to save us from our fears and self-centeredness. In my head, soul and heart there is a true desire for rebirth, for rest in God. You know how much the writings of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who was assassinated in Auschwitz in 1943, have touched and moved me. She lived among the worst of horrors. She knew she was condemned to die, with all of the people of Jewish origin, by Hitler and his adepts. *“I look your world right in the eye, my God, I don’t run away from reality and take refuge in beautiful dreams... and I stubbornly praise your creation despite everything!”* she writes. A little further on, if we replace the word ‘life’ with ‘God’... *“When I stop being on my guard... all of a sudden there I am resting on the naked bosom of life and its arms that hold me are so gentle and so protecting. And the beating of its heart, I cannot really describe it – slow, so regular, so gentle, almost stifled, but so faithful, strong enough to never cease and at the same time so good, so merciful”*.



Some members of the moving team: Isabelle, Fady, Jean, Odile, Alain, Damien and Bruno

Our world seems to be on the edge of a cliff. Millions of men and women suffer from hunger, others are prisoners of fear, victims of wars, refugees in camps, exploited by mafias, innocent and imprisoned. We know all of this – the media speaks of this and then silence comes to encourage us to forget the cries, as if they no longer existed. The world is also undergoing a grave financial crisis. Everyone speaks about it, but have we really been touched by the realities of what it is to be in need? Life seems to continue on as if nothing was wrong.

One day we will hear, over the noise of fears, bells ringing and Christmas carols singing, *“Peace, peace, peace on earth”*. Christmas happens each day that out of darkness comes a small light. Yes, peace is in our hands, is in my hands. I can do small acts of tenderness and love to reveal to the different ‘others’ their beauty. At L’Arche, as with Faith and Light, we are not militants for a cause but rather witnesses of hope. We know the smiling and beautiful eyes, of Estelle; people say she has Down’s syndrome. Some would have liked to have killed her before she was born. Others would have liked to have healed her Down’s syndrome. But there she is, with her luminous eyes, revealing the presence of God. The world is turned upside-down. God of peace, so gentle, so humble and so merciful, is not hidden in the stars above us or in beautiful ideas of intelligent speeches but rather in the face of Estelle, the face of a child. It is not a matter of healing or eliminating these children but of creating places where all people, whatever fragilities or difficulties they might have, can find their place in society. It is not so much a question of ‘healing’ Estelle as it is a question of healing attitudes of fear and rejection that exist in our societies. It is a question of creating communities of welcome where all people can grow, develop, find confidence in themselves and discover the deep meaning of their lives.

Jesus, taking a child in his arms, calls his disciples to become like that small child in order to enter into the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love. Let us learn to welcome this tenderness, these eyes that wonder, this openness, this trust and this love that are the gifts of children. Jesus adds, *“Those who welcome a child in my name welcome me”*. To welcome Estelle is to welcome God. This God of peace is hidden in the smallest and the most wounded. Let us not try to climb up in the heavens but let us descend, yes, let us descend to meet

'Estelle' and people who have been rejected. It is about meeting them, heart to heart, person to person, with smiles in very gentle moments of communion; not to change them, but to meet them by making room in our hearts.

Let us go back to my new hermitage which is named Lazarus house. Lazarus was the brother of Martha and Mary of Bethany whom John speaks of in his gospel (Chapter 11). His sisters name him, when sending a message to Jesus - "He whom you love is ill." "He whom you love" is his name. John who wrote the fourth



gospel also calls himself the "disciple whom Jesus loved". The identity of Lazarus, as in the identity of John, is to be the "friend of Jesus", "loved by Jesus". Is that not the identity of us all, to be "loved by God"? This is the meaning of our lives and of the accomplishment of our lives. Today I believe that one day I will experience this in plenitude. Living Christmas in the house of Lazarus is a new stage for me. It is the beginning of the end of my life. I am going to learn with Etty to rest on the bosom of God and listen to the beating of God's heart.

Those who have come to my retreats on the Gospel of John know that a possibility exists (according to me) that Lazarus had a severe disability and that Jesus often came to rest near him. Lazarus house is a great place to become weaker! Christmas is a very gentle and mild time, even if continents in the south are under a burning summer sun. In France it is raining, the weather is mild and moments of sunshine are fairly rare. The world is going

through difficult times, but it has also seen beautiful demonstrations of peace. Wonderful people – to the right, to the left, above and underneath, of all different religions or without any religion – are looking for ways of showing peace, love and welcome to people who are different. They give their smiles, and these smiles sometimes spring from chaos. The announcement of peace is there in our hearts.

Let us be in communion with each other in this great network that exists around L'Arche and Faith and Light, where we are healed in relationships with people who are oppressed, isolated or in difficulty. It is a network that reaches out all over the world, in monasteries, in the hearts of Christians, Hindu, Muslims, Jews, and in temples, mosques, churches, chapels and synagogues, and in men and women who do not have any particular faith but believe in human beings. It is a great network where each person, according to the person's possibilities, works for peace and is an instrument of peace. I liked Izzeldin Abuelaish's book, "I shall not hate". This man lost three of his children, killed in Gaza by Israeli soldiers. Let us turn from all rejection of others to see in those "others" people capable of love and peace.

Pray for me, that I can learn to love. Some of the last words in Etty's journal were, "I want to be a balm poured on so many wounds."

Thank you for your cards and your letters. Thank you for all that you are.

That God blesses each of us and all of the people on this earth in this New Year.

With love,
Jean

P.S. You have probably not yet read the marvellous new book by Marie-Hélène Mathieu on the story of Faith and Light "Plus jamais seuls" (No longer alone)? It came out in French in October. Translations will follow, I hope.