

Letters of L'ARCHE®

A magazine published by the International Federation of L'Arche Communities

INTERNATIONAL



**On the
front page**
*Who knows ... and
God will guide us!*
**LUCIA
MURASHKO**

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Note: Respectful terminology to describe the people who are at the heart of L'Arche and for whom L'Arche was founded varies from one country to another. We invite you to substitute the terms used by our authors with those that are used and accepted in your country.



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In 2008, L'Arche International is:

- 135 communities
- 36 countries on 5 continents
- 2800 people with an intellectual disability



On the front page

Who knows ... and God will guide us!

LUCIA MURASHKO



Born in the Ternopil region, not far from Lviv, Sister Lucia Murashko is a member of the Order of St. Basil the Great, an order of the Greek Catholic Church. She has been a friend of Faith & Light and L'Arche for many years and spent a month in L'Arche Sledziejowice in Poland, as well as six months in L'Arche Arcobaleno in Italy. Last November, she was appointed founding community leader of L'Arche Kovcheh, the first L'Arche community in Ukraine

A nation under foreign domination

Ukraine is a country with a long and a difficult history. It has almost constantly been under foreign domination by one or the other of its strong neighbours, be it the Lithuanians, the Polish, the Austro-Hungarian Empire or, more recently, the Soviets. Due to this constant occupation, Ukrainians were not able to develop an independent political and economic system. Yet, they managed to keep alive their folklore, their music, their language, as well as their Christian heritage, and this despite the fact that many were forced to practice their religion in secret. Right up to the present day, Ukrainians have been a lively and a faithful people.



This is not to say that one Ukrainian is like another, as there is a big difference between Western and Eastern Ukraine. The East continues to be oriented towards Russia, and has lost great parts of its singu-

lar Ukrainian identity due to the long Russian occupation. Western Ukraine was equally under foreign control. Yet, its occupiers changed more often and left more Western influence. Today, we Western Ukrainians are oriented towards Europe, and are also well aware of their specific Ukrainian identity.

Ukrainians are very warm and hospitable people who like to celebrate and who are accustomed to hard work. Typically, Ukrainians live one day at a time. We are not particularly organised and long-term planning is definitely not part of our culture. If we must accomplish something, if a problem must be dealt with, we tend to say, "Well, it will be done somehow." Fortunately or unfortunately, we do not spend much time figuring out who should take on responsibility and how things could best be done. Difficult moments in life are just lived through very spontaneously. Ukrainians are used to hard work and are often gifted. Yet, very often, they do not recognise their own gifts and tend to lack some self-confidence.

The system and not the person

Under the Soviet occupation, a person was not treated as a person and one's gifts were used as instruments to benefit the system and not the individual. Ukrainians were not allowed to travel abroad. Consequently, we were quite closed up in ourselves, especially with regard to our culture and our national traditions. At the same time, those who celebrated national traditions were persecuted by the Russians. Under communism, it was better not to even attempt to analyze one's personal situation!

I could even say that people were afraid to be themselves. The celebration of our national traditions was one reason some of the Ukrainian elite were sent to prisons and camps in Siberia, especially after 1945.

Today, we in the Western part of Ukraine look towards the West. The hope of joining the EU is certainly based on our expectation that the Western model of society, which includes the protection of human rights, a free and liberal economic and political system, be applied to our country.

Ukrainians are now found around the world – especially women, who earn money for their families back home in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Diaspora spreads our culture to other countries, as Ukrainians share it with people they work and live with. In the homeward direction, they bring back the European culture and mentality to Ukraine. Ukrainians who live abroad are essential in this exchange of gifts in which we, Ukrainians, offer our friendship and our devotion to



God. We really trust God's power to give us the strength to live, especially through the hard times of our lives.

Thrown into the big wide world

Ukrainian women who work abroad are recognised for their gifts and abilities as teachers and doctors, or simply for their faithful and conscious attitude towards their job. Thanks to this experience in the West, we Ukrainians are learning to appreciate our own skills. This is also true of the discovery of our national traditions, our culture, and our spirituality. These seem to have been recognised by others first, and only then, thanks to this, by ourselves. International exchange gives us Ukrainians the space to reflect objectively on our own situation.

We have our heart, our humanity and our faith. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, as a nation, was not known to the world and foreigners would frequently mistake us for Russians. Today, our borders are open. We receive good things from abroad. But we are also – again – in danger of losing our culture, our mentality. The lack of constraints and limits and the abundance of novelty bring with them the temptation of forgetting who we are.

And it is only understandable that people who have lived in poverty for such a long time now want to live like those they see on TV, like Westerners. There is a temptation to throw everything away, to lose our rules, customs, and morality just to “do as the others.” Just as one can be lost in a highly regulated sys-



tem, we now risk being lost among with the variety of lifestyles that come to us from the West. We need to be taught to use our own minds and to have confidence in our own judgment.

A new vision of the person with a disability

Mykhajlo Matseliukh is a member of one of our workshops. He tells us about his life. "Before," he says, "I used to live in an institution. The boys there used to hit me and laugh at me. My mother died and now I live with my father in one room. My father has been a pensioner for many years, but he still goes to work to earn money and I go to the workshop. I love my friends at the workshop. I like to sing, to weave, and to make candles. On weekends, I wait for Monday so I can go back to the workshop again. When the weather is nice, we go to the park. We play football and cook sausages. On my birthday, we all ate a cake together! The workshop is my home!"

Recently, Mykhajlo's father, Anton, learned that he has cancer. This is very sad news, because the financial situation of Anton and Mykhajlo does not allow them to treat the disease. Anton is afraid that Mykhajlo will have to return to the institution after his death. L'Arche and its future house give hope to Anton. Mykhajlo is already happy today that he belongs to the community and trusts that it will secure his future.

The Ukrainian society has built up a spiritual hunger for an answer to the question of how to relate to

people with special needs. For many years, people with a disability were hidden in institutions, far away from society - just like Mykhajlo. Ukrainians were ashamed of their simple presence, which was considered a problem. Faith & Light and L'Arche are like bread given to a hungry society! There is still much room to make known our vision and our spirituality, but we can see how Ukrainians are beginning to adhere to our vision, how they are changing their attitudes. Today, Faith & Light and L'Arche are called to share the fruits that give life to so many families, young people and, of course, people with an intellectual disability.

Many of our visitors tell us that they have come to realise the need for an enhanced presence of people with a disability in a way that they never could have imagined. Often, they come to our communities to offer some of their time, to serve the poor. Only, after a short time, they notice that they are receiving more than they are giving. People with a disability have many gifts that they can share. At the same time, others feel good and of equal value in their presence. This is a rare treasure in our society.

Learning from others

We as L'Arche in Ukraine are very open to the Federation, to the international dimension of L'Arche. This may be because we are a new community and want to learn as much as possible, seeking the support of others. Having spoken earlier about our lack of self-confidence, I see this is as quite natural for Ukrainians. However, there are also other reasons.





Ukrainians are inclined to large communities that comprise many people. On the other hand, we have more difficulty building deep, personal relationships. In Soviet times, we were afraid to say anything political in public. On the other hand, we gathered in groups that made us strong enough to resist against the system that oppressed us. When you are persecuted, you automatically form a group against the oppressors. Our religious and cultural traditions have benefited from this unity. But we were all taught not to trust anybody outside your own family. It is therefore still not very easy for us to build deep relationships between one another. We must work hard in the field of formation and training to be able to fully live out the L'Arche philosophy. At least that's how I see it!

With greater insight into the Federation, we sometimes feel a bit afraid of the difficulties that L'Arche communities in other countries face, for example, their lack of assistants. We are very much aware that these problems will reach us due to the effect of globalisation and Ukraine's economic development.

Like any true Ukrainian, I am not really able to give my view on the future of the country or of our community. Here we would say, "Who knows! It will be done ... somehow. And God will certainly guide us." If I tell you that there will be a few beautiful communities in different cities, with several houses each and with wonderful members, I am sharing my dream. Before accomplishing this dream, we still have a lot of difficulties to overcome, and we need a lot of prayer.

Ukraine is a country in Eastern Europe. From the 9th century, the territory of Ukraine was a centre of the medieval East Slavic civilization forming the state of Kyivan Rus. From the 14th century on, the territory of Ukraine was divided among a number of regional powers and by the 19th century the largest part of Ukraine was integrated into the Russian Empire with the rest under Austro-Hungarian control. After a chaotic period of incessant warfare, several attempts at independence and two artificial famines in which over 8 million people died, Ukraine emerged in 1922 as one of the founding republics of the Soviet Union. In World War II, German and Soviet armies were responsible for some 7 to 8 million more deaths.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine became independent again. But democracy remained elusive as the legacy of state control and endemic corruption stalled efforts at economic reform, privatization, and civil liberties. In 2004, the results of a presidential election, which had been largely rigged, caused a public outcry in support of the opposition candidate. The protest led to the peaceful Orange Revolution, which brought about extensive constitutional reforms.

Under the communist occupation, the economy of Ukraine was the second largest in the Soviet Union. But the country's economy contracted severely following the Soviet collapse and the majority of the population plunged into poverty. Today, the Ukrainian economy grows rapidly and average salaries increase.

According to the Constitution, Ukrainian is the country's state language. But Russian is still widely spoken, especially in eastern and southern Ukraine. The dominant religion in Ukraine is Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which is currently split between three Church bodies. A distant second by the number of the followers is the Eastern Rite Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which practices a similar liturgical and spiritual tradition as Eastern Orthodoxy, but is in communion with the See of Rome and recognizes the primacy of the Pope as head of the Church.

It's ironic that Thomas, who has no family connection, has adopted an African country as his own. He's not concerned about where Kampala is. I don't think that he even knows that America and Africa are two different continents. What matters to him is that 'Jophes' and George are together, and that makes him feel good.

It reminds me of a declaration we made at the Covenant Retreat in Orval in Belgium in October: "Something wonderful is happening in our world because we are together, because we are friends, and because God is with us."

L'Arche International – lots of friends and places to go

All of this got me thinking about "Belonging to the International" in a different way, so I asked Noah, at our last sleepover, why being in L'Arche is a good thing. At eight years old his priorities are similar to Thomas' – Because I have lots of friends all over the

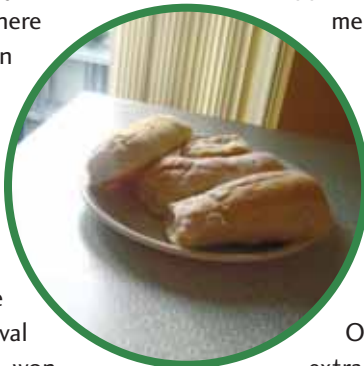
Maria, Jillian, Thomas and Megan

world and there are good places to go on holidays.

Sometimes I fall into the trap of thinking of L'Arche International in terms of our structures. Other times I get hung up on our Mission and the obstacles that get in the way. From now on I'm going to adopt Noah's definition: "L'Arche International – lots of friends and places to go."

It's what I first loved in L'Arche – the friends and the travelling, but lately I've started to forget. 'Downside

up' is the only way for me to see straight. I'll have to start looking through my inner clown's eyes again to appreciate the fun. Write to me often to keep me reminded.



«Belfast Baps», a local pastry

It's the smallest things in life that make the biggest difference. A

friendship like yours and Thomas' can seem like an everyday thing. Ordinary it might be, but it bears extraordinary fruit. We are connected through three continents in a world wide web of humanity because of it.

Friendship gives an identity that expands our world

Your friendship gives Thomas an identity that expands his world – he's no longer just 'a client' or a 'service user', an abandoned son, a lonely brother, or an unknown uncle. He is someone's friend, with the possibility of creating a network of friendships spreading outwards in ever widening circles. When you gave him your beige cord jacket and the new red shoes, could you ever have imagined that?

I notice in myself that my joy and hope exist in equal measure to my inner world, and yet here I am in Belfast, a city that is about family and locality to the point where kerbstones are painted in accordance with the politics, and people rarely cross the invisible borders that define their social, political, and cultural identities. Thank God for friends who keep me connected to a world beyond borders!



Luc Ganty, from L'Arche in Brussels, was the Zone Co-ordinator here for a number of years and he too was passionate about the power and the possibility of friendship. I think that you were around when he died last year. I was sad that I hadn't taken the time to visit him when he was ill. It's one of my regrets. Like most people in our culture, I was too busy to attend to what keeps me human and alive –



Larry, the photographer of these pictures

my friends. That kind of busyness is the silent pandemic of our Western world.

I love getting news from the Pearl of Africa. It makes me happy and sad at the same time. There are moments

when I'm envious of you and I long to pack my bags and head off to freedom and possibility. I realize that my glasses are rose tinted, but it reminds me of the L'Arche that I said "Yes" to 20 years ago - a human response to human need. I'm not underestimating the impact of the sheer physical poverty of the majority world, but there are other kinds of poverty in our world today that are devastating in a less obvious but maybe more sinister way. That's the poverty that scares me most. Along those lines, I was touched by this extract from Richard Rohr.

Even though our houses here in Belfast are made of bricks and mortar with lockable doors, maybe, just maybe, we are still managing to keep the mud hut mentality alive! What a sign of contradiction we will be if that is true.

You, Me, Thomas, and George - we are part of a web that is spreading to places that we don't even know but belong to us anyway. We are the local faces of the 'International'.

Speaking of faces and places, did you know that James is marrying Fayth in Seattle in a few weeks? We also want to know if Beatrice is still in the community there. We've heard nothing about her for a while. If she is, please pass on our love.

It's your birthday today, Joseph. I pray that it's a happy one and a happy year and that you're celebrated in true African style.

Stone Houses

Some people live without anything and have everything.

The example that always comes to mind for me is in Africa. This little old black African man and I prayed together after a long session. He prayed with such tenderness, saying, "O Lord, help us never to move into stone houses." And everybody echoed, "Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord."

Afterward I asked the missionaries what he had meant. "Well," a priest said, "look at the villages. They're all door-less thatch huts. And so as long as you live a simple life in a thatch hut with no doors, you don't know where your family ends and where the next family begins. You move in and out of one another's lives, and it's all really one family. And there's no possessing; there's no mine and yours; it's ours. It's a world of community. Once the first stone hut is built in a village," the missionary continued, "very quickly a door and locks are put on it. Immediately the world of 'mine' and 'yours' is created. The entire social worldview, the entire understanding of self, changes, but... I'd say you can't see God very well if you spend too much time inside your stone house." (Richard Rohr, *A Spirituality of Subtraction*)

Stay Connected – we are with you even if we seem far away. Let us know if you need anything.

Peace,
Maria

P.S. Thomas and Larry and Megan have attached a letter and some photos for George.

Mrs McGlade

Ormeau Road,
Belfast
Northern Ireland
18 February 2008

Dear George,

I wanted to write you a letter after reading your community's news recently. Megan is typing for me. We are so sorry to hear that you lost your friend, Annet, last year. Thank you for telling us all about her life — she sounds like a good friend.

I am interested in the Special Olympics, too. As my rest evening activity these days, I have joined a Special Olympics club here in Belfast. We do running and jumping and bowls and more running. I go at 6 o'clock every Friday, dinnertime! I have a wee snack before I go then I get my dinner when I come back. Sometimes I have a wee bun or something. I don't have time to have a bap, my favourite thing to eat.



I looked in a catalogue yesterday because I am looking for a table and chair for my room. I want to be able to write letters to my friends in my room. Megan gave me a letter-writing box for Christmas and that started the idea of a desk. Maybe the next letter I send to you will be written from my table.

Joseph Huffman is my friend who lived with us for a year as an assistant. Has he reached your community yet? I know Joseph will make you all laugh and feel happy! If Joseph misses Belfast, you can tell him to look at the pictures that Larry took today to send along with this letter. There is Paul at the Post Office, Mrs. McGlade at the shop, a cuppa tea & baps, and me, Jillian, Larry, Marie, and

Megan.

I think of the time when you and Beatrice visited and the walks and drives we took. It makes me happy to remember collecting you in Mary's red car. Mary has a silver car now. I hope that you have happy memories of your days in L'Arche Belfast.

Send me your news when you can—it's not a big hurry.

Paul, the postmaster



Your Friend,
Thomas