

Letters of L'ARCHE®

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

COMMITMENT



On the front page: *Make hope possible, rather than
despair convincing* – DON WRIGHT

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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 is:

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



Portrait

*My friend, my friend...
when are you coming?*

PABLO AND MARIA MULLEN

Pablo is 19 years old and has Down syndrome. He is one of the most important people in my life, the only brother - of my five siblings – who still lives with me in my parents' home; the only one who knocks at my door every night, just to say, "Maria? Good night. I love you very much."

It was through Pablo that I got to know L'Arche Argentina. We live close to the community, which is very important for Pablo. Because his school is far away, Pablo had no friends in the neighborhood. Without any special activities organised, he would spend his afternoons reading, watching TV, or drawing – all by himself.

Today, every time I go to L'Arche, he jumps up to meet Daniel, Osvaldo, or Maxi with whom he enjoys listening to music, talking, or working in the workshop. He loves going to L'Arche. And I love what L'Arche does to him, me, my family, and even my friends. It is here where I witnessed for the first time how Pablo raised his finger, in the middle of Mass or prayer, to say, "I want to talk." What a surprise to hear his thoughts, his words to God, words of prayer and thanks. He feels part of L'Arche. And so do I.

"Do you know what "commitment" means?" I asked Pablo. "No, what is it?" he replied, stopping drawing and staring at me through his glasses. I realized that talking with my younger brother about two abstract concepts, such as "commitment" and "belonging," was not going to be easy.



Pablo, do you know what it means to belong? To feel part of something, like a team?

Yes, I belong to a football team with other kids. We have a captain, Matias. He picked me to be his team. I like that.

Do you feel you belong in L'Arche? How?

I feel good. I love to go and eat with them. I love barbecues. Also, my friends Fernando, Sandra, Maxi, Osvaldo.

You like that they care for you?

Yes! A lot.

Yet, I remember a day, when you were tired and didn't want to go to visit them. Your friend Osvaldo was sad.

No. That was in the past, Maria! Not now, not anymore.

Do you know what the word "commitment" means?

No, what is it?

For example, if I tell you that I will take you to have an ice cream but then I do something else, I break a commitment. That's bad.

Not Maria, it's OK! It is not so important.

Would you not be sad if I went to do something else?

Well yes, I would not like you to do something else.

What does it mean to be friends with someone?

Being a friend is like a promise. Like a wedding.

What things do you do with your friends?

Yes! With friends I like to go and have an ice cream, chat, have dinner, give presents, remember their birthdays, go to their parties.

And if they go away, do you forget them?

No. I miss them.

What if something happens to them? If they get sick?

Nooo... that's not going to happen! They are not going to get sick. If that happens, I have to pray.

If Osvaldo, who is old, gets sick, what would you do?

Pray. And I would tell him to take his pills and medication. Or if, for example, he has a cough, I would tell him to have tea with lemon. And I would visit him.

When you love someone and feel loved in return, it makes you feel good. But it also generates a commitment, right? To take care of and not to forget the person. Just as you do with the puppy that you love so much.

Yes. When puppies are born they came out from their mother's belly. First one, then two, then three.

What do they need when they are born?

They need to drink milk until they grow and grow and turn big. Then, when they are thirsty, yes, we must give them water.

But what happens when you're tired and do not want to worry about people you love?

No, I am not tired!

But sometimes, instead of going to L'Arche, you want to stay at home watching TV.

Some days yes... but not now.

Do you remember when Osvaldo was waiting for you and you didn't visit him? He called you. What did he say?

He told me, "Pablo, my friend no more! When are you coming?"

When you finally went to visit him, what did he do?

He ran to hug me and told me twice, "My friend, my friend!"



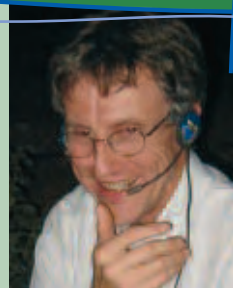
L'Arche Argentina



Another look

The will to be changed, the desire to be transformed

PATRICK FONTAINE



Jamil is from Palestine. After living at L'Arche Bethany, he was obliged to return to Malja hospital during the Gulf War, when the L'Arche community and its workshop closed. For the past 16 years, Jamil has lived in an institution that provides food and bedding to a hundred people with mental disabilities. During the day, Jamil is in a wheelchair, and for several years now, he has frequently been confined to his bed owing to the effects of a stroke. For a long time, Kathy B., as well as several other friends, has been visiting Jamil. At the beginning of June, for the first time, Kathy came accompanied by Jean-Christophe Pascal, International Coordinator for L'Arche. At the sight of this unknown visitor, Jamil held out his hand and introduced himself in an unexpected fashion. "How do you do?" he said. "My name is Jamil and I'm a member of L'Arche." Jamil is unaware that he has not been registered with L'Arche for many years now. For Jamil, he is simply part of the L'Arche family.

The sense of commitment is first and foremost compassion and openness, more or less deeply rooted. We should learn to involve people with disabilities in every discussion on this theme, as they are partners in the founding relationship fundamental to L'Arche.

What rational definition of commitment can be added to this heart-felt insight? We could discuss ideas about an individual's aspirations in relation to the community's. In this sense, commitment to L'Arche would be the bond created; the subsequent fruit and transformation; its objective and its ensuing transmission to the world. All this would be coherent with our identity and our mission statement.

For some years in southern Europe, such questions have been debated, and we have focussed particularly on the commitment made by assistants. The pathway trod is indeed difficult, as communities and individuals hesitatingly thread their way, advancing by trial and error, between upset and unity, conflict and communion.



Jamil, Palestine

Consequently, we would like to take this opportunity to present two aspects of assistants' sense of commitment to L'Arche that we have examined.

Commitment is multi-faceted within us

Commitment rests upon three elements manifest within three stages of the founding history of L'Arche.

The first element goes back to August 1964, the founding of L'Arche. At that time, Jean Vanier put into practice an insight of his spiritual director, Father Thomas, for which it is still not possible to quantify the ramifications. In short, Jean experienced a call to 'do something' and decided to share his life with the poor. During its initial years, L'Arche was at times portrayed as a "charity." "Doing something for"¹ the disabled was part and parcel of the founding insight. Generosity is an element of commitment. It is one of

¹ Kathryn Spink, *The Miracle, the Message, the Story* : Jean Vanier and L'Arche, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., p.63

the responses to the recurrent question posed by God² to humans: "What have you done to your brother?" It is with us today in the act of giving freely, inherent within commitment to L'Arche. Such generosity is

Meeting of the zone Southern Europe and the Middle East

also one of the cornerstones of the Islamic culture. And it is on this notion of generosity that the basis for an interactive dialogue between the Islamic culture and the spirituality of L'Arche could come about.

With the ongoing founding process, we have grown beyond the simple generosity of the initial period. It is arguably regrettable - an inevitable source of embarrassment - that generosity is often the only aspect of L'Arche understood outside our communities. On the other hand, theorists³ focusing on this generosity have developed a reflection on the sense of commitment that is far from irrelevant. That said, L'Arche has since moved on to other stages.

The second stage took the nascent community by surprise with the dawn of a new culture in March 1965. In accepting a role as director of the Val Fleuri, a small institution for men with mental disabilities, Jean Vanier brought about the entry of L'Arche into a larger, institutional world. The subsequent change was radical. The few assistants in L'Arche at the time were somewhat baffled.⁴ And only two people then working at Val Fleuri decided to remain. By virtue of that choice, their commitment was tantamount to that of assistants. From then on, within L'Arche, 'employment', 'working hours', and 'director', became common parlance, and the influence of external regulations meant 'service', 'management', and 'quality' gradually became familiar. Nowadays, all non-salaried members of L'Arche are engaged in a community-employer context. This



influences our relationships and sets us apart from other young communities such as Faith and Light. Born out of a desire to be different, L'Arche nonetheless renewed contact with the institutional practices it initially rejected. In doing so, L'Arche recognised its mission and the expertise of professionals. On the other hand, it meant L'Arche thereafter had to be deliberate in showing that community life put into practice the cherished values on which it was founded.

At that point, L'Arche could have stayed put, aligning itself with its peers and numerous charitable institutions, particularly in the West. And yet, during the initial years, without being able to fix a precise date, the final founding stone of L'Arche was placed. Throughout the preceding months, Jean Vanier had become conscious of the benefits of living together with Philippe, Raphael, and others who joined their small community. The simplicity of day-to-day life, small festive gatherings, the happiness of being with each other, differences mended, forgiveness exchanged - all this and more transformed Jean's life and his relationship with the world at large. Joy, happiness, and peace blossomed within, com-



L'Arche Bologna

elling him to share this newfound joy with others. As for the assistants, predisposed to help others, they discovered that it was they who reaped manifold fruits. And Jean, herald of glad tidings, harvested a relationship yielding unimagined joy. More and more, Jean witnessed a revolution that could change the world. It was at that point that L'Arche's foundations were well and truly laid. In short, the commit-

² Genesis IV, 10

³ Paul Fustier, *Le lien d'accompagnement, entre don et contrat salarial*, Paris, Dunod

⁴ Kathryn Spink, *The Miracle, the Message, the Story : Jean Vanier and l'Arche*, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., p.71



ment to L'Arche is desiring this relationship, this transformation, and the mission of L'Arche consists in revealing it to the world.

Commitment to L'Arche is akin to a mosaic formed from this three-fold quest for generosity, professional involvement, and transformation. These three elements co-exist in us and we act upon them and respond to them continually. We might well lament a lack of purity within the L'Arche sense of commitment, even deny the existence of one facet in favour of another, but this would be tantamount to rejecting our story. To name each aspect, to give honour where due, to develop each and every one - this contributes to unifying each respective person, to bringing harmony into our communities, and to rendering L'Arche rich and fertile.



stance raises fresh questions. Thus, we remained for many years in a state of bafflement, not knowing how to go beyond the disagreements that separated communities from each other.

One day, while studying the Bible, we came across the gospel text about wedding guests (Lk 14: 15-24). This parable, describing a supper for the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind, is one of L'Arche's founding texts.

L'Arche in Switzerland

In the story, the king's friends - those deemed 'suitable' - deign not to accept an invitation to his wedding banquet. Instead, he hosts people he finds on the street. An analogy may be made to idealistic people who do not visit - or rarely visit - our communities. They are like the king's friends. Akin to the banquet in the parable, the L'Arche 'wedding' is not peopled with the expected guests, but with those bumped into, and off the beaten track.

Commitment is multi-faceted between us

Eight years ago, within L'Arche southern Europe, we began working on the concept of belonging, which gradually developed into a reflection on commitment. First of all, we attempted a pooling of our ideas about belonging. We were quickly mystified. The criteria for belonging, as defined by L'Arche, is accepted by the communities, but being incorporated into a system of belonging causes embarrassment, a degree of opposition, if not fear. Each person's past is invariably scarred by suffering and a sense of being judged. Clarifying the meaning of belonging can be useful, but taken alone can reinforce the barriers between persons rather than what unites them. In such a context, members employed as staff, or those whose identity is difficult to define, feel undermined. Likewise, those members whose identity is more secure are uncomfortable narrowly defining themselves. In short, certain communities would like another way to be able to incorporate members whose sexual orientation, family situation, or faith

But how do we decide, if at all, to the limit L'Arche's welcome? How far do we push the barriers? What becomes the reference point to distinguish between what is community and what is not? We admire the king in the parable who ensures, as a self-respecting Eastern host, that his guests are well received. But when the story is told in Matthew, some guests arrive without the proper apparel, and the king rejects them (Mt 22: 1-14).

What is this "apparel" vital for each member of the L'Arche "wedding"? From the numerous symbols attached to wedding apparel in the Bible, L'Arche has retained that of change, of transformation. At the beginning of history, Adam and Eve, fallen from grace, leave Eden clothed in animal skins (Gn 4: 21-24), and at the end of history, the resurrection scene in Revelation sees human beings transformed and attired in white (Rev 7:9). Elsewhere, be it the healing of Legion, demon-possessed (Mk 5: 1-20), or be it the

5 DI202-1990-Membership-EN

return of the prodigal son (Lk 15: 11-32), the person's transformation is accompanied by "fresh apparel."

Change and moving onwards

Involvement in a community, means adorning the "apparel": accepting change and transformation, and moving onwards.

L'Arche Kovtchek, Ukraine

And so, little by little, we move from a static vision of belonging to a dynamic vision of commitment. Concern with our identity or position within the community becomes relegated to the back seat. The barriers associated with belonging are not so much removed as become secondary. Commitment is everything, comprising as it does the will to change, the desire to be transformed.

This reversal in thinking has manifest ramifications, such the way in which assistants are assessed. The key question becomes not, "Where are you?" but, "How are you evolving?" With this in mind, the most bewildering differences are accepted as a logical part of our development. The danger of eyeing each other in a moralising way lessens. The greatest differences can be viewed as a source of enrichment instead of being perceived as a threat.

In southern Europe, we are currently compelled to open up to fresh and atypical situations with assistants, notably those who are involved with L'Arche without being a member of a community. The list of such cases is long, which we illustrate by the following few examples:

In Ukraine, alongside the new L'Arche community, Kovtchek, is the Emmaüs Centre, in which three assistants are involved full-time. Their mission is to contribute to the development in Ukraine of the values of L'Arche and Faith and Light. They support L'Arche communities, actively work with the media, and participate in Katimaviks (gatherings).

In Serbia and the neighbouring countries, a former assistant who is not a member of any L'Arche community was sent on a mission to promote the values of L'Arche, to develop contacts, and to prepare the way for future communities.

We also have in mind various personal situations, such as those of former members and their spouses who no longer share in a daily community life but remain nonetheless linked to L'Arche and committed to its mission.

Finally, how can we overlook Jamil and his ten companions from Malja in Palestine, who were never consulted regarding their removal from the L'Arche membership lists, they, nor their community?

As a result, the following questions are raised within our own Zone: Can one be involved in L'Arche without being a member of a community? If so, using what criteria? With what means of support? What kind of recognition? What sort of regulatory structure? These questions are beyond us and we need the advice and support of the Federation in order to tackle them.

The work undertaken in southern Europe on the theme of commitment enabled us to understand its growing diversification. Far from concerning us, diversity seems to us to be a core component of L'Arche. Nevertheless, if the diversity of people welcomed into L'Arche is generally seen as a source of enrichment, we realised that diversity among assistants is perceived uncomfortably. This is despite one of the mission statements L'Arche adopted at Assisi: "To develop a community environment which corresponds to the changing needs of our members."

Jamil is, in fact, prophetic. And the sense of commitment is one of the ways forward for L'Arche. In short, we are pilgrims called to take risks to enhance the quality, the openness, and the fruitfulness of community life.



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