



Jean Vanier

Jean Vanier was a Canadian humanitarian and social visionary. Founder of L'Arche and co-founder of Faith and Light, Vanier was a passionate advocate for persons with intellectual disabilities and a world where each person is valued and belongs.



BACKGROUND

JEAN VANIER was born on September 10, 1928, in Geneva, Switzerland, the fourth of five children of Canadian parents, future Governor General Georges Vanier and Madame Pauline Vanier.

Jean received a broad education in England, France, and Canada. At age 13, he informed his parents of his intention to leave Canada to join the Royal Navy in Great Britain. His father responded, “I don’t think it’s a good idea, but I trust you.” Jean said that his father’s trust in him touched him deeply and gave him confidence in his inner voice throughout his life.

Vanier entered the Royal Navy at *Dartmouth Naval College* in 1942. From 1945 to 1950, he served on several warships, accompanying the British royal family in 1947 on their tour of South Africa aboard the HMS Vanguard. He transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy in 1949. During this period he

“Jean Vanier’s inspirational work is for all humanity, including people with intellectual disabilities. In a world where we fear differences and misunderstand each other, where our religions all too often distrust one another, Jean Vanier has used faith and values to build peace and to discover the best in all of humanity.”

TIMOTHY SHRIVER,
CHAIRMAN & CEO,
SPECIAL OLYMPICS



Raphaël Simi, Jean Vanier and
Philippe Seux in 1966

began to pray during long stretches serving watch on the ship’s bridge and came to realize that his future would move beyond the life of a naval officer.

He resigned his naval commission in 1950 and devoted himself to theological and philosophical studies, obtaining his doctorate in 1962 from the *Institut Catholique* in Paris with a widely praised dissertation, “*Happiness as Principle and End of Aristotelian Ethics.*”

L’ARCHE IS FORMED

IN 1964, VANIER was lecturing in philosophy at *St. Michael’s College* at the University of Toronto, but he was increasingly attracted to the life of intentional Christian communities living with the poor. He was invited by his spiritual director to visit psychiatric hospitals in northern France where men with intellectual disabilities were living. He was disturbed by the rejection and loneliness of the men he met, yet also moved by their openness. He felt called to share his life in community with some of them. Jean’s understanding of his call crystallized when one of the men asked him simply, “*Will you be my friend?*”

With the support of family, friends, and professionals, Vanier welcomed two men from an institution, Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux, to live with him in a small house in Trosly-Breuil, a village north of Paris. He named the house *L’Arche* (the ark). In 1965, Vanier was named the head of the *Val Fleuri*, a small institution in the village, becoming an administrator as well as the leader of a small community. Life together was challenging, yet full of joy. It was a place of friendship, belonging and growth for Vanier and the assistants as much as it was for the men with disabilities.

For many years, Vanier returned to Canada twice a year to lecture, give retreats and talk about his new life, often to university students, some of whom visited Trosly to live and work. In 1969, two Canadians who lived at *L’Arche* returned home to start *Daybreak* in Richmond Hill, Ontario – the first *L’Arche* community in North America.

In 1970, a community began in Bangalore India, and *L’Arche* became inter-faith. The *International Federation of L’Arche*



“He would never claim any great achievement for himself, yet there can be no doubt that his work has produced a kind of ‘prophetic sign’, pointing to new possibilities for the global human community.”

REV. PROF. EMERITUS
FRANCES YOUNG,
PRO-VICE-CHANCELLOR,
UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

was formed as L’Arche spread quickly around the world. Today, there are 149 communities and 14 projects in 37 countries around the world.

OTHER WORKS

JEAN VANIER became a voice for vulnerable and marginalized people around the world. In 1971, with Marie-Hélène Mathieu, he founded *Faith and Light*, an international support network for families who have a member with a disability. Today, there are 1,500 Faith and Light communities in 82 countries. In 2000, with Gilles La Cardinale, he co-founded *Intercordia*, an experiential learning program for university students.

Vanier traveled extensively throughout the world to establish and support L’Arche and Faith and Light communities, to give talks and retreats especially to young people and those at the margins of society, including in prisons, and to further his commitment to reach out across religious differences among Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and people of other faiths.

Jean Vanier wrote more than 30 books, including the bestseller, *Becoming Human* (based on the 1998 Massey Lectures), which have been translated into 29 languages.

Among the honours he has received are the *Companion of the Order of Canada* (1986), *Grand Officer of the National Order of Quebec* (1992), *French Legion of Honour* (2003), and the *Templeton Prize* (2015). In March 2014, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the founding of L’Arche, Vanier met with *Pope Francis* along with people from L’Arche communities around the world. In January 2015, he spoke at the House of Lords in London on “*Why do the Strong Need the Weak?*”

A man of deep faith, Jean Vanier allowed his thinking to be informed by encounters with people of other faiths and cultures. Into his 80s, he continued to write and to travel the world to encourage local L’Arche and Faith and Light communities and to announce his vision of humanity to many thousands of people from all walks of life. His home remained with his brothers and sisters in L’Arche Trosly where he had lived since 1964.

Jean Vanier died on May 7, 2019, in Paris.



Jean and Francis Maurice
PHOTO: IRENE BORINS ASH

“The fundamental principle of peace is a belief that each person is important. Do you believe you are important? Do you believe – do we believe – that we can do something to make this world a better place? Why is the gap between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless growing? There can be no peace unless we can become aware of where this growing gap comes from.”

JEAN VANIER



L'Arche Canada is part of the International Federation of L'Arche communities. In L'Arche, persons with intellectual disabilities and those who support them share life in communities of friendship and belonging.

The Mission of L'Arche is to:

- Make known the gifts of people with intellectual disabilities, revealed through mutually transforming relationships.
- Foster an environment in community that responds to the changing dreams and needs of our members, while being faithful to the vision and core values of our founding story.
- Engage in our diverse cultures, working together toward a more human society.

In 30 communities across Canada, L'Arche supports over 800 persons with intellectual disabilities to live a good life in their communities.

L'Arche Canada is working to increase our impact in Canada through development and growth initiatives, public dialogue, education and advocacy, and around the world in solidarity with L'Arche communities in developing countries.

You can help L'Arche Canada in its mission by working with us (<http://www.larche-work.ca>), or by making a donation through the Foundation (<http://www.larchefoundation.ca>).

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