

# WELCOME as a WAY OF LIFE



A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF JEAN VANIER

Benjamin S. Wall

foreword by  
John Swinton

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# Foreword

JEAN VANIER STANDS AT around six-and-a-half feet tall. The height of his body reflects the depths of his heart. In 1964 Vanier did a small thing. After spending time in Paris in various institutions for people with disabilities, he emerged shocked and determined to change things. His horror at the violence and oppression meted out to people with intellectual disabilities did not result in a political movement or a heroic act of social justice. Rather he did something very simple, but deeply radical. He took three men with severe intellectual disabilities into his home in Trosly-Breuil, northeast of Paris, and lived with them in community in the spirit of the friendships of Jesus and the teachings of the Beatitudes. On the first night one of the men, Dany, became so disturbed that he had to go back to the institution from which he had come. But Vanier and the two other men, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, persevered. They lived together not as carer and cared for, but as *friends* who shared their lives in mutuality and vulnerability. From that small gesture emerged the L'Arche (the Ark) movement, which now comprises 147 communities across the world, all of which live according to this powerful relational dynamic. But of course, like many stories that are tinged with romance, the reality is much more complicated.

There is no question that Vanier is a unique, wonderful, and in many ways saintly individual who sees the world differently from many others. His writings and his presence reveal a world of gentleness and humility; a world where the weak are considered strong and the vulnerable become paradigmatic of God's coming kingdom. Vanier, and the communities that he has founded, inspire and challenge us to think differently; to *be* different. I remember a few years ago meeting up with Jean at a get-together of the L'Arche theology group in Birmingham, United Kingdom. The meeting was held in a beautiful old nunnery on the outskirts of the town. I flew down from Aberdeen, jumped in a taxi and made my way to the venue. As I arrived and began to walk up the long driveway towards the nunnery, I saw Jean walking in the garden. When he saw me, his face

lit up. I immediately felt welcomed. He began walking purposely towards me. When he was about six feet away he reached out his arms and offered me the possibility of an embrace. I moved forward and we entered into what was a quite wonderful non-self-conscious hug that was dripping with the nectar of communion. “John!” he exclaimed. “So good to see you. Let’s walk.” And so we walked hand-in-hand up the driveway towards the nunnery. Now, under normal circumstances I would feel rather strange about walking hand-in-hand with an elderly man in the garden of a nunnery! But that is not how it is with Jean. The grace of his presence overcame the power of my pointless self-consciousness and enabled a form of communion that simply would not normally have been available to me. Those of us who wish to hide behind barriers of self-consciousness, lack of humility, and a desire to please those who look at us even if we do not know them, find ourselves revealed in the presence of such embodied grace. On that day, Vanier’s embrace functioned as an exemplar of the grace that the L’Arche communities have embodied and drawn to the attention of the world.

Vanier is special. Nevertheless, the standard narrative of the L’Arche communities can sometimes be construed in terms that are overly romantic. The very foundations of L’Arche were, as Benjamin Wall powerfully draws out, imbued with apparent failure. Dany was sent back to where he came from. Likewise the beautiful gracefulness of Vanier’s life and presence is marked by the realization that in the face of the most vulnerable people Vanier could be tempted towards violence. Like all of God’s creation, there is a shadow side to the story of L’Arche. In focusing on a deep and intricate practical theology of L’Arche’s practices of welcoming, Benjamin Wall opens up the story of these communities in ways that are fresh, honest, and deeply significant for the communities and for the world that is the object of their signification. Benjamin Wall presents a picture of L’Arche that is deep and rich and honest. He holds in critical tension the beauty of community, the power of welcoming, and the dangers and difficulties that accompany such practices. As such, his contribution to our understanding of Jean Vanier and the L’Arche communities is both edgy and warm.

There are many accounts of the L’Arche communities that have

been written over the years. Some of them focus on the nature of community, some narrate Vanier's life, some focus on the spirituality of the L'Arche communities and others emphasize his philosophy. There are however relatively few studies that have really tried to dig into the *theology* of Vanier and the deep and vital theological roots which formed and continue to sustain the L'Arche communities. Part of the reason for this is that Vanier is a rather strange theologian. As you read through his written works it is rare to find extensive referencing, complicated words and ideas, formal academic philosophy, or engagement with current debates around the epistemology or ontology of God. Instead, what one discovers are narratives, aphorisms, and nuggets of wisdom that reveal the beauty not only of disabled lives, but of all human lives. This could lead us to think that Vanier is the type of practical theologian who tends to have nothing to say to what we might call "formal academic theology." To think this would be a profound mistake, a mistake that Benjamin Wall is very aware of and seeks to address with care and sensitivity. Vanier's writing may appear to be simple, but once one begins to reflect theologically on what he says and what he does—and it is important to note that in Vanier's thinking there is no separation between the two—the depth of his theology quickly moves to the fore. As Wall theologically engages Vanier's thinking, so the richness and depth of Vanier's theology floats to the surface like cream on a fresh pint of milk.

The L'Arche communities are dynamic and ever changing. We need people like Benjamin Wall to help us track the changes and talk into to those complex and difficult issues that emerge when human beings attempt to live in community. I commend this book as a wonderful contribution not only to our understanding of Jean Vanier and the L'Arche communities, but more broadly to our understanding of humanness. Wall's work enables all of us in all of our different situations and contexts to discover a little bit more about what it means to be human and to live humanly in a world that often militates against both.

John Swinton

University of Aberdeen

September 2015

## Preface

LIKE ALL THEOLOGICAL PURSUITS, this book is an attempt to furnish a theological reading of the practical impulses that inform and shape Jean Vanier's writings and the aims and social forming dynamics of L'Arche. One of the aims of this book is to develop a practical theological account of the role welcome plays in the shaping of the Christian ethos according to Vanier's communal account represented in his writings and exemplified within L'Arche. Throughout this book the writings of Jean Vanier are read within the frame of a theocentric account of ethics taking God to be the primary object of all ethical inquiry. Since Vanier's writings convey the notion that living fully human involves both an awareness and responsivity to God's activity in the world, the foregrounded contention of this book is that central to the tasks of Christian theology and ethics is listening to the Word of God. Vanier asks not how we ought to live but how our lives are to listen and remain responsive to God, and God appearing in and through God's Word, creation, and others in particular. Essentially, this work attempts to highlight how Vanier's writings and L'Arche theologically name what it means to be and become human rightly. To be and become human is to be addressed by God. As we will see, for Vanier, listening and responsivity to this divine address is central to the moral life of our creaturely existence.



# Acknowledgements

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I am also indebted to the Collegetown Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John's University in Collegetown MN for granting me time, space, and opportunity to engage the Brethren of Saint John's Abbey and the Sisters of the Order of Saint Benedict at Saint Benedict's Monastery; both monastic communities supported the early stages of the development of this book through their extraordinary Christian witness and hospitality, interactions, and conversations on Christian witness, hospitality, and friendship throughout the duration of my time in residence within the St. John's community. Additionally, I am extremely indebted to Sue Mosteller, who provided not only a wealth of wisdom and constructive feedback on my reading of L'Arche and Jean Vanier but also shared many experiences of her life in L'Arche in story form during our time together at the Collegetown Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research.

I am profoundly thankful to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Trosly-Breuil, who provided the opportunity for me to experience the beauty of genuine hospitality and gain a greater understanding of what so many people mean when they commonly characterize L'Arche as a prophetic witness in the world and Church. My time with Vanier combined with the numerous encounters with core members of L'Arche were far more life giving and resourceful than any publication and/or

presentation I could find in their trove of resources. My brief time with Jean Vanier and L'Arche has had and continues to have a profound effect on my life and thinking about what it means to live and worship.

I am also very grateful to many colleagues in Houston Graduate School of Theology and Greensboro College. In particular, I am indebted to Douglas Kennard for reading and critiquing drafts of these chapters, Stephanie Hruzek for her encouragement and keen eyesight during final proofreading, and Robert Mclachlan, Cameron Moran, Cindy Burns, Emmanuel Paulpeter, Ashley Gibson, Fr. Carl Lund, Wesley Mclachlan, Rev. Alan Hawkins, and Dodd Drake for listening hearts, fruitful conversations, and spiritual nourishment during the final stages of this book. I am also thankful to Rosie and Anne Gant for their generous support of my post within the Religion, Ethics, and Philosophy department at Greensboro College.

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**Benjamin S. Wall**

Greensboro College  
October 2015

# Introduction

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT the practical theology of Jean Vanier. Drawing from the large corpus of Vanier's writings, this book situates Vanier's theological thinking on community, care, and what it means to be and become human in the context of "welcome." This book is an attempt to draw attention to how "welcome," for Vanier, entails a way of life visibly expressed through gestures of welcome rooted in love and trust that take shape in welcoming others, befriending the stranger, and celebrating difference; gestures that embody an ethos of counter witness predicated on a commonly held vision of the good life, a politics that refuses modern liberal societal tendencies to displace *being* and *belonging* subservient to *doing* and possession; gestures of genuine hospitality, mutual support, togetherness, and belonging that offer an alternative way of conceiving and naming the social forming dynamics within Christian community, with special attention given to how "welcome" occurs within the communities of L'Arche. Throughout this work I constructively develop and name Vanier's practical theology as a "theology of welcome," demonstrating how welcome underlies and informs Vanier's understanding and practice of a way of life embodied in listening and remaining responsive to God, and God's ways within the story of human existence in particular.

At a deeper level, this book assesses Vanier's thinking on the place and role both the self and community play in welcoming the truth of reality as it is revealed and given within community in order to prepare the way for exploring how "welcome," for Vanier, is a sign of community life, the concretization of individual and communal trust in God's providence, and a conduit of God's presence in the world. In order to demonstrate how welcome cultivates life and growth within community, one's life, and one's life in relation to the community, this book highlights how "welcome," for Vanier, is a way of life inclined toward listening and remaining responsive to others; namely, God who is wholly Other, and then to other people. Moreover, this work constructively examines how Vanier's thinking on community in connection with L'Arche's inability to welcome everyone provides an

access point for understanding the ways in which weaknesses, boundaries, and limitations are not only inherent to community life but also one's true self.

In addition, this book surveys thematic aspects of Vanier's understanding of what constitutes humanity and the self, explores how his understanding of how becoming present to the dynamic of faith exemplifies the theological conviction that Christ's presence is realized within the ordinary composition of daily life, and identifies how his communal account of L'Arche raises conceptual questions about the values accorded to the self within our current contemporary forms of life. In doing so, this book examines how Christ's presence concretized in the other not only gives shape to what it means to be with and present-*for* others but also calls into question how human society has come to understand and behave toward conditions of human limitation. For this reason, an analysis of care provision within L'Arche, which is expressed throughout many of Vanier's writings, will be given in order to provide a lens by which we can better theologically distinguish what forms of care and treatment are humane from those that depersonalize and objectify persons.

Chapter one provides a brief sketch of the ethos of the age in which L'Arche emerged, characterizes L'Arche as the visible expression of Jean Vanier's faithful exploration of God's will, and outlines the significant stages in Vanier's life that have been instrumental in the shaping of his spiritual and intellectual development. Additionally, this chapter sets the stage for the examination of the impulses that underlie the development of Vanier's conceptual framework and accompany the concrete theological realism inherent in the lived contexts of community, care, and faith within L'Arche. Finally, this chapter summarizes the beginnings, growth, and structure of L'Arche in order to draw attention to how L'Arche exemplifies a renewed vision of peace for humanity.

Chapter two outlines central theological, ethical, and anthropological features that undergird and influence the characteristic spirit naturally to Jean Vanier's understanding of community. By foregrounding the distinctive attributes that characterize the communal ethos within Vanier's writings and

L'Arche, this chapter develops a constructive theological-ethical account of listening in the shaping of the Christian ethos. Throughout this chapter, I explain how Vanier's understanding of community takes God to be the primary object of all ethical inquiry, conveys the notion that living humanly involves both an awareness and responsiveness to God's activity in the story of human existence, and calls attention to humanity's need to remain responsive to the God who appears in and through the other.

Chapter three identifies and describes how vulnerability underlies and informs Vanier's thinking on community and L'Arche. Throughout this chapter, I constructively explore how the weak and poor in society, according to Vanier, are visible expressions of the constant form of Christ's pneumatological presence within the world in order to highlight how vulnerable persons are sources of life, unity, and communion with God and others, and how communion with the weak and poor is communion with God in particular.

Chapter four consists of three parts. Part one analyzes how Vanier sees listening and remaining responsive to God's activity within the story of human existence as integral to what it means to be and become human. Part two examines how Vanier's communal account and practical theology of care provision within L'Arche raises conceptual questions about the values accorded to the self and the distinctive qualities that are often regarded as holding personhood, identity, and individuality in place within society. Part three provides a synopsis of Vanier's understanding of what roots community, what attitudes inform the ways of life in community, and what breaks down community in terms of what I propose to name as "faithful exploration" in remaining responsive to the presence of God within the course of life. By way of drawing attention to the emphasis Vanier places on God's ways with humanity in the course of life, the purpose of this final chapter of the book is to demonstrate how Vanier's account provides a platform for Christian ethics to explore ways of speaking about God.

In conclusion, Vanier and L'Arche offer a radical vision of the ways in which the specificity of Christ's claim on us is visibly expressed in and through welcoming the other. Taken as a synthetic whole, Vanier and L'Arche present a vision of Christian existence and witness that is

prophetic in nature—to abide in love is to welcome others.

## A Call to Welcome

THIS CHAPTER PROVIDES A brief overview of the beginnings of L'Arche, reads L'Arche as the visible expression of Jean Vanier's faithful response to and exploration of God's will, and outlines significant stages in Vanier's life that have been instrumental in the shaping of his spiritual and intellectual development. Along the way, this chapter analyzes the ways in which Aristotelian philosophy and ethics not only underlie the development of Vanier's conceptual framework but also influences and accompanies the concrete theological realism inherent in the lived contexts of community, care, and faith within L'Arche. Finally, this chapter draws attention to the inception, ethos, development, and organization of L'Arche in order to highlight the ways in which L'Arche epitomizes a radical vision of peace for humanity.

### Jean Vanier and L'Arche

IN THE MIDST OF an era marked by global anxiety and international tensions forcing many societies, countries, and nation-states into competing modes of existence, Jean Vanier chose a course of action that would begin and continue to call into question the prevailing powers, principalities, and cultural undercurrents profoundly affecting the characteristic spirit of his time and future generations.<sup>1</sup> With determined efforts to reign in freedom, establish a just society, and nonviolently stand up to prevailing oppression, cruelty, and unreasonable repression of marginalized people groups, namely, "persons with intellectual disabilities," Vanier invited three men with intellectual disabilities (Raphaël, Philippe, and Dany) who had been living in a neighboring institution to live with him in a small house in Trosly, an old village in France (August 1964).<sup>2</sup> This was the beginning of the first L'Arche community.<sup>3</sup> Yet, L'Arche was no ordinary, sudden,

or serendipitous undertaking. Instead, it was and is the embodiment of Vanier and others' faithful exploration of God's will involving a life of learning how to listen and remain responsive to God's activity in the story of human existence. Though originating out of a personal response to God's call upon Vanier's life, L'Arche, from the beginning, included encountering others. Encounter is an important theme throughout Vanier's writings and reflections on community. Reflecting on the entailments pertaining to and flowing from encountering others in community, Vanier explains that the cultivation and growth of trust stems from living together, especially when we live with others in ways that affirm the fulfillment of others' lives; gestures that occur in and through listening to who they are.<sup>4</sup> On this account, listening cultivates trust and genuine meeting, encounters that give way to the lowering and breaking down of defense mechanisms related to who we are. By way of a gradual relationship in the encounter, the meeting, and through listening, others become conscious of their importance and value; they discover who they actually are. Living with people who are broken, according to Vanier, helps them to perceive exactly their value and that they have something to give.<sup>5</sup> Correspondingly, "to talk about the encounter one should speak about the encounter between mother and child, which is essentially a celebration. Here, trust is born. The child knows she is loved and that she is seen as precious. She is not just listened to through the ears, but listened to through the body. True encounter gives way to true hospitality. Since the word *hospitality* entails taking people into oneself, the encounter is a way toward communion."<sup>6</sup> For Vanier, "mutuality," "trust," "listening," "celebrating," and "meeting" reveal what occurs in the linking between listening and encounter; "meeting," "encounter," and "trust" all relate to and deal with listening.<sup>7</sup>

Living and being with others are integral to the commonly held vision in which belonging and communion with others is visibly expressed in being present-*for* the other within L'Arche, particularly in and through the economy of caring, a way of life therein. Vanier's emphasis on belonging and communion is often expressed in terms of "being with" others as a way to articulate the ways in which love is



concretized within L'Arche. Love requires more than doing things for others. It involves being with others and takes shape in and through the process of becoming friends, a process that demands dynamic relational gestures such as presence, welcome, listening, and mutual willingness to be vulnerable, to name a few.<sup>8</sup> Correspondingly, being with others characterizes the nature, scope, and aim of the type of care provision within L'Arche exchanged between carers and those to/for whom care is rendered. At this point it is important to note that being present-*for* others in need of care is not the same as doing things for persons in need of care. Rather, being present-*for* the other involves attitudes and expressions analogous to the relational characteristics Vanier highlights above. John O'Regan writes:

It is so easy to be present with another; this is simply a matter of physical nearness and connotes nothing whatever of friendship. Indeed one can have this sort of closeness with an enemy! It takes little besides ingenuity to be present to another in the sense of wanting to get all I can from him . . . There is no percentage in the present-*for* partnership; it is that benevolent friendship of Aquinas that seeks the good of the other as its primary purpose. It is real agape, a covenant-like love that has its eye on nothing, but its heart and whole energy devoted to the good and growth of the other.<sup>9</sup>

Commenting on relational dynamics of presence, Vanier writes, “To be present to the despised, the poor, and the rejected, L'Arche needs to move from a vision of power, even the power to do good, to receiving the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth promised by Jesus so that we all grow in love *for* each person and particularly the most despised.”<sup>10</sup> On this account, being present-*for* the other entails more than a mere presence and/or nearness with and/or to others; it involves a real covenant-like love, friendship, and devotion, which holds the capacity to guard against artificial and pretentious relationships.

In the contexts of community, caring, and being with others, being present-*for* the other is not a mean toward an end—virtue and character development and/or moral formation—as if those persons who seek to be present-*for* others are seeking to fulfill an ethical

imperative in an attempt to be morally formed. As we will see, the self, according to Vanier, receives its ethical form in relation to the other via being present-*for* others in faithful listening and remaining responsive to the presence of God within the story of human existence. Moreover, being present-*for* the other is not read from the perspective of a unilateral dynamic of human agency—self-determined efforts of exclusively doing things for others. Though doing things for others is a necessary part of caring practice that occurs within L’Arche, gestures of doing are carried out in light of a commonly held vision of the good of the other that underlies, informs, and shapes gestures of belonging and being with others.

Correspondingly, being present-*for* the other in the context of care provision within L’Arche does not entail a type or set of caring practices designed to reveal the value or worth of others lives. In other words, caring for the other does not constitute the worth of another life. Rather, being present-*for*, read from a theocentric perspective, affirms the inherent worth and value of others’ lives. Moreover, it is the commonly held vision, goods, and politics related to the intrinsic worth and incomparable value of all persons that ultimately serves as the basis of community, covenant-like friendship, and a sharing of life with others; a commonly held vision concretized in being present-*for* others. I will return to these particulars in chapter 3 in relation to what I see as Jean Vanier’s emphasis on the significance of being present and caring for each other and for each other’s growth in understanding what makes community possible as an indispensable constituent of L’Arche.<sup>11</sup>

Being present-*for* another is a form of self-expression that calls the foregoing distinctive attributes belonging to the characteristic spirit of the age into question. By way of being present-*for* the other one subserviently assumes a position of lesser importance in which true self-actuality is constituted in belonging to, communion with, and responsiveness to others. What is being implied here is that communion with, belonging to, and being present-*for* the other precedes doing *for* others. In being with and present-*for* others, one abandons the propensity toward self-preservation, dominance, efficiency, competition, and pleasure while simultaneously offering a counter-witness against forms of self-projection in which the self is

pretentiously bestowed and/or forced upon the other. As we will see, one's faith in the concrete reality that the other lays claims to one's being, leads to the discovery of the meaning of faith in practical life in relation to others' being—a discovery of ways in which others' being is placed before possession and/or possessiveness. Hence, the self receives its form in relation to the other. Being present-*for* another is at the heart of Vanier's theology and the ethos of L'Arche.

Within L'Arche, it is in living and being with and present-*for* others that persons—carers and cared for—come to perceive the value of each other and one's true self. On this account, the discovery of one's inherent worth and true self is not a phenomenon exclusive to persons with disabilities as if they are solely in need of discovering their true inherent value. A key point to Vanier's writing and L'Arche is the significance of the attempt to understand our own vulnerability in order to discover the inherent worth of our true self, given constraints. As we will see, Vanier believes that when persons learn to welcome reality as it is revealed and given, which entails the reality of one's own vulnerability and brokenness, they learn to welcome oneself in truth.

## Aristotle in the shaping of Vanier's conceptual development and L'Arche

Prior to the first L'Arche community Vanier spent eight years (1942–1950) as a naval officer in both the British and Canadian Navy. Throughout his military career Vanier became extremely conscious of a world full of devastation in which hope, forgiveness, human solidarity, and peace were scarce. He writes, “[These] years were taken up in a world of efficiency, controlling, and commanding others. I was a technician of destruction.”<sup>12</sup> After a few years, Vanier began to reflect on questions concerning the meaning of life, his Christian faith, and Jesus' message of peace and vision for humanity, leading him to depart from the navy.<sup>13</sup> He recounts, “I felt called by Jesus to take another path, the path of peace.”<sup>14</sup> After departing from the military Vanier spent many years under the tutelage and spiritual direction of Thomas Philippe, a Dominican priest and professor of theology and philosophy (1950–64), earned his doctorate in the area of Aristotelian

philosophy (1962), and took a permanent professorship position at St. Michael's College in Toronto (1963-64). During this time Vanier's study of Aristotelian philosophy and long time friendship with Père Thomas provided intellectual and spiritual foundations that continue to influence and shape his life, writings, and work in L'Arche.

During his doctoral studies Vanier devoted his time and attention to acquiring knowledge on Aristotelian philosophy and ethics. In 1962 he defended his doctoral thesis *Happiness as Principle and End in Aristotelian Ethics* at the Catholic Institute in Paris.<sup>15</sup> Even though Aristotle does not appear as a prevalent figure in Vanier's writings after the early 1970's, other than in his republished doctoral thesis, Vanier's conceptual Aristotelian beginnings have continued to influence and inform his writings and work in L'Arche.<sup>16</sup> Jacques Dufresne writes:

In the wake of Aristotle, he [Vanier] also knew how to avoid another trap, that of the idea of a dualism of body and spirit. To listen to people, to touch reality—first, the body—this is his primary concern. The substantial union of the spirit and body is at the heart of the notion of human beings for Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. Given how much incarnation means to him, Jean Vanier could not but adhere, without reservation, to such ideas as this one: “There is nothing in the mind that has not previously passed through the senses.” He further insists on the importance of the senses to the point of speaking of the body as if it includes the soul.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout his thesis Vanier analyzes how Aristotle's view of ethics and happiness provide access to understanding the meaning of creaturely existence. Vanier places ethics within a positive register when interpreting the Aristotelian philosophical foundations of moral science. He writes, “Ethics help us to clarify what is a truly human act, what justice is and what the best activities are—those that render us more human and happiest. They help us better understand to what our freedom is calling us.”<sup>18</sup> For Vanier, ethics provides clarity into our most profound inclinations with the intention to bring them to

their ultimate fulfillment. Vanier understands Aristotle's ethics originating from the experience of desired ends that attract humans toward genuine happiness and fullness of life.<sup>19</sup> Vanier's understanding of happiness is characteristically Aristotelian; it is analogous to Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, happiness as human flourishing. This account presupposes that every man and woman inherently possesses the desire to experience genuine happiness originating from fulfilling activity that enables humans to reach their full potential, to become accomplished, and to attain full maturity. On this account, Vanier perceives Aristotle's intended meaning of ethics as moving beyond the sphere of abstraction. He writes, "Aristotle's ethics are not therefore based on an idea but on the desire for fullness of life inscribed in every human being . . . [They] require that we work on ourselves."<sup>20</sup>

Vanier's account of Aristotelian ethics calls attention to the relationship between moral science and anthropology. Vanier describes Aristotle's ethics as "an actual moral science: the science of man."<sup>21</sup> As we will see, this linkage is vital for understanding particulars undergirding Vanier's theological anthropology. On this account, Aristotelian ethics engenders existential questions on the meaning of life and provide access to understanding what actions best embody what it means to be fully human. Consequently, reaching one's full potential, becoming fully accomplished, and attaining full maturity, or more precisely, "being fully human" does not mean simply obeying laws that come from outside.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, ethics involve more than established rules of conduct and appeals to unconditional moral maxims that are perceived as binding in each and every circumstance and independent from individual motives and/or dispositions. Vanier writes:

If we do not become fully accomplished, something is lost to the whole of humanity. For Aristotle this accomplishment derives from the exercise of the most perfect activity: that of seeking the truth in all things, shunning lies and illusion, acting in accordance with justice, transcending oneself to act for the good of others in society . . . Law does not necessarily have any impact

on the most profound driving forces of our action.<sup>23</sup>

Necessarily, an ethics of law does not determine what follows.<sup>24</sup> Instead, it is an ethics of desire in which the subject who acts experiences the inclination that moves them consciously toward desired end(s). Accordingly, an ethics of desire, for Vanier, names the nature, scope, and meaning of Aristotle's moral science—"that attraction which makes us rush towards what we perceive to be the good" for ourselves and the good of society.<sup>25</sup> Commenting on Aristotle's use of *orexis*, desire, Vanier writes, "*Orexis* . . . is a generic term that encompasses not only the passions but also the will or "rational appetite" . . . Experience might suggest the impulses of passion are not the same as those of will. But Aristotle uses the single generic word *orexis*, to designate [this] attraction . . ."<sup>26</sup>

According to Vanier, Aristotle draws attention to the need to thoughtfully consider what it is that attracts humans toward desired ends. Therefore, ethics presuppose listening and responsiveness to the self and its relation to desired goods. Vanier states, "According to Aristotle, to adopt an ethical approach thus supposes that we set about listening to what it is that profoundly attracts us and that we familiarize ourselves with the kind of vision that sees things as moving in conformity with desire. This, far more than any sense of law, is the ethical person's prime virtue."<sup>27</sup> Clearly, Vanier believes every man and woman inherently possesses both the desire to experience happiness and ability to consciously listen and remain responsive to the goods that attract us toward the ends we desire. Yet, this does not ensure that every man and woman will desire to act upon natural inclination(s) they possess and/or possess the wisdom to seek truth in all things, evade the illusory, act in conformity with justice, and transcend oneself to act for the good of others in society. Aware of these dilemmas, Vanier appeals to what he perceives as Aristotelian realism that presupposes the need for distinguishing and choosing between what is truth from falsehood. Vanier writes, "If we are to remain on course, the ethics of desire must be combined with a sense of discernment and choice."<sup>28</sup> Hence, discernment and choice give definite form to listening and responsiveness in the shaping of

Aristotelian ethics. As we will see in subsequent sections, “listening,” for Vanier, plays a vital role in the shaping of his ethics, theological anthropology, and work within L’Arche. Though he retains the Aristotelian notion of discernment and choice in connection with listening to the inner depths of ourselves in order to distinguish desires that are superficial from those that are more profound, Vanier throws these Aristotelian sensibilities into a different key of welcoming and accepting that which is true according to the reality of one’s self, as it is given and revealed— reality as it *is*—read from a theocentric christological perspective associated with divine providence.<sup>29</sup> For this reason, it is my contention that Vanier, though retaining the “object” of listening from Aristotle’s account here, further develops it by way of situating both the “object” of listening and “listening” within a theological register on welcoming reality as the concretization of one’s trust in God’s providence.

Vanier places “becoming fully human” within an active register involving individuals reaching their full potential, becoming fully accomplished as possible, attaining full maturity, and discovering how to orient their life in the best possible direction. Although this ethical approach appears individualistic it does not necessarily confine one to such a view. Vanier writes, “At the very beginning of *Ethics*, Aristotle states that this science is subordinate to political science, because it is nobler to act in order that a large number may attain happiness than to act only for one’s own sake.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, reaching one’s full potential, becoming fully accomplished as possible, and attaining full maturity are subordinate ends oriented toward a political dimension that integrates both civic and social spheres of life in which one lives out one’s full humanity for the good of others in society. Discovering how to orient one’s life in the best possible direction, for Vanier, presupposes acknowledgment and affirmation of the other’s existence. Commenting on these particulars within *Nichomachean Ethics*, Vanier writes, “In a broader sense, happiness has a social and civic dimension. The man who wishes to be fully human cannot remain a stranger to city life.”<sup>31</sup> The essential point that Vanier insistently affirms here and in other writings is that becoming fully human not only involves fullness of life but ultimately takes shape by way of living for the good of others in society. For Vanier, attuning oneself in relation to others

and their good makes being and becoming fully human possible.

Undoubtedly, the foregoing particulars relating to Aristotelian thought play a vital role constituting Vanier's intellectual foundation and continue to influence and shape his life, writings, theology, and work in L'Arche.<sup>32</sup> Vanier writes, "[Aristotle's] thinking spans the centuries and is still relevant to us today."<sup>33</sup> Influenced by Aristotle's thinking on the good of others in society, Vanier's writings focus on the meaning of life and aim to provide access to understanding what it means to be fully human. Correspondingly, his writings seek to enable others to reach their full potential, to become accomplished, to attain full maturity, or more precisely, "to become fully human."<sup>34</sup> On the whole, Aristotelian thinking has an atmospheric impact rather than being directly incorporated into Vanier's thought. It sets certain intellectual trajectories and offers core beliefs that underlie Vanier's writings. To a similar degree, many of his writings possesses qualities and features in common with Aristotelian appeal for the organization of a just society in which all members are enabled to become fully accomplished and live well within it.

Although comparable in certain respects, the corresponding particulars between Aristotle and Vanier's thinking within the foregoing analysis are not inherently homologous in every detail. Vanier broadens Aristotelian thinking concerning *logos*, calls into question hierarchal divisions between persons, and exposes many other Aristotelian shortcomings.<sup>35</sup> Rather than affirming that it is the *logos* in relation to value placed on rationality and intellectual capacity alone that constitutes what it means to be human, thus making a greater or lesser degree of autonomy possible and/or drawing individuals closer to God, Vanier affirms that "every human being, regardless of his or her [rational or intellectual] limitations, culture, or religion, is important and valuable and should be respected."<sup>36</sup> Vanier writes, "The worst ill is disdain of another person, which can lead to oppression and the suppression of human life. In order to progress towards the fullness of life that is inscribed in his or her being, every person, at some time or other, needs others."<sup>37</sup> Correspondingly, Vanier's writings draw attention to society's need for celebrating difference, encountering the other, and welcoming the



otherness of the other. Though he favors the Aristotelian impulse of friendship being an essential part of human life, Vanier strongly critiques Aristotle for his ignorance on the value of an encounter between the rich and the poor, men and women, or more precisely, between unequals that moves beyond a mercantilistic perspective.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, Vanier calls into question Aristotelian sensibilities concerning happiness consisting in relation to achieving the greatest possible autonomy. He contends, happiness consists of “a sharing of hearts and humility in relation to others,” emerging from a *communion* “that is the sharing not merely of great and fine activities, beautiful thoughts, and generosity, but also of their shortcomings, their weaknesses, and their affective needs.”<sup>39</sup> Flowing from his “experience of life among fragile women and men wounded by illness and rejection,” Vanier extends justice to persons with disabilities, integrates Christian theological particulars with his ethical and anthropological thinking, and repeatedly articulates how L’Arche is rooted within and profoundly affected by the Christian theological tradition.<sup>40</sup> What is being implied here is that Vanier’s intellectual development, though heavily influenced by Aristotle’s philosophical and ethical thinking on humanity and the good, is not one of unbroken continuity with his Aristotelian beginnings. In other words, Vanier’s basic conceptual framework is not simply applied Aristotle. Instead, it has developed over time in the course of his life in experience. Commenting on the ways in which his studies in Aristotle assisted him with ordering his thoughts and helping him to distinguish what really matters from what is less important, Vanier writes, “Aristotle loved all that is human. He made me pay attention not primarily to ideas but to the reality and experience.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, Aristotelian thought was a catalyst for listening and remaining responsive to the present moment. Attending to the present moment within the course of his life at L’Arche “has been, and is, a profound experience . . . both humanly and spiritually.”<sup>42</sup> As a result, people with disabilities, Vanier explains, “have taught me much about human nature and the real meaning of human existence.”<sup>43</sup> He continues:

They have taught me more about the gospel and even

about human relations than all the great psychological and philosophical concepts; or rather they have allowed me to catch a glimpse of what should be true theology, true philosophy and true psychology. More than this, I have discovered Jesus in them, Jesus radiating goodness, Jesus the mirror of purity, Jesus meek and humble, and sometimes Jesus suffering and in agony . . . truly strength lies in weakness.<sup>44</sup>

## Christian Spirituality in the Shaping of Vanier & L'Arche

Christian spirituality plays both a necessary and profound role in the shaping of Vanier's life and writings and the emergence of L'Arche. Vanier writes, "Spirituality is like a breath of inspiration that strengthens our motivation . . . [It] helps us better understand to what our freedom is calling us."<sup>45</sup> Throughout his writings Vanier emphasizes how spirituality, or more precisely, his Christian faith and the spiritual guidance of Père Thomas, helped him discern God's call on his life to a path of peace.<sup>46</sup> In response to this call—originating in Jesus' life, message, and vision for humanity—Vanier gave up his naval career to search for the meaning of life in his Christian faith, learning to trust God as he continued to discern God's divine vocation for his life.<sup>47</sup> Departing from the navy (1950) Vanier entered a time of intellectual and spiritual tutelage under the guidance of Père Thomas at Eau Vive and began working toward his doctorate. In a 2005 interview Vanier reflects, "Père Thomas didn't give answers. He provided tools for people to recognize and understand the choices in their lives. [He] would listen and then say, 'Pray about it.' [He] helped me to discover the Holy Spirit within me. His was a pedagogy of helping people to trust themselves to trust God."<sup>48</sup> In the light of the foregoing analysis on Aristotelian thought in the shaping of Vanier's conceptual framework, it is important to note the correspondence between Vanier's reflection on the type of spiritual tutelage he received from Père Thomas—" [he] helped me to discover the Holy Spirit within me"—and the Aristotelian call to listen to one's own desire in the light of the nature each person has received, recognizing and respecting the place in which nature has placed each person.

However, offering a full-scale account on whether or not this pneumatological reflection is a full-on baptizing of this Aristotelian sensibility lies beyond the scope of this book. During this contemplative period Vanier gave frequent time and attention to cultivating both his intellect and spirituality. Carolyn Whitney-Brown, a member of the L'Arche Daybreak community in Canada from 1990 to 1997, writes, "Vanier threw himself into his studies, the manual work of the community, and direction, both intellectual and spiritual, from Père Thomas."<sup>49</sup>

Throughout this time many circumstances relating to the structural arrangements of Eau Vive as well as relations between Père Thomas and Rome and Vanier occurred resulting in the removal of Père Thomas from Eau Vive and Vanier's appointment to assume its leadership.<sup>50</sup> Shortly thereafter Rome and others would begin to vet for and anticipate Vanier's priestly ordination. Nevertheless, Vanier discerned that the path of peace to which he was initially called lay outside ecclesiastical structures.<sup>51</sup>

In response to his spiritual intuition Vanier departed from Eau Vive to continue completing his doctorate. Shortly after completing his degree Vanier was hired to teach philosophy at St. Michael's College in Canada. Before starting his professorship (1964) Vanier spent time in Trosly France helping Père Thomas move and transition into his new chaplaincy at Val Fleuri, an institution for men with intellectual disabilities. During his stay Vanier encountered first-hand society's exclusion of persons with disabilities. In the midst of deplorable realities originating from institutionalized life and the collective cacophonous voice of those he encountered at Val Fleuri, Vanier began to realize that any idea of peace was absurd in a society characterized by an ethos of denying and disparaging persons.<sup>52</sup> Reflecting on the invariable voice of those he encountered during his visit, Vanier writes, "Each of them starved of friendship and affection; each one clung to me, asking, through words and gestures: 'Do you love me? Do you want to be my friend?' . . . 'Why? Why am I like this? Why do my parents not want me? Why can't I be like my brothers and sisters who are married?'"<sup>53</sup> Accompanying these cries of utter rejection were long histories marked by rejection and intense

suffering at the hands of parents, individuals, institutions, asylums, and/or society as a whole. “All this completely changed my life,” Vanier writes.<sup>54</sup> If an ethos of exclusion prevailed upon individuals, institutions, and society, then peace, for Vanier, not only seemed absurd but absolutely impossible. Commenting on the circumstances that brought him into contact with persons with intellectual disabilities, Vanier writes, “I discovered how divided and fragmented our societies are . . . I realized peace could not prevail while no attempt was being made to span the gulf separating different cultures, different religions, and even different individuals.”<sup>55</sup> Though not immediately or fully known at the time, Vanier’s initial call from God to a path of peace was developing into something more concrete.

Before leaving to return and take up his teaching post at St. Michael’s Vanier was confronted with the allure of Père Thomas’s calling him to do something with persons with disabilities.<sup>56</sup> And it was during his first term at St. Michael’s that Vanier begin to discern the concrete form his call from God would take. At the close of his first teaching term Vanier moved to France, bought a small dilapidated house in Trosly, and invited Raphaël, Philippe, and Dany, three men with disabilities, to live with him.<sup>57</sup> This was the first L’Arche community.

Originating in a call from God—rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ—both Vanier’s life and L’Arche embody a path of peace extending beyond conceptual limits of abstraction. Each of these particulars witness to God’s activity in the story of human existence and convey the notion that living fully human presupposes an awareness of and responsiveness to God’s divine movement in the world. Consequently, Vanier’s life and writings and L’Arche explicitly call attention to both individual’s and society’s need to remain responsive to the other, especially persons who are weak, marginalized, and poor. These particulars challenge modern ethical thinking in so far as they ask not how we ought to live but how our lives are to remain responsive to God and God appearing in and through the other, specifically those who are most vulnerable. As we will see, these particulars provide means for critiquing society’s judgments about care provision, humanity, and the good from a theological perspective. On this

account, it is clear that Christian spirituality has shaped and continues to shape Vanier's life, writings, and the emergence of L'Arche.

### L'Arche: A Sketch

Following the signs of the Spirit in early August 1964 Vanier responded to the needs of his time and invited three men with disabilities to live with him in a small house in Trosly, France.<sup>58</sup> The community was named L'Arche, the Ark, after Noah's ark. Vanier writes, "The community of L'Arche wants to provide a refuge for people with mental handicaps, who can so quickly be drowned in the waters of our competitive society."<sup>59</sup> From its inception Vanier sought to organize L'Arche with restorative social forms that empowered persons with disabilities to cultivate and joyfully reclaim their full humanity. Reflecting on the aims of L'Arche, Vanier writes, "We seek to restore to people with handicaps their own particular humanity, the humanity which has effectively been stolen from them."<sup>60</sup> L'Arche exists not as a means of escape from society but rather as a place in which necessary time and opportunity are given to enable persons with disabilities find their place in society.

Since its genesis L'Arche has rapidly grown into a federation of 147 communities ranging across the globe in more than 35 countries on 5 continents.<sup>61</sup> Each community, though diverse in many ways, remains united around the commonly held vision that the humanizing gift of persons with disabilities to society becomes apparent in mutual relationships; a vision visibly expressed in drawing near, welcoming, and listening to others who are different from us.<sup>62</sup> Correspondingly, each community is grounded on welcome of the poor and on religious faith.<sup>63</sup>

For the duration of L'Arche a daily routine involving work, times for sharing meals, and celebration has been vital to both its structure and relationships. Commenting on the simplicity of the daily rhythm in L'Arche, Vanier writes, "[From the outset] we had our work in the house and garden (and later on in the workshops), and our meals together were often full of joy. We shared times of fun and relaxation and also prayer. As far as I was concerned, Raphaël and Philippe were

not so much men with mental handicaps as friends.”<sup>64</sup> Here, Vanier calls attention to how daily rhythm in L’Arche provides structure and a sense of belonging. Though simple in its form, the daily structure of L’Arche allows for the nurturing of genuine community that involves mutual support, togetherness, and friendship.

L’Arche stands in opposition to contemporary society in which privilege, power, and strength are held in high regard and perceived as indispensable attributes that constitute what it means to be human. L’Arche radically expresses a renewed vision for humanity in which difference is welcomed, otherness is valued, mutual support and trust define relationships, genuine community is possible, and weakness and vulnerability are given equal place at the table. Essentially, L’Arche offers individuals and society a new way of embodying a vision of peace that calls into question the undergirding powers and principalities currently effecting the characteristic spirit of this age.

In this chapter, we have focused on the characteristic spirit of the age in which L’Arche emerged, characterized L’Arche as the visible expression of Jean Vanier’s faithful exploration of God’s will in the course of his life, and outlined significant stages in Vanier’s life that have been instrumental in the shaping of his spiritual and intellectual development, his writings, and the emergence of L’Arche and his work therein. In doing so we have focused on how Aristotelian thought has had an atmospheric impact on the development of Vanier’s conceptual framework and the ways in which Aristotelian ethics underlie and shape Vanier’s understanding of the meaning of what it means to be and become fully human in particular, together establishing certain intellectual trajectories and offering core beliefs that underlie his writings and work in L’Arche. Additionally, we have considered the place of Christian spirituality in the shaping of Vanier’s life and writings and the emergence of L’Arche in order to better understand the role Christian faith and the spiritual guidance of Père Thomas played in Vanier’s intellectual and spiritual development, helping him discern the concrete form God’s call to take a path of peace in the course of his life would take. These narratives of the inception, ethos, development, and organization of L’Arche, taken as a synthetic whole in relation to Vanier’s intellectual and spiritual development, not only demonstrate the ways in which Vanier’s thinking and L’Arche

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surely on the road to the most serious degeneration.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the possibility for suffering greater anxiety and insecurity is heightened when society and individuals flee from reality as it is and live a life based on illusions and falsehood.

Vanier writes, “The danger for any community and for every person is to live in illusions. We all do that as we shut ourselves off from others.”<sup>70</sup> Communities and individuals must accept reality as it is given and revealed; they must cultivate time, space, and opportunity to attend and respond to that which is true and in accordance with reality as it is. Truth, for Vanier, is reality.<sup>71</sup> Here, Vanier is reliant on American psychiatrist Morgan Scott Peck’s work *The Road Less Traveled* in which Peck writes:

That which is false is unreal. The more clearly we see reality of the world, the better equipped we are to deal with the world. The less clearly we see the reality of the world—the more our minds are befuddled by falsehood, misperceptions and illusion—the less able we will be to determine correct courses of action and make wise decisions . . . <sup>72</sup>

Vanier utilizes Peck’s account of “truth is reality” to develop his thinking on what it means to be and become human, to grow in our true humanity as persons. Vanier writes, “There is no growth when we live in falsehood and illusion; when we are frightened to let the truth be uncovered and seen by ourselves and by others.”<sup>73</sup> Clearly, Vanier believes that our lives must be oriented by and to the truth of reality as it is. When our lives are properly oriented to the truth of reality there is a willingness to open our hearts to others, uncover our masks, and expose our fears, anxieties, prejudices, misperceptions, and vulnerabilities. Vanier writes, “We must open ourselves up to the truth and let it be revealed.”<sup>74</sup> Only then can the self be released from the dominion of the powers and principalities undergirding the characteristic ethos of the present age, from those undercurrents of society that stimulate the drives toward autonomy and self-preservation, and from the propagandistic voice that praises the self-



precarious way of life in illusion.

Opening ourselves up to the truth of reality as it is given and revealed is the concretization of welcoming God's providence that is so vital for our lives. According to Vanier, this is a process of liberation that opens us up and leads us to the discovery of our common humanity.<sup>75</sup> He writes:

[This discovery] is a journey from loneliness to a love that transforms, a love that grows in and through belonging . . . The discovery of our common humanity liberates us from self-centered compulsions and inner hurts; it is a discovery that ultimately finds its fulfillment in forgiveness and in loving those who are our enemies. It is the process of truly becoming human.<sup>76</sup>

What is being implied here is the notion that to evade reality as it is given is to deny truth; attending to and welcoming truth and reality as it is is to live as fully human.

Essentially, Vanier calls into question the natural psychological/spiritual impulse that urges us to escape the truth of reality by emphasizing how welcoming reality as it is given is the visible expression of attentiveness and responsivity to God's providence, and thus characteristic of what it means to be and become human. Commenting on how being human involves remaining responsive to reality as it is, Vanier writes:

To be human means to remain connected to our humanness and to reality. It means to abandon the loneliness of being closed up in illusions, dreams, and ideologies, frightened of reality, and to choose to move toward connectedness. To be human is to accept ourselves just as we are, with our own history, and to accept others as they are . . . [T]o be human is not to be crushed by reality, or to be angry about it or to try to hammer it into what we think it is or should be, but to commit ourselves as individuals, and as a species, to an evolution that will be for the good of all.<sup>77</sup>

Reality, for Vanier, is “the first principle of truth.”<sup>78</sup> Denying reality is ultimately a failure to acknowledge what it means to be human—that is, to welcome our humanness for what it is—to accept ourselves just as we are and others as they are. To be human involves the welcoming of reality that involves listening, valuing, and responsiveness to that which is true and in accordance with the authenticity of others and ourselves. This involves a way of life that is inclined to and shaped by listening and remaining responsive to the truth of reality given and revealed. Rather than living on the periphery of ourselves in which we put forth superficial effort to mask the reality of our lives and all its entailments, Vanier calls communities, each individual, and society as a whole to work toward cultivating and deepening an ethos of listening that promotes a way of life characterized by welcoming reality as it is.<sup>79</sup> Vanier writes, “[We must] constantly work to deepen our inwardness and our contact with the silent places at the heart of our being where God lives.”<sup>80</sup> Vanier’s understanding of truth of reality encompasses a spiritual/psychological phenomenon that requires listening to reality as it is in relation to the heart of one’s essence. This notion further substantiates the foregoing assertion that welcoming the truth of reality as it is, for Vanier, not only is the visible expression of attentiveness and responsiveness to God’s providence but also characteristic of what it means to be and become human.

Commenting on the ways in which we learn to read the signs of becoming more human, Vanier writes, “Each one of us needs to work at searching for truth, not be afraid of it. We need to strive to live in truth, because the truth sets us free, even if it means living in loneliness and anguish at certain moments . . . Perhaps this search for truth is a process of letting ourselves be enfolded in truth.”<sup>81</sup> This pursuit of truth, for Vanier, presupposes that genuine liberty is experienced when individuals, communities, and society welcomes the truth of reality as it is revealed and given. “It is only as we begin to integrate such a sense of reality more fully into our being” that individuals, communities, and entire societies can discover what it means to be and become human as well as have “new intimations of what is.”<sup>82</sup> Hence, Vanier views “welcome of reality” as a life-giving phenomenon in which individuals, communities, and society at large

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170. Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 150. See Spink, *The Miracle, the Message, the Story*, 265.

171. Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 88.

172. Ibid.

173. Ibid., 89.

174. Ibid., 97.

175. Ibid., 92.

176. Ibid., 92–93.

177. Ibid.

178. Ibid., 93.

179. Ibid.

180. Ibid., 95.

181. Ibid., 96.

182. Ibid. See Spink, *The Miracle, the Message, the Story*, 63.

183. Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 96.

184. Vanier, “Prepared Remarks.”

185. Vanier, *Eruption to Hope*, 41.

186. Ibid.

187. Ibid., 43.

188. Ibid., 41.

189. Ibid.

190. Ibid., 42.

191. Ibid.

192. Ibid.

193. Ibid., 43.

194. “Efficiency” stems from the Latin word *efficientia*, which is based on the verb *efficere*, “accomplish.” In order to draw attention to the way in which persons with disabilities are distinctly efficient from society’s conventional understanding of what it means to be efficient I have emphasized the term “accomplishing.”

195. Ibid., 44.

196. Ibid., 42–43. Vanier writes, “[Their] distress is much greater because