



Samuel and Jacqueline in front of the new house at L'Arche Carrefour, Haiti.

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A spirituality centered on the mystery of the poor

The two worlds today

The two worlds that existed in the time of Jesus still exist today in every country, city, town, and within every human heart.

The rich are those who, believing they are self-sufficient, do not recognize their need for love and for others. There is a rich person in each of us. They are the materially, culturally and even spiritually rich, who, self-satisfied, live in luxury, caught up in wealth, power and privilege. They have in abundance those things that fail to ever satisfy profoundly. Thus, ever in want, they constantly seek more, trapped in a vicious cycle of unrecognized dissatisfaction of the heart! Failing to recognize their own weakness, they look down on others, especially those who are different or weak.

There are also always a great number of people who are marginalized. They are the humiliated, living in poverty and misery, and unable to cope. They are the homeless, the immigrants, the

unemployed, the victims of abuse, the mentally ill, those who suffer with intellectual or physical disabilities, and the elderly who are lonely and neglected. There are also those who suffer malnutrition and famine, as well as refugees fleeing from hatred, violence and war. These are all people trapped in broken self-images.

Jesus' message today is the same as ever: he came to gather together in unity all the scattered children of God and give them fullness of life. He longs to put an end to hatred, to the preconceptions and fears that estrange individuals and groups. In this divided world he longs to create places of unity, reconciliation and peace, by inviting the rich to share and the poor to have hope. This is the mission of L'Arche, of Faith and Light and of other communities: to dismantle the walls separating the weak from the strong, so that, together, they can recognize that they need each other and so be united. This is the good news.

A competitive society

Western societies are consumer societies that encourage individualism, and so are highly competitive societies. In school, children are taught that they must strive to come first and that that they must win in order to be admired. They learn that if they are successful when they are young, their reward will be a prestigious, powerful and well-paid job when they grow up. In practically every walk of life, people struggle to climb the ladder of success in order to have more: more money, more influence and more recognition.

There are good things about competition. It helps people to develop their talents and to do their best. Without competition or the urge to be well-known and admired, humanity's progress in many areas would have been slower. The search for excellence

develops excellence, but it also has negative aspects. For each person who wins, how many lose, feel discouraged and cease to develop their gifts? Unable to climb the ladder of success, they fall into the pit of discouragement and lose self-confidence. Those who have succeeded in climbing the ladder tend to ignore those who have not managed to do so.

I was part of this competitive world. I wanted to be "on top." I saw little value in those who were "on the bottom," even if from time to time I did try to help people in need, doing what I could to attract them upwards, encouraging them to seek success and a better standard of living.

In 1963, thanks to Father Thomas Philippe, I discovered the world of people "on the bottom." In visiting institutions, prisons, asylums and psychiatric hospitals, I discovered a whole new world of marginalized people. Those with mental illnesses or intellectual disabilities often lived in a world of despair and madness. These people had been hidden away far from the rest of society, so that nobody could be reminded of their existence. Shut up in rooms together, some turned themselves around and around all day for want of something better to do. The dormitories were sometimes well organized, but there was nothing at all personal in them. The staff was often good-hearted, but they did not have time to give people individual attention. The men and women suffering from intellectual disabilities were often neglected, left to themselves or sometimes even oppressed. If they did try to revolt—and they often had every reason to do so—they were severely punished. This crushed not only their aggressiveness, but also their hope.

It would be wrong to condemn those who created these institutions, or the staff who worked in them. They were simply

the products of a culture that regarded people with limited intelligence as pathetic creatures incapable of anything, including real suffering. Some institutions did take good care of their people and treated them with love, affection and respect. However, even in those places, no one really believed that people with intellectual disabilities could grow, become more autonomous, or offer anything to others, much less become for others a source of life.

I met Raphaël and Philippe in an asylum near Paris where they were locked up behind enormous walls. It was a dismal place. The people who lived there had no work, and the place was filled with cries of violence and depression. As a child Raphaël had had meningitis, which had impaired his sense of balance and left him unable to speak. It was much the same for Philippe. Both had been sent to this asylum when their parents died.

I bought a small, dilapidated house in Trosly, a village in northern France, and invited them to come and live with me. That is how the adventure of L'Arche began.

The adventure of L'Arche

As I began to live with Philippe and Raphaël, the first thing I discovered was the depth of their pain, the pain of having been a disappointment for their parents and others. One can understand their parents' reaction to them. What parents would not be distressed, grief filled or even angry to discover that their child would never be able to talk, walk or live like others? Parents whose children have disabilities certainly suffer deeply, but their children who have the disabilities suffer deeply, too. Raphaël and Philippe had incredibly sensitive hearts. They had been deeply wounded and humiliated by rejection, and by the lack of consideration shown them by those around them. Because of this,

they sometimes became very angry, or escaped into a world of dreams. It was quite clear that they had a great need for friendship and trust, and to be able to express their needs to somebody who would really listen. For far too long, nobody had been interested in listening to them or in helping them make choices and become more responsible for their lives. In fact, their needs were exactly the same as mine: to be loved and to love, to make choices and to develop their abilities.

As our friendship grew and deepened, I became increasingly aware of the cruelty of our societies that promote the strong and reject the weak. This rejection seems to be deeply ingrained in our cultures and institutions. Even the church often fails to recognize the value of people with disabilities. It is as if our societies cannot admit that these people are fully human and that they suffer terribly from rejection and contempt. Admittedly, church and society recognize that it is important to "do something" for them and their distraught parents, but rarely do they see that these people truly have something to offer in return.

Being counter-cultural

Over the years, I have come to realize the extent to which sharing our lives with people suffering from intellectual disabilities is counter-cultural.

Soon after L'Arche began, I came across the passage in Luke's gospel in which Jesus says:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers [and sisters] or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and

the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you
(Luke 14:12-14)

I had heard this text often, but its full force had never struck me. Suddenly I realized that it described what we were living at L'Arche as we sat down at the same table as Raphaël, Philippe and others. Sitting down at the same table meant becoming friends with them, creating a new form of family. It was a way of life absolutely opposed to the values of a competitive, hierarchical society in which the weak are pushed aside. I began to realize just how counter-cultural the good news of Jesus is.

Some parents of assistants, although good Christians, were mortified by the idea that their sons or daughters chose to live at L'Arche. Had their child chosen to be a priest or minister, they would have been proud of them, but they considered their choice to live with people "like that" beyond the pale. Some said: "It's such a waste that my son is in L'Arche; he could have done something really useful with his life!"

In spite of our living a counter-cultural reality, I was nevertheless encouraged by Father Thomas, and by a number of psychiatrists and people involved in the French government and social services. They appreciated the importance of treating people with intellectual disabilities as people first, of helping them make choices and of providing them with a warm, supportive home, fully integrated into a town or village where they could build up friendships with the neighbours and the local community. They, too, believed that big institutions, which were more like prisons, should be avoided. Most people with intellectual disabilities are not sick and do not need constant medical treatment; they need to live in surroundings adapted to their needs,

in which they can grow, develop and find meaning in their lives. I was struck by how often the human sciences came to the same conclusions as the gospel. Competitive, individualistic, materialistic societies detract from our humanity; the message of Jesus is profoundly human. To live this message we need spirit, an inspiration, and an inner force that urges us forward to grow in the love of all people in the human family. That is the spirituality of L'Arche.

Befriending the poor awakens and transforms the heart

Making friends with Raphaël and Philippe and living a covenant, a sacred bond, with them implied an enormous change in the way I approached life. My education had taught me to be quick and efficient, and to make my own decisions. I was, first and foremost, a man of action rather than a man who listened. In the navy, I had colleagues, but no real friends. Opening ourselves to friendship means becoming vulnerable, taking off our masks and letting down our barriers so we can accept people just as they are, with all their beauty and gifts as well as their weaknesses and inner wounds. It means weeping with them when they weep and laughing when they laugh. I had created barriers around my heart to protect it from pain. In L'Arche, I was no longer climbing the ladder of human promotion and becoming more and more efficient and important. Instead I was "descending," "wasting time" with people with intellectual disabilities, so that together we could create communities, places of covenant and communion.

Obviously, I needed to do some things for Raphaël and Philippe. They needed help to become more autonomous, to learn to make choices and assume more responsibility for their

lives. To be competent and professional in L'Arche is vital, but this is not the most important need. Above all, they needed to escape from a sense of isolation, to belong to a community of friends and form bonds of love and communion, as well as developing their capacities. I had to learn what really loving someone, entering into communion with them, meant. Loving someone means, of course, wanting to do things for them, but more essentially it means being present to them. Presence involves helping the other to see their beauty and value, to trust themselves and to grow humanly to greater maturity. Loving involves letting others see my own poverty, and giving them space to love me. It was especially vital for Raphaël and Philippe to find friends, since they had experienced so much rejection and had very negative self-images. They were convinced that they were "no good," that they had only been sources of trouble and pain to their families and others. I had to fight against these convictions by showing them the joy I felt in their existence and in sharing my life with them.

As I touched the fragility and pain of people with intellectual disabilities, and as their trust in me grew, new springs of tenderness welled up in me. I loved them, and was happy with them. They awakened a part of my being that had been underdeveloped and dormant. Through them, a new world began to open up for me, not the world of efficiency, competition, success and power, but the world of the heart, of vulnerability, communion and celebration. They were leading me on a path towards healing and wholeness.

To be a friend to the poor is demanding. They anchor us in the reality of pain; they make it impossible for us to escape into ideas or dreams. Their cry for solidarity obliges us to make choices, deepen our spiritual lives and put love and a sense of responsibility at the heart of our daily lives. It transforms us.

This growth in friendship with the poor also reveals our own inner conflicts. It is so easy to try to escape from its demands, and be seduced by activities or personal projects that seem more pressing, or by other distractions and pastimes that diminish our solidarity with the poor. Leading a truly Christian and human life—welcoming those who are weak and different, living the spirituality of L'Arche—is a real struggle. We cannot be faithful in this struggle unless we receive a new inner power from God and develop an interiority and places of silence where we can rest in God.

As I grow in friendship with people who are weak and powerless, I am beginning to discover in them qualities of the heart that I find less often in people who have devoted their energies to success and who are often full of stress. Of course, I should not generalize. Every person is unique, and has his or her own gifts and wounds. The people we have welcomed in L'Arche, however, have a great gift of simplicity in relationship. They are not governed by social conventions. They welcome visitors with joy, and make no distinction between those who are important in the eyes of the world and those who are not. They are not interested in anyone's profession or rank, but they are perceptive about people's hearts. They do not wear masks; they express both joy and anger quite naturally. They live in the present moment, and are not caught up in a longing for the past or in dreams about the future. This seems to make it easier for them to forgive and make peace. All these qualities make them men and women who welcome, celebrate and cherish relationship. Free from the urge to compete and succeed, many of them radiate joy. This joy is not clouded by past hurts, but seems to flow from them. They seem to have a greater wholeness than many people who are more

intellectually or practically gifted. They show us a path of love, simplicity and joy.

Discovering my own wounds

If, at times, some people with disabilities awakened a new tenderness in me, and it was a joy to be with them, at different moments others awakened my anger and defensiveness. I was frightened that they might touch my vulnerability. At times I felt agitated and ill at ease with them, just the opposite of the peace and openness I needed to be present to them. It is hard to admit to the darkness, fears, anguish, confusion and psychological hatred in our own hearts, all of which hide our past hurts and reveal our inability to love. If we love only those who love and affirm us, is that really love? Is it not simply self-love? How can we learn to get out of ourselves and be open to those who cry out their anguish, who need to be loved, but who upset us and awaken our own anguish? For those who, like me, have always been able to do what they like and have always succeeded, it is difficult; at the same time it can be a real source of salvation and growth to discover our poverty and our powerlessness, and to be confronted by failure.

I had to accept my own difficulties and poverty, and look for help. Faced with my anger and inability to love, I came into contact with my own humanity and became humbler. I discovered that I was frightened of my own dark places, always wanting to succeed, to be admired and ready with the right answers. I was hiding my poverty. It is easy to see the flaws in others and judge them. It is more difficult to accept our own flaws. How quickly we try to justify ourselves and blame others instead of humbly admitting our own weakness and sin.

How can we be loving and compassionate with Raphaël and Philippe, and accept their poverty and woundedness, if we cannot accept our own? Living with people with disabilities and becoming their friend forces us to come down off our pedestals and recognize our common humanity and especially our own difficulties in loving.

I realized that to become a friend to people in need, I needed to pray and work on myself, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and with good human and spiritual accompaniment—people who would walk with me and share my life. I had to learn to accept myself without any illusions. I had to discover how to forgive *and* discover my own need for forgiveness. Little by little, the weak and the powerless helped me to accept my own poverty, become more fully human and grow in inner wholeness.

Being attentive

When you are with people who suffer from intellectual disabilities, you cannot be in a hurry. It takes time to listen to them and understand them. Efficiency is not their strong point! They find their happiness in presence and relationship; their rhythm is the rhythm of the heart. They oblige us to slow down and enter into relationship.

Listening is first of all an attitude. Without judging we try to understand the pain, desires and hopes of the other. By listening attentively, we give them a sense of value and help them to grow in self-confidence. Many people suffer when they sense that others do not want to understand them. They close in on themselves. However, if someone takes time to listen to them attentively, they begin to open up.

It is not just a question of listening to words, but also to the non-verbal, the body language. Raphaël hardly spoke at all. I had

to learn his language, the meaning he gave to the few words he could say. I had to learn to interpret his bodily gestures, his tears, his smiles, his touch, his cries of anger that sprang from frustration. People with intellectual disabilities express themselves more through their bodies than through words. We have to be very attentive to this simple, concrete language to grasp the pain and the problems as well as the desires behind it.

Bathing another person is one of the most privileged experiences at L'Arche. When a person is naked, he or she is particularly vulnerable. One has to be attentive to the reactions of the body, to make sure that the person draws the greatest possible benefit from this special time of relationship. Great attentiveness, respect and tenderness are necessary. I had never given a bath to anyone before I came to L'Arche. When I came to do so, I was reminded of Paul's words: "... do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you?" (1 Cor. 6:19). This little, fragile, naked body is God's dwelling place. My own body is God's dwelling place, too.

If I am too self-centered or always trying to prove myself, I will find it difficult to listen to others. Listening to the words or body language of another implies a kind of dying to myself; it implies an openness to receive what he or she wants to give: sometimes darkness and rebellion, but also inner beauty.

At L'Arche I have learned what unconditional listening is. If a person is violent, deeply disturbed or depressed, the assistants meet with the medical team to try to understand what the person is living, what he or she is trying to say through the violence, and to understand the root of the pain. No moral judgments are made. Of course, some limits have to be put on destructive behaviour, but there must always be discussion so we can

understand and help these persons make choices and leave their world of darkness.

As I learn to listen, I learn not to judge people according to rules or by what is "normal." Rather, I try to identify their pain and help them take a step forward. If we ask too much of someone, he or she will feel paralyzed and possibly guilty. If we do not ask enough of them, they will not grow. Listening has also helped me detect more quickly the masks that so-called "normal" people wear to hide their limitations, wounds and inner pain. Listening without judging has helped me outgrow my prejudices, the fruit of my education, and develop a greater appreciation of people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. When others sense that you want to understand them and to be close to their hearts, they too let down their barriers and begin to trust.

It is not always easy to listen and be close to other people. They may challenge the things we believe in. To listen attentively to others means taking them into your heart, trying to understand and love them. It means to risk looking clearly at the weeds as well as the healthy seeds in the field of their lives and naming them, without making the person feel guilty. It also means respecting and trusting them. Sometimes when we uphold the importance of moral values and social norms and customs, we find it difficult to be close to people who, for various reasons, do not observe these standards. Yet when we listen to people who are addicted to drugs, or those serving time in prison, we begin to understand their inner wounds and pain, and their difficulties in observing such laws or appreciating these values. If we befriend recent immigrants, we begin to gain insight into the pain they experience as they face a new culture and language. We suffer when others judge or condemn these people without taking

time to understand them. Similarly, as we become close to people with intellectual disabilities, our value system changes. A new world opens up for us in which kindness, gentleness and compassion come before achievement and power. The spirituality of L'Arche necessarily changes our attitudes; we become humbler, more open. Community life has the same effect.

The weak: chosen by God

When we listen to the poor with open hearts and without prejudice, we discover that they can be prophetic. People suffering from intellectual disabilities do not know God in an intellectual, abstract way, but they can sense when they are loved. When children know that they are loved, they are peaceful. When they feel unwanted, they are in pain. They learn through contact with their hearts, their bodies and their senses. Isn't it the same for all of us, and especially for people with severe intellectual disabilities, who have few abilities and are never admired for their achievements?

In my community, we welcomed Eric, a young man who was blind and deaf. He could not speak, walk or eat by himself. He came to us from the psychiatric hospital where he had suffered the separation from his mother, who loved him very much, but was unable to care for him. He had also suffered from passing through many hands that touched and handled him, often without love or any real commitment. He had developed a very negative self-image. When he arrived in L'Arche, our task was to find ways to show him that he was lovable, just as he was, that we were happy he was alive. He used to come to the chapel with us. Those close to him during the eucharist remarked how peaceful his face was. How could he know he was in the chapel, the house of God? He could only know through a sense of the

presence of God and an inner peace given to him. The mystery of the incarnation is that God comes to us and reveals to us the breadth and the depth of the Trinity's love; God lives in us and loves us. God's presence is revealed to our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit. As children of God, we are called to receive this gift of presence and to open our hearts to this love. People who have highly developed intellects often try to reach God through their minds and thoughts. People who have limited intelligence are more open to a simple presence, a heart-to-heart relationship of communion and love. They receive God in the peace of their hearts, although they are unable to put their experience into words. If Eric could have described what he lived during the eucharist, he would probably have said, "I was filled with deep peace and joy."

Sometimes it is difficult for intellectually gifted people to understand this type of knowledge that comes from the heart. They think it is of little value because it is too emotional. They forget that it is the most fundamental form of knowledge in each of us: that we felt loved or rejected by our parents forms the basis of our psyche. The experience of falling in love and the joy we feel when we are loved by or love others both come from knowledge that flows from the heart.

This does not mean that people with intellectual disabilities do not need to be taught. Teaching has its place. The most important knowledge, however, is the knowledge that comes directly from a heart-to-heart relationship with Jesus in which they sense how much they are loved and are called to grow in love. With candles, music, the word of God and silence, we need to create an atmosphere that helps each person become quieter and more open to this presence of Jesus in their hearts.

A few years ago, everyone in our house spent two days on retreat. When I asked Didier what had touched him most during the retreat, he said: "When the priest spoke, my heart was burning." I'm sure he would not have been able to tell me exactly what the priest had said. But the music of his voice and his words filled with the love of Jesus were like channels through which the Holy Spirit had touched Didier's heart, giving him a deep sense of peace and joy.

Some people find it difficult to believe in the value of this kind of knowledge of the heart; it may seem too childish or sentimental. Perhaps they themselves lack faith. Or perhaps they are confused by the paradox they see in people with intellectual disabilities: even though they may be prophetic, they still behave in strange, sometimes self-destructive ways. We forget that God comes to us in the deepest part of our beings, at the source of our life, the innermost heart, hidden behind and beyond the more apparent psychological wounds and barriers.

Paul was conscious of this mystery when he wrote to the Corinthians that "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world ..." (1 Cor. 1:27-28).

Jesus touches this same mystery when he speaks of the king who offers a wedding feast for his son (Matthew 22). "Good," well-established people refuse his invitation. They have other things to do; they are too busy. So the king sends his servants out into the highways and byways to invite the poor, the lame, the sick and the blind—all those who are normally excluded from society because of their handicaps. "So the wedding hall was filled with guests" (Matthew 22:10). The poor are open to love; their greatest thirst is for love.

When Jesus said "Blessed are the poor ..." (Matthew 5:1-12) on a hill overlooking Lake Tiberias, he gave a guide to life, a charter. People gifted with intelligence and knowledge are invited to choose this way of life. Those who are weaker, particularly people suffering from intellectual disabilities, have no choice. They *are* poor in spirit; many are humble and gentle; they weep because they know pain; they thirst for justice, partly for themselves; many have pure hearts; many are persecuted and can become instruments of peace. Their very being manifests the presence of Jesus, poor and humiliated. That is the reality of their state of life. They can choose either to accept it or fall victim to it; that is the mystery of their freedom.

The fact that they have open, spontaneous hearts does not mean that people with intellectual disabilities do not have to struggle and make real efforts in life. They need help, formation and the right support from friends and professionals so they can accept themselves more fully just as they are, grow in faith and live, not in an imaginary world, but in reality. During the retreats or formation sessions we have organized in L'Arche and Faith and Light, we help people with intellectual disabilities look at some fundamental areas: intellectual disabilities, sexuality, death, and the presence of God. These sessions bring some of them a real freedom and inner maturity.

Jesus: present in the poor

Jesus tells us that whoever welcomes a little child in his name, welcomes him, and whoever welcomes him, welcomes the Father (Luke 9). The little child symbolizes all those who cannot cope by themselves, who need somebody to be with them and help them most of the time. Jesus identifies himself with outcasts, with strangers, with those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick,

imprisoned when he says, "... as you did it to one of the least of [my brothers and sisters], you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). What a mystery of faith! How can Jesus, the Word of God, be present in Eric with all his poverty? Is it really possible that when I am in contact with Eric I am in contact with God?

Jesus' identification with the poor remains one of the greatest and most incomprehensible mysteries of the gospels. How can God, who is all powerful, all beautiful and all glorious, become so powerless, so little, so weak? The logic of love is different from the logic of reason and power. When you love someone, you use her language to be close to her. When you love a child, you speak and play with him as a child. That is how God relates to us. God becomes little so that we will not be frightened of him, so that we can enter into a heart-to-heart relationship of love and communion.

The Word became flesh to reveal what is most precious in each one of us: our hearts, our thirst to be loved and our capacity to love, to be kind and compassionate and to give life to others. What is most important is not our knowledge or influence, but the love hidden in our hearts, which permits us to use our knowledge and gifts to serve others, to give life and to build faithful covenant relationships. That is why Jesus identifies himself with the weak, who cry out their need for love and who call people together in communion. The mystery is that our God is a hidden God. Our God is not a God of rules, regulations and obligations, or a master teacher who wants to impose a path of salvation. Our God is a God of love and communion, a heart yearning to communicate to another heart the joy and ecstasy of love and communion that exist between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Loic often sat on my lap at evening prayer in La Forestière. This quite small, weak man, who could not speak although he

was forty years old, would sit there quietly. He looked at me; I looked at him. It was a deep moment of communion one with the other. We are told that St. John Vianney, known as the "Curé d'Ars," noticed an old farmer who used to sit for hours in the church. When the saint asked him what he was doing, the farmer replied, "He looks at me and I look at him." We have moments like that with our people who, like Loic, are deeply handicapped; moments of contemplation filled with peace and stillness in which "he looks at me and I look at him," healing moments that unify our hearts and minds.

By identifying himself with the poor and the weak, Jesus reminds us that he identifies with all that is poor and weak in each of us. We are called to become more open, trusting, child-like and filled with wonder. Each person is sacred, no matter what his or her culture, religion, handicap or fragility. Each person is created in God's image; each one has a heart, a capacity to love and to be loved.

Consecration

Throughout the ages, Christian churches as well as the other great religions have always valued the call of some people to consecrate their lives completely to God. These people have always been seen as privileged witnesses or signs of God. They are the hermits, men and women living in contemplative monasteries, people who give their lives totally to Jesus; priests, nuns, religious and lay people who live their celibacy as a gift in his name. Their celibacy announces the eternal wedding feast of God with all of humanity. In the Old Testament, prophets speak of God as "the Spouse" and the people of God as "the betrothed." In the New Testament, John the Baptist calls Jesus "the Bridegroom."

Through baptism, each person's heart belongs to God. Some people, however, are called to manifest this gift of their belonging in a special way and through a particular way of life. The gospels seem to reveal to us another aspect of consecration: the mystery of the poor consecrated to God through the sacred "oils" of pain, rejection and weakness. When Paul says that God has chosen the weak, the foolish and the rejected, or when Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, describes the kingdom of God as a wedding feast to which all the poor, the lame, the sick and the blind are invited, they confirm that the weak have a preferential place in the heart of God. Jesus himself was rejected and outcast; he identifies with the rejected, the outcasts. Is that not the gospel's new order, which replaces the old? We in L'Arche are beginning to touch something of the mystery that people like St. Vincent de Paul grasped when he said, "The poor are our teachers."

This does not mean that either exclusion or rejection is in accordance with God's will. On the contrary! They are the fruits of the sins of injustice and of hardness of heart. The gospel shows, however, that God welcomes in a special way those whom society rejects.

The mystery of pain

To eat at the same table with people who have suffered rejection can be painful. In our community in Santo Domingo, we welcomed Luisito. He was born with a severe intellectual disability. His mother lived in a shantytown, in a small hut made of wooden planks. She used to bring Luisito to beg in front of the church. He could not walk or talk. When his mother died, the people in the parish took turns caring for him, washing him, bringing him food. They tried to find a home for him. They heard about L'Arche and prayed for a L'Arche community in their parish.

When a community opened in Santo Domingo, Luisito was the first person we welcomed.

It is not easy, however, to live day after day with someone like Luisito who is full of anger, darkness and depression. People who have been rejected tend to close in on themselves and refuse to communicate. Seeing themselves only as victims, they lock themselves up in their own pain and in a world of dreams. When they come to L'Arche, they are invited to open up, relate to others and let down their barriers of protection. That is not an easy transition. At first, the poor will resist any change; they will cry out their anguish, their anger and their violence. When Luisito first arrived, he refused to eat with the others at table: he was used to sitting on the ground and eating with his fingers. He had never done anything by himself; others had always helped him. The community tried to help him become independent, more responsible for himself. Each day was a struggle between the strength of our hope for him and the force of his despair.

Luisito has been with us now for twenty years. He has made a lot progress, and he has found a community and friends. He has started to walk and to work a bit in the workshop. We understand him better, though our relationship with him is still quite fragile. Even if he has opened up a bit, he remains very wounded. Much anger and sadness are still hidden deep in his heart. It takes a great deal of effort for him not to remain discouraged but to get up each day, to walk, work and live with others. Living with Luisito, bearing with his anger and trying to understand his changing moods, is quite demanding. L'Arche has given him a home and a new life, but the pain and challenge of living with him day after day, carrying his anguish, remain.

Living with the poor and eating at the same table is not a utopia. It involves conflict and struggle. People suffering from

intellectual disabilities can be quite self-centered. We need to struggle against everything that keeps them closed in on themselves, to help them open up and not be governed by fear and depression. These struggles are painful. We need the support of community life as well as the help of professionals.

Thirty years ago, I went on holiday for the month of August with a group of fifteen people from L'Arche. Our life together was quite simple, but quite demanding. Several men and women in the group had severe intellectual disabilities and we had to do all the cooking and cleaning as well as help them. Since I used to get up very early, I would leave the house and go to morning prayer at a nearby monastery. It was a time of peace and silence for me. Afterwards the monks gave me breakfast. Then, around eight o'clock, as I walked back to the house, my heart felt heavy. After the peace and quiet of the monastery, I was going back to the daily routine of making breakfast, waking up Loic, giving him a bath, waking up the other assistants. As the days went by, I sensed in myself more and more feelings of heaviness and sadness. Yet with the monks I felt so good! I realized that I had to look at my own vocation and accept it more fully, not live in dreams or inner conflict. I had to realize that Jesus had not called me to live the life of a monk according to the rule of St. Benedict, but to find him in the poor, with my people in a daily life made up of little acts of love and service. Jesus had called me to L'Arche.

As we share our lives with the powerless, we are obliged to leave behind our theories about the world, our dreams and our beautiful thoughts about God to become grounded in a reality that can be quite harsh. That is where we meet God, God who is Emmanuel, God-with-us. There God is present, hidden in wounded humanity, hidden in the pain of our own hearts.

The weak: a mystery of faith

It is easy to understand the need to be generous and to fight for justice against discrimination and poverty. We must do all we can to help teach people with disabilities to learn and take a full part in life. But we must also learn to walk with those who will never be healed, who remain imprisoned in their anguish and weakness. They need friendship and community. They need us to reveal to them their beauty and their preciousness. The gospel teaches us something completely new: that through their suffering and poverty, these people have something unique to offer. They carry, in their very beings, the mark of God and the presence of Jesus (Matthew 25).

L'Arche's spirituality is not chiefly about doing things for the poor, but about listening to them, welcoming them and living with them to help them discover the meaning and purpose of their lives. This relationship is a covenant—a relationship of fidelity rooted in Jesus' fidelity to the poor.

The poor reveal, to those who come to be with them, how to live compassionately on the level of the heart. They evangelize us. They show us the way of the beatitudes. A gradual transformation takes place in the hearts of those who come to live with them, as they discover their own poverty. They discover that the good news of Jesus is announced, not to those who serve the poor, but to those who are themselves poor. The poor lead them from generosity to compassion, and help them take to heart the words of Jesus. At the heart of L'Arche are relationships that transform us and become a sign of hope for our world.

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful;
Do not judge, and you will not be judged;

do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.
Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

(Luke 6:36-37)

We gradually discover that people suffering from intellectual disabilities, and all those on the bottom rung of the social ladder, present us with a paradox. From the point of view of faith, those who are marginalized and considered failures can restore balance to our world. It is said of Jesus: “the stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner” (1 Peter 2:7). Similarly, if we welcome those who have been rejected, they can transform us. This is the gospel and the new order instituted by Jesus. To be radically transformed, to live with this new love, we need the gift of the Holy Spirit, eyes of faith, a hope and love flowing from the heart of Jesus, which together gradually transform our hearts. The transformation, in our hearts and in the way we relate with the poor, is slow and beautiful. It takes place as we enter into community life.

