



CONTACT: Donald Lehr – The Nolan/Lehr Group / +1.212.967.8200
dlehr@templetonprize.org / www.templetonprize.org

Fact Sheet – Jean Vanier

September 10, 1928: Jean Vanier born in Geneva, Switzerland, the fourth of five children of Canadian parents, Major-General Georges Vanier (1881-1967) and Madame Pauline Archer Vanier (1898-1991).

In 1914 at the advent of World War I, his father, a Montreal lawyer and later diplomat, became a founding member of the francophone Royal 22nd regiment, the famous “Van Doos.” He was a distinguished and highly decorated soldier, suffering the loss of a leg. He would later serve as First Secretary in the Canadian High Commission in London and then as Canadian Ambassador to France in 1938. In 1959 he was appointed 19th Governor General of Canada, the first French Canadian in that post, where he served until his death.

Jean’s mother, a noted humanitarian in her own right, was one of the first Companions of the Order of Canada, and the first non-political woman appointed to the Queen’s Privy Council for Canada. After her husband’s death, she spent the last two decades of her life living in Trosly-Breuil, beloved “grandmother” of the L’Arche community there.

Jean’s sister, Thérèse, was a captain in the Canadian Women’s Army Corps and sailed in the Battle of the Atlantic, later becoming a hematologist and the first woman consultant in her field at St. Thomas’ Hospital in London. She was a lifelong friend of 1981 Templeton Prize Laureate Dame Cicely Saunders, later joining in her pioneering work in palliative care. In 1974 Thérèse founded the first community of L’Arche in England. A tireless advocate of unity across Christian faiths, she died in 2014.

Jean’s older brother Georges was a Trappist monk in Canada, known as Fr. Benedict, for almost seven decades, and also died in 2014. Jean’s older brother Bernard, a painter, died in 2010 in Paris. Michel is still alive.

1930s: Vanier receives a broad education in English and French, in England, France and Canada. In an effort to help victims of Hitler, his father urged the Canadian government to loosen immigration laws, but was rebuffed. His parents used their diplomatic cover to help fleeing Jews.

1940: The Vanier family, stationed in France, flee in advance of the Nazi occupation to London, the last Canadian diplomats to escape. After surviving months of German bombing during the Blitz, the family returns to Canada, crossing the dangerous waters of the North Atlantic. Georges Vanier returned to London in 1943 as the Canadian representative to the French government in exile.

1942: At age 13, Vanier informs his parents that he wants to leave Canada to join the Royal Naval in Great Britain. His father gave his answer: “I don’t think it’s a good idea, but I *trust* you.” He now insists that his father’s trust in him touched him deeply and gave him confidence in his desires and his inner voice for the rest of his life.

Enters Royal Navy, Dartmouth Naval College.

1945: Following the liberation of Paris, Georges Vanier returned to France as Canadian Ambassador. His mother worked with the Red Cross there and Jean travels from England to witness firsthand the arrival of concentration camp survivors in Paris. He often quotes the writing of the young Dutch Jew Etty Hillesum, who

kept diaries detailing a confidence in God's presence during her imprisonment at concentration camps prior to her death at Auschwitz in 1943.

1945-50: Naval service on several warships, including accompanying the British royal family on their tour of South Africa aboard the HMS Vanguard. Begins to pray more during long stretches of solitude serving watch on the ship's bridge, and comes to realize that his future would move beyond the life of a naval officer.

1949: Transfers to the Royal Canadian Navy and appointed to the carrier HMCS Magnificent.

1950: Studies the writings of Thomas Merton, an American Trappist monk, pacifist and social activist, and meets and befriends Daniel Berrigan, the American priest and counterculture activist later noted for his opposition to the Vietnam War. When docked in New York he visits the Harlem outpost of Friendship House, the Catholic missionary movement founded in the 1930s dedicated to social justice, particularly civil rights.

Following a 30-day retreat, Vanier resigns his naval commission, feeling a strong call to follow Jesus and to live in the spirit of the Beatitudes, close to the poor and those at the margins.

Joins "L'Eau Vive" ("Living Water"), a center in Paris for training of lay people in spirituality and theology, directed by Dominican Father Thomas Philippe, who will become Vanier's spiritual father.

1956: Leaves L'Eau Vive to devote himself to prayer and the writing of his thesis, while living a life of poverty and solitude. Spends time at the Trappist monastery of Bellefontaine, and then two years near the Marian shrine at Fatima.

1962: Receives his doctorate from the Institut Catholique in Paris. His widely praised dissertation, "Happiness as Principle and End of Aristotelian Ethics", was a bold challenge to the founder of modern ethics and Aristotle's widely-accepted concepts in such realms as bravery and virtue.

1963: Invited by Father Thomas Philippe to Trosly-Breuil, a village north of Paris, where he was serving as the chaplain at a small institution for people with intellectual disabilities. While there, Vanier visits psychiatric hospitals and other institutions where many people with disabilities were living, and concludes that they are among the most oppressed people in the world. His understanding of their need is crystallized when an institutionalized man asked him simply, "Will you be my friend?"

1964: Lectures briefly in philosophy at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto.

Decides to leave academia to follow his inner voice and spiritual calling. Invites two of the men from the institution, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, to live with him in a small house in Trosly-Breuil. He names the house L'Arche (French for "ark and "arch"), to symbolize both Noah's Ark, a "boat" to which he could invite people in pain, and an "arch" or bridge connecting heaven and earth.

1965: Accepts Directorship of Le Val Fleuri, a small institution in Trosly for 32 men with intellectual disabilities, where the men were strictly supervised. His first act is to throw away the keys.

Mid-1960s: Returns to Canada twice a year where he lectures, gives retreats and talks about his new life, often to university students, some of whom come to Trosly to live and work.

1967: Speaks at Canada's National Prayer Breakfast in Ottawa as the Six Day War rages in Israel. He notes that the world needs to find the vision and courage to prove it is not "fundamentally evil."

1968: Leads a retreat at Marylake in King City, Ontario unusually bringing together lay people, clergy and people with disabilities. Out of this, "Faith and Sharing" is born, communities created to meet and pray together each month. Hundreds of Faith and Sharing retreats occur annually across North America.

1969: Steve and Ann Newroth, Canadian students who had lived at L'Arche, return home and start Daybreak, the first L'Arche community in North America, in Richmond Hill, Ontario.

Lectures on poverty to the major superiors of religious orders, Toronto.

Travels to India to establish the first L'Arche in India. Moved by the teachings of Gandhi, who he feels as close to the spirit of the Beatitudes. This and subsequent visits underline for him the difficulties of interfaith issues, as well as introducing him to the poet Tagore, who writes of the transcendent in our midst.

1970: First L'Arche in India founded in Bangalore. Today there are five communities in India.

1970s and beyond: Additional L'Arche communities are organically founded in the UK, France, Denmark, Canada, India, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Japan, Ukraine, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Syria, Egypt, Argentina and Bangladesh. L'Arche communities rapidly became ecumenical or inter-religious.

1971: Vanier and Marie-Hélène Mathieu, the founder of OCH (Office Chrétien des Personnes Handicapées), and joined by his sister Thérèse, organize 12,000 people including 4,000 with disabilities to travel together to Lourdes in small groups on pilgrimage at Easter. These groups became the foundation of Faith and Light, a spiritual and mutual support movement for people with developmental disabilities, their families and their friends. (There are now more than 1,500 [Faith and Light](#) groups in 82 countries.)

Receives the Kennedy Foundation Award, with co-recipient Mother Teresa (the first recipient of the Templeton Prize in 1973).

Talks on *Becoming Prophets of Peace* to the Empire Club of Canada.

In advance and after the pilgrimage to Lourdes, Vanier travels extensively throughout the world to establish and support L'Arche and Faith and Light communities, and to give talks, lectures, and retreats, especially to young people and those at the margins of society. He also frequently speaks in prisons.

1972: First L'Arche community in the United States founded in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Madame Vanier, Jean's mother, moves to the L'Arche community in Trosly, where she lived as beloved community grandmother until her death there in 1991.

With the L'Arche communities' leaders, forms an International Council, which slowly evolves into the [International Federation of L'Arche](#) communities.

1973: "The Farm" opens, the center of spiritual life in Trosly.

1974: Mother Teresa visits Trosly.

Leads a US conference with Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger, international voice of "Normalization."

1975: Talks on *The New Society of Brotherhood, Justice & Peace* at the Vanier Institute of the Family, Ottawa.

1976: Returns from India unwell with a tropical infection and spends two months hospitalized.

1978: Foundation of La Forestiere in Trosly, home for those with severe disabilities who reveal to Vanier the presence of God hidden in the hearts of the most vulnerable and fragile.

1979: First annual 10-week "renewal" for long-term assistants, in England. The most recent was in 2000.

1980: Steps down from day-to-day operations of L'Arche Trosly. Spends a year living in La Forestiere.

A ten-day trip to Lebanon includes talks at Saida University and elsewhere, as many as five per day, including one to 500 people at a psychiatric hospital titled "The Wounded Image of the Mentally Sick." Also participates in a television program bringing together Muslims and Christians.

A visit to Honduras coincides with the assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero in San Salvador. Gives the homily at the official mass for Romero in the cathedral of Choluteca.

1981: Pilgrimage to the Holy Land with 40 long-term L'Arche members. This trip has often been repeated after Easter, with Vanier giving talks about the life of Jesus at each stop.

1982: Development of Faith and Light, particularly in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt.

1983: Delivers the major address to the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver, where 230 different churches are represented.

1986: Visits the Philippines during the People Power Revolution, where he gives a retreat near Manila, visits Faith and Light communities, and the prison at Muntinlupa.

1987: At the invitation of Pope John Paul II, participates in the Synod of the Laity in Rome. Visits Japan and South Korea.

1988: Delivers the inaugural Harold M. Wit Lectures at Harvard Divinity School on "Living a Spiritual Life in a Contemporary Age." The lectures are published as *From Brokenness to Community*.

1989: Invited by the Moscow Institute of Philosophy to give several talks including on "The Ethics of Nonviolence." Meets with people concerned with caring for the disabled, and with Christians from Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and Baptist churches. This trip opened doors for later visits to Russia, Lithuania, Romania, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. Faith and Light communities are developed in all these countries.

1992: Leads retreat at the Orthodox Institute of Theology in Bucharest, attended by members of Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches. The Orthodox Patriarch gives his authority for the Eucharist to be celebrated on alternate days in a local Orthodox church, a first.

1993: Leads ecumenical retreat in the Ukraine, attended by members of the Greek-Catholic, Latin, Independent Orthodox, Orthodox, Baptist and Pentecostal churches.

1995: Attends ecumenical "Festival for Peace" in Northern Ireland, and includes the [Liturgy of the Washing of the Feet](#), wherein people wash each other's feet as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, which serves as a helpful gesture of interdenominational communion.

1997: Invited to meet with Pope Shenouda III, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church (with the largest membership of any church in the Middle East), and speaks to a large audience at the Orthodox Centre of Theology in Cairo.

Receives the Pope Paul VI International Prize from Pope John Paul II who says of Vanier: "He is a great spokesman for the culture of solidarity and 'the civilization of love,' both in the fields of thought and action, in his commitment to encouraging the integral development of every man and the whole man."

1998: Animates a day on spirituality for the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, representing 230 different Christian churches, which includes the participation of all present in the Liturgy of the Washing of the Feet.

Joins three other founders of lay communities – Chiara Lubich (1977 Templeton Prize Laureate), Kiko Arguello, & Fr. Luigi Giussani – at the invitation of Pope John Paul II to speak to 350,000 people at the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity in Rome.

At the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, leads a retreat at the Lambeth Conference for 800 bishops of the Anglican Communion and speaks on "The Call to Holiness." Included in his presentation is the "Liturgy of the Washing of the Feet."

Delivers the Massey Lectures in Convocation Hall, Toronto, for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) on "Becoming Human," which are later published in a best-selling book, *Becoming Human*.

2003: Visits South Africa and Zimbabwe where he speaks at, among other places, a prison in Zimbabwe.

2004: Invited by Pope John Paul II to speak to an international symposium on the dignity and rights of people living with intellectual disabilities. The Pope stated: "...that in revealing the fundamental frailty of the human condition, the disabled person becomes an expression of the tragedy of suffering...and that disabled people are humanity's privileged witnesses."

Invited to participate in the Pope's pilgrimage to Lourdes, and to deliver short meditations in front of the Pope. Later writes of the Pope, afflicted with Parkinson's disease, as a living symbol of the presence of God in weakness, poverty and vulnerability, and as a call to tenderness.

Attends International Council of Faith and Light in Syria where he gives two public talks, in Damascus and Aleppo, each to about 700 people, mostly Muslims. After the talk in Aleppo, the Mufti speaks of people with disabilities being a path to God. Also leads an ecumenical retreat in Northern Ireland.

2005: Invited to Jordan by the British organization Questscope to meet with Muslim youth in difficulty, as well as with their teachers and psychologists to help develop an approach to the needs of troubled youth.

Attends inter-religious meeting in Lyon organized by the community of Sant'Egidio, a community of prayer and service to those at the margins where he participates in a round table discussion with a Muslim philosopher and a Jewish Rabbi on "an anthropology for the 21st century"

Attends the International Federation of L'Arche meeting in Assisi, Italy where he speaks about St Francis: "Francis ...shows us all a way of humility and love. His desire to live simply and poorly, to share his life with the poor... is a call for us all in l'Arche."

2006: Participates in a Paris conference on peace initiatives, including a discussion with Adolfo Perez Esquivel and Hildegard Goss-Mayr.

Symposium organized in Aberdeen by Dr. John Swinton on "L'Arche: A Place of Gentleness."

Leads retreat in Krakow and visits Auschwitz, 24 years after his first visit to Poland. Leads first annual retreat for Paris street people and their accompaniers, in Trosly.

2008: Speaks at Duke University Divinity School to mark the publication of *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, co-authored with Prof. Stanley Hauerwas.

Leads a retreat at the [Community of Saint Martins](#) in Kenya. L'Arche Kenya is later founded at the heart of that community.

At the International Federation of L'Arche meeting in Kolkata, India, he speaks about Gandhi's holiness: his nonviolence, humility and love, both the enemy and of those who are humiliated.

2009: In Israel and Palestine, narrates 14 films on the Gospel of St. John from the perspective of L'Arche.

2010: Convenes a meeting of Christians and Muslims in Trosly.

2014: 50th anniversary of the founding of L'Arche. Meets with Pope Francis to mark the anniversary, joined by members of L'Arche from around the world.

2015: Speaks at the House of Lords, London on "Why do the Strong Need the Weak?"

Currently there are 147 L'Arche communities in 35 countries on five continents, and more than 1,500 Faith and Light communities in 82 countries.

Awarded the 2015 Templeton Prize.

#