

# A letter from Jean

August 8

Once again, the moment for my annual stay at the Abbey of Orval (Belgium) has come round: the singing of the monks brings me peace and lifts me up to the heaven in them and in me; I rediscover the swallows back from Africa, dancing and diving into the pond outside the church; I feel renewed by times of prayer, a joy-filled space with restful thanksgiving to God; walks in the forest on legs that sometimes wobble a little; also time to read a book on the prophet Isaiah written by a Belgian priest, Jacques Vermeylen (Brother Luc, a Dominican, had told me he thought the book of Isaiah had been the bedside book of John the Evangelist).

I have also re-read Hannah Arendt's book on the trial of Eichmann, who, during the war, coordinated the extermination of Jews in the different concentration camps, especially Auschwitz. In his defence, he pleaded: "I have done nothing but obey my superiors." In addressing the banalisation of evil, Hannah questions the attitude of a person who obeys without making a personal judgment, who just does the same as everyone else, following a culture promoted, among others, by the media and advertising industry. But, faced by social norms and laws, is there not a personal conscience within each of us inviting us to be agents of peace, truth and justice? Would that not correspond to the deep meaning of L'Arche, which is to welcome people with intellectual disabilities who are so often condemned by exclusion or abortion.



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August 23

Around August 15th, I broke into this month spent at Orval, to travel to Taizé, that extraordinary community founded by Brother Roger.



It was the 100th anniversary of Brother Roger's birth, the 75th anniversary of the birth of the community and the 10th of his assassination. Brother Roger was a pastor of the Reformed Church in Switzerland; thanks to a very warm relationship he had established with a Catholic family, he became very enthused by Christian unity. This family was living the same love as his own Protestant family, so how come there were differences in theology, in ways of praying and worship? Along with other Protestant pastors, Brother Roger was led by the Holy Spirit and by Jesus to establish this amazing community, whose goal from the beginning was common prayer and the welcome of people in need and the desire to live unity among Christians. The community expanded rapidly, since it attracted many young people from different Christian churches in Europe and beyond, thirsting for renewal, for a life of prayer, simplicity and evangelical poverty, as a sign of peace and unity among Christians.



The three days I spent in the community were days of joy and wonder. For these anniversaries, their church, which has been gradually and creatively enlarged over the years, welcomed 6000 young people and friends, gathered around the 90 brothers in

the community. These young people received a tremendous welcome and participated in various discussion forums. I was invited to give a witness testimony on L'Arche and on the vision of "living with" as a place of healing and transformation, as a source of peace and unity. A thousand young people attended one of the forums, and 300 came to the other. I was surrounded by ten members of L'Arche Les Trois Fontaines (Ambleteuse). Their joyful, exuberant presence put flesh on my words. At the end of the larger forum, we all danced together, a real celebration. The week-long presence of the group from Ambleteuse, meant that young people from so many European countries, could experience the deep sense of L'Arche as a community of peace and unity.



While there, I also met Nayla Tabbara, Muslim, and a priest, Father Fadi, who together founded an interfaith formation centre in Beirut to help Muslims and Lebanese Christians to get to know each other better. Nayla Tabbara also supports Muslim members of Faith and Light and of L'Arche in Bangladesh, of Bethlehem and elsewhere, to deepen the spirituality of L'Arche: to discover God and be transformed through a relationship with people with intellectual disabilities. Nayla and Father Fadi are coming to Trosly in September 2016, to lead a session on "divine hospitality" in the Christian vision and the Muslim vision.





At the present time, in all Western countries we feel the fear that comes from acts of terrorism committed in our countries and the horrific, mad violence committed by "Daech" (ISIL) in Syria and Iraq, not only against Christians but also against other Muslims and other religious groups. Coordinated by Daech, terrorists seek to create panic, division and hatred in our Western countries, and make us forget the deeper meaning of Islam as a religion of prayer, worship of God and openness to the poor through works of charity. L'Arche has a role to play to help each person to discover and experience this deep sense of Islam.



I like to quote a text written by an Algerian Muslim woman, Oum El Kheir, a friend of Bishop Claverie of Oran, the bishop murdered by terrorists in Algiers in 1996. This is what she wrote:

*«There is in Algeria  
a "Muslim Church".  
It is made up of all these women  
and all these men  
who identify with the universal message  
of love and of commitment  
to a pluralist  
and more fraternal society.  
This Muslim "church"  
is larger  
than you think.  
In Algeria, our blood is intermingled. »*

Yes, everywhere around the world there are Muslims who discover the universal meaning of this human family.



In two days' time, I take the road back to my community in Trosly: the joy of re-connecting with my life there, and my community, and especially the meals in my home at Le Val. I am so happy in the midst of my community, despite the difficulties and divisions of life that can arise there. I give thanks for everyone and especially for Christine McGrievy who carries responsibility for the Trosly community with great competence and a concern for each. My joy is to live among people who were humiliated in their youth on account of their disabilities. My joy is to be with them because they were chosen by God in their weakness and folly to confound those who place importance and value on power and knowledge. Living with them teaches me to be a little crazy and weak.



The other day, on the train, there was a very serious looking gentleman near me who seemed rather closed up. But at one point, he got nearer to his young child, and began to make utterly ridiculous gestures and facial expressions, laughing with him. If I had seen his gestures and his face without the child being there, I would have thought that this gentleman was not "all there". The child teaches us to discover the freedom to be oneself, the freedom to play, the freedom to live. At L'Arche, we too are learning to be free, weak and sometimes ridiculous with people who are graced with a certain "craziness".

In a short time I will be 87 years old, believe it or not! I see my 90th is getting closer... In the past, I considered this a ripe old age. Now that it has arrived, I also see that it is a moment to live what I have been preaching a long time, the value of disability and weaknesses in human life. In fact, each of us has to live his own weaknesses and not just talk about or help those who are weak. Fortunately, Odile is here, watching over me. Pray for me that I may learn to live this great age well, by discovering its riches.

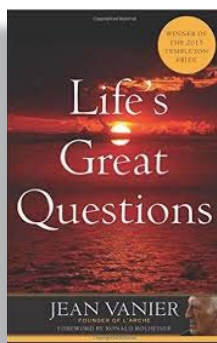
For now, I receive it as a great gift, being able so often to preach the Gospel at La Ferme in Trosly. On my return, there will be a retreat with a large group of Faith and Light from Lebanon, and then another for Irish priests, then a group from Norway, followed by other groups of Faith and Light from Russia and South America. There will also be retreats open to everyone, organised by La Ferme. And then there will be retreats for people who have been humiliated in particular ways: for street people, for those who have divorced and sometimes remarried, for homosexuals. I discovered that all these people have the gift of meeting God in truth and, through their humility, they teach me a lot about humanity.

*Thank you to each of you  
for your friendship, for your letters.  
I feel so in communion with each of our  
communities of L'Arche and Faith and Light.*

*Jean*



## Two new books published by Franciscan Media

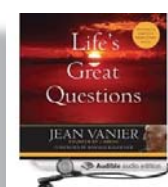


*"This book is a gift to us all,  
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- Krista Tippett

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Vanier explores the ponderings every great philosopher seeks to understand, such as: Who are we? Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? With Vanier's characteristically deep yet accessible style, the philosopher and humanitarian encourages his readers to delve more deeply into their own faith and spirituality, while guiding you to find your own answers to life's great questions.



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is available  
Audio book  
5 hours and 41 minutes

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### The Gospel of John The Gospel of Relationship

Vanier examines the two great commandments: the love of God and love of others. Vanier eloquently demonstrates how the two commandments are, in fact, the same as individuals express their love for God through compassionate care for one another and encounter the love of God tangibly through closeness. In this chapter-by-chapter exploration of the Gospel of John, Vanier explains how Jesus taught this lesson throughout his ministry. The book includes personal stories from his work with L'Arche that express the great privilege we have of developing our relationships with one another and with God.

