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Niall Ahern

Jean Vanier
– Prophet of
Tenderness
(1929-2019)

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Jean Vanier is an international figure and as I attended his funeral recently at his community in Trosly- Breuil outside Paris, I became more aware than ever that our sadness and thanksgiving were for a man of extraordinary global import. He was 90 years of age and in his lifetime he raised to new levels of awareness the beauty and giftedness of those who are weakest and most fragile amongst us.

Born in Geneva to Canadian parents, he went on to study in Canada, England and France and earned a doctorate in Philosophy from the Institut Catholique de Paris with a dissertation on Happiness in Aristotle but abandoned academia to pursue an inner urge to live life at the heart level. This led through small steps towards the founding of *L'Arche* and *Faith and Light* – both communities focused on the dignity of persons with learning disabilities. By founding this first local community in Trosly-Breuil and witnessing it develop as a global movement dedicated to the flourishing of persons with intellectual challenges, Jean has become a scion grafted onto something beyond itself, which in turn is now creating something vital and transformative for the church and the evangelisation of our world today.

When invited by the editor of *The Furrow* to pin point the origin and significance of Jean's vision and inspiration, I initially recalled that as a very young man he was taken by his mother to assist the survivors of recently liberated Nazi concentration camps. Not surprisingly, the work left an indelible mark on him as a witness to what human beings can do to each other, but also testified to how human beings can transcend fear, hatred, violence and meet each other face to face. Figures like Anna Frank and Etty Hillesum became inspirational for him. 'Get rid of the little seeds of hate for one another' Jean often urged 'because we can only discover the transcendence to which our humanity calls us when we meet the different.'

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He travelled the world to support his foundations and to imbue them with a spirituality grounded in his own Catholic faith; his reflection on the mystery of suffering and his awareness of the subtle violence that dwells in each human heart. What this compels us towards is an examination of how we respond to what Jean regards as the central question at the core of all humanity – ‘Can you love me?’ This is the most important pedagogical question of all. Jean’s love of the poor, the disabled and those who are so earnestly questing for relationship was the gentle force behind all his endeavours. (cf. Documentary / Summer in the Forest). He would say ‘I strongly believe that God is hidden in the heart of the smallest of all, in the weakest of all, and if we commit ourselves to them, we open a new world’.

The whole invitation of Jesus is to ‘Love one another as I have loved you’ (Jn 13: 34). To love people is not to do things for them, but to reveal to them that they have a value. It is to help them discover that they are precious because they’re capable of relationship and of love. We are not to develop our other capacities at the expense of the capacity to love. That is all Jean did – healing people to help them love and give thanks. The vision of Jesus is to announce the Good News to the poor. But to announce the Good News to the poor is to announce that each one is precious and it is not just in God’s eyes but in one another’s too. The heart of *L’Arche* and *Faith and Light* is to live tenderly, and tenderness is to see in people their beauty. It’s having what you would call in French *bienveillants* – kindly eyes, to look at people kindly. This means without judgement, without fear – to see people as people. ‘They will know you are my disciples by the love you have for one another’ (Jn 13:35). Jean spent his life attending the needs of the marginal, the neglected, the suffering, those deemed socially unworthy. There was always, for him, a bewilderment when he would articulate the drive to dominate as a means of proving individual success and worth. When we give hospitality to such bewilderment we fundamentally discover that what matters are relationships. What matters is meeting another person as a human being – a meeting that implies that I am not better than you and you are not better than me. It is a place of revelation. A revelation of tenderness. Jean is for us all a prophet of tenderness.

WINNERS AND LOSERS

He is the author of several books on the dignity of each person and spent all his energy in revealing the unclaimed beauty in the weakest amongst us. He devoted his life to flattening hierarchies. A crucial element of his teaching – particularly to young people

whom he urged to lead the world to simplicity – is that we must stop madly striving for status. ‘People are so desperate to be part of an elite’ Jean has remarked ‘so they push for victory in sports, business, school, professional life and saddest of all, in relationships’. Or they may hide themselves in closed groups and define themselves by their politics, race, religion or gender. ‘When women are angry at all men, or men are afraid of the intelligence of women’ he said ‘they’re not open to difference. And they are not in touch with their own anguish’. There is always that tension between the significant and the insignificant; between the achievement and the littleness. To be a Christian is just to love people who are different, not because they’re going to give you power, but because they’re crying out for a friend and you desire to respond by being their friend. We create a culture of winners and this then creates a culture of losers. And the losers are frequently people who see the world in all its confusion and do not know how to enter it. Such reality is a very painful and harsh world; the world where only winners are esteemed.

At *L’Arche* and *Faith and Light* the discovery is that the poor evangelise us. They open our hearts and reveal to us the true image of Jesus and of his mission. The poor person is prophetic. They cry out. They call us to change, to relinquish our selfishness and open ourselves to communion. They ask to be recognised as a person, to be loved with a love that is not mere sentiment but one that is committed, a love that expresses care and understanding; a desire for the other to be at ease in his body and in his entire being, that they might progress their latent potential. They desire a love that embodies tenderness. Yes, the poor person is prophetic. They challenge us to change, to adopt a new style of life. They invite us to live relationship, celebration, sharing and forgiveness. The rich person is fearful, he shuts himself up in his wealth, his isolation, his hyperactivity and his leisure time. The rich person needs the poor to help him to escape from the prison in which he has enclosed himself. The danger that threatens him is that of self sufficiency and of becoming a slave to his own security, his knowledge, his power. If he allows himself to be intruded upon, then the miracle can happen. The poor person breaks through the prison bars and his eyes penetrate the heart of the rich to awaken it to life. Little by little he discovers a gentle power, a strength hidden deeper than his knowledge and his capacity for action. He discovers the strength of tenderness, of goodness, of patience, of pardon, of joy. There is real reciprocity here in the mutual discovery of hearts created for relationship and for service; hearts which are meant to be signs of God’s love in our world.

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WOUNDEDNESS

The reality is we have a world where all will eventually die. It's the reality of weakness. But weakness means 'I need your help'. So are we trying to create a world of individuals who come to apparent success but don't need people until they themselves start getting weak?. Is it weakness that inevitably brings us together?. The mission of *L'Arche* and *Faith and Light* is about bringing the vision of Jesus alive by forming communion in fragility and tenderness. And this means that your weakness is my weakness. We need each other. In community there is mission and the mission of Jesus which Jean announces is to live our woundedness together. The resurrected Jesus retained his wounds and these unabashedly became the recognition point for others to believe in the transcendence of love.

The response to the *cri du coeur* 'Can you love me?' is found in the mutual discovery of anguish. Everyone suffers. Everyone is wounded. And the touchstone of our tranquillity is the discovery of our woundedness. That is the way of spiritual liberation. It is something Jean was convinced young people could find in intimacy with the disabled. The biggest change he observed in society in recent decades is the decline of traditional morality. He lamented how the loss of orthodox morality had allowed the mass media promote rampant sexuality and yet he tentatively ventured to quote the celebrated atheist philosopher, Andre Malraux, that, in quiet response to the sexually libertine 20th century, that the 21st century could become one of heightened spirituality. The beauty in every human being cannot resist disclosure no matter what the circumstance. Asked once to name the film that he found most dangerous from a moral or spiritual standpoint, Jean instead opted to highlight one that exemplifies his desired approach to life: *Dead Man Walking*. That film is based on the true story of a Catholic sister who ministered to an American prisoner on death row. All his life he had been told he was useless; a disappointment; a burden. The treasure of the film is that he became convinced that there was something beautiful in him and his last words to the sister were 'I love you'. This is the lesson of the life of this great prophet of tenderness – Jean urges us to experience the transformation in the heart of the one who expresses the plea 'Can you love me?' and witness it become for them the benediction 'I love you'.

This is, indeed, the essence of Jean's mission statement; its *raison d'être* is simply this: we need to open ourselves to Jesus and to one another in such a way that we are capable of hearing the other say to us, individually, 'I love you'. Jean's favourite gospel was the gospel of Saint John and it makes this exact point. This

gospel structures itself very differently from the other gospels. John has no infancy narrative or early life of Jesus. In his gospel we meet Jesus as an adult on the first page and the first words of Jesus form a question: ‘Who are you looking for?’ Jean suggests that this question remains throughout the rest of this gospel as a hermeneutical colouring suggesting that beneath everything else a certain searching is going on. A lot of things are happening on the surface but underneath there remains always this nagging, restless question: ‘Who are you looking for?’ Jean frequently pointed out that Jesus answers that question explicitly only at the end of the gospel; on the morning of the resurrection a distraught Mary of Magdala goes looking for him and asks him where she might find Jesus. Jesus, for his part, repeats for her the question he opened the gospel with: ‘Who are you looking for?’ And he then immediately answers it. With deep affection, he pronounced her name: ‘Mary’. In so doing, he points her towards what she and everyone else are forever looking for – the voice of Jesus, one to one, speaking the tenderness of love, gently recognising us individually by name. In the end, Jean believes that this is at the core of each heart’s yearning. We, who are so constantly in fear of our own seeming insubstantiality, are brought to hear Jesus call us by name. Nothing else is needed. All else is grace.

This encounter Jean facilitated year after year for Irish priests and for Irish young people when he led them in retreats at his home and when he visited Ireland he impressed us all by the direct communion he had with each person. Pope Francis said of him ‘He was a man who knew how to read our Christian existence from the mystery of death on the cross of illness; from the mystery of those who are despised and rejected in the world; from the mystery of those who before birth face the possibility of being sentenced to death: from the mystery of tender compassion.’

It is Jean’s conviction that in a mysterious way the weak teach the seemingly strong how to love, how to be delicate and attentive. Gradually, they teach us how to be vulnerable, to allow barriers behind which we hide, to fall down. They call forth within us new energies; appealing to what is deepest within us; helping us to develop a seeing and a hearing heart. Gradually, the rich person becomes poorer; he separates himself from society’s values and his emerging poverty and insecurity realign themselves with that of the poor. They become sisters and brothers on a journey together into Jesus. For Jean did not believe that a heart can love truly, and with all the sensitivity that this implies, without the presence of Jesus. Jesus is the master of love and in Jean’s experience it is He who teaches us to love authentically. And in this apprenticeship the handicapped person has a primordial role. He touches the very

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depths of our hearts; he reveals and inspires love. Jesus sees the weak as the instruments of redemptive love amongst us.

We need to be guided in this revelation of love. We can quickly fall into illusion. What we are approaching is ultimately the gift of compassion. This compassionate presence is the kernel of Jean's pedagogy. In becoming present to and living in a relationship with the poor, we discover the compassionate and contemplative dimension of love; how Jesus is hidden in the heart of the weak; how the face of the poor is the reflection of the face of Jesus. As Jean Valjean says in *Les Mirables* 'To love another person is to see the face of God'.

Over the years this one man had received virtually every honour and distinction to which any humanitarian could aspire, including the Companion and Order of Canada, the French Legion of Honour, the *Pacem in Terris* Peace and Freedom prize and the Templeton award. And yet as we sat in vigil before his mortal remains laid out in a sealed simple wooden casket we became deeply aware that such honours dissolve before the strength of such an enormous love – a resurrection love that no earthly seal can contain.

‘Set me as a seal on your heart,
as a seal on your arm.
For love is strong as death.
Love's flames endure forever.’
SONG OF SOLOMON 8:6

Jean Vanier profoundly inhabited such love; it is the tender love of Jesus; it will endure forever.

The spiritual life. The spiritual life is not, cannot be, a pious pastime. It is premised on a total surrender to the promise and demands of the gospel. It bears the imprint of the Cross and is charged with the Spirit of the risen Jesus. No platitudinous 'spirituality' can encompass the grandeur of this sacrifice of praise.

– ERIK VARDEN, *The Shattering of Loneliness* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum) p. 129.