

JEAN VANIER & L'ARCHE: Biography and Backgrounder

Christian philosopher, writer, humanitarian and founder of L'Arche and Faith and Light

Born: September 10, 1928 in Geneva, Switzerland.

Died: May 7, 2019 in Paris, France – aged 90



PHOTO: Jean Vanier at the Templeton awards in 2015

A Canadian Catholic whose charity work helped improve conditions for the developmentally disabled in multiple countries over the past half-century, Jean Vanier died in May 2019 at the age of 90 in Paris after suffering from thyroid cancer.

Jean Vanier was the fourth of five children born to Major General Georges Vanier and Pauline Archer Vanier, who were both Canadian; his father, George Vanier is best known as a Canadian diplomat and the first French-Canadian Governor General of Canada [1959-1967].

In 1942, at age 13, Jean Vanier enrolled at Dartmouth Naval College in England. When his father was Canada's ambassador in Paris in 1945 and his mother a delegate of the Red Cross, he participated in the reception of concentration camp survivors in the French capital – an experience that marked him for life.

He transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy in 1949 before resigning his commission a year later to, in his words "follow Jesus and work for peace". In 1962 he obtained his doctorate in philosophy and began teaching at St Michael's College in Toronto.

When Vanier was 36, he left academic life. He began to assist a friend, Fr. Thomas Phillippe, OP, who had just become chaplain of the Val Fleuri, a French institution that was home to 30 men with intellectual disabilities. While there, Vanier visited a psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of Paris, which housed those with both mental illnesses and intellectual disabilities. He was struck by the depravity of the conditions there, and the apparent loneliness of the residents.

"I visited homes and discovered a world of vast suffering that I had been totally ignorant of. In the navy, I had been in a world of efficiency; through my studies, I was in the world of intellect. And then I found myself faced by a world of 'the cry' and that has turned my life upside down."

Shortly thereafter, Vanier discerned in prayer that he should invite two men, Raphael Simi and Phillippe Seux, to live with him in a small house in Trosly-Breuil, France. He named the home "L'Arche," or "The Ark." Vanier later recalled: "What they really wanted was to have a friend. They didn't care about my knowledge or capacity to do things, but about my heart and my being."

The house quickly became too small to welcome both volunteers and disabled people and other L'Arche homes started up in France and spread across the world. L'Arche now has 154 communities in 38 countries that are home to thousands of people both with and without disabilities.

In 1971 Vanier also founded – with Marie Hélène-Matthieu – Faith and Light, an organisation bringing together, on a monthly basis, people with intellectual disabilities, their families and friends. Today there are more than 1,450 such groups in 85 countries.

He also travelled the world to encourage interfaith dialogue and was awarded the 2015 Templeton Prize for spiritual work, as well as France's Legion d'honneur. In 1998 he addressed both the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and, at the invitation of Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, the Anglican bishops at the Lambeth Conference.

Across ministry settings, people came to know Vanier's philosophical and theological ideas through his many books, like *Becoming Human* and *Community and Growth* among dozens of others, but also through personal encounters as he traveled to L'Arche communities around the world and his speaking on the areas of faith, community, and the possibility of peace in diversity.

In a long message read at his funeral, Pope Francis prayed that the L'Arche communities around the world would "continue to be places of celebration and forgiveness, compassion and joy, demonstrating that everyone, no matter his or her disability, is loved by God and called to participate in a world of brotherhood, justice and peace."