

Synthesis of the Study Commission's report mandated  
by L'Arche internationale

**Control and Abuse,  
An investigation  
on Thomas Philippe,  
Jean Vanier and L'Arche**

JANUARY 2023

This synthesis summarizes the work of the Study Commission mandated by L'Arche international in the Autumn of 2020, following the revelation in February 2020 of the existence of the coherent and converging testimonies of six women declaring abuses by Jean Vanier, but also of the latter's long-time knowledge of abuses implicating Thomas Philippe. The chief point of the mission letter given to the Commission are the following: shed light on the history of the foundation of L'Arche, identify the relational, cultural and institutional dynamics at work that may have fostered situations of abuse, highlight Jean Vanier's personal trajectory, his connection with Thomas Philippe and his degree of belief in the deviant mystic into which he was initiated.

The commission consists of six researchers of different disciplines: history, sociology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis and theology<sup>1</sup>. It met every two months over a period of two years with a pluri-disciplinary approach. A scientific council, to which the commission could regularly present its works, was also set up.<sup>2</sup>

The investigation covers a period of over 90 years, from Jean Vanier's birth in Geneva in 1928 till his death in 2019.

The object of the Commission was not to retrace the history of L'Arche, nor to investigate the situations of hold or abuse that had no connection with Thomas Philippe or Jean Vanier. It was not within its sphere of competence either to draw a portrait of Jean Vanier that would balance his faults with his merits nor to establish what the position of L'Arche with regard to its founders should be.

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1. Florian Michel and Antoine Mourges are historians, Claire Vincent-Mory sociologist, Bernard Granger psychiatrist, Nicole Jeammet psycho-analyst, Gwennola Rim-baut theologian. Two members of the Commission are not authors of the report : Alain Cordier brought in his experience as member of the CIASE and Erik Pillet, retired from L'Arche, acted as coordinator.

2. With the help of Marie Balmary, Céline Béraud, Guillaume Cuchet, Karlijn Demasure, Véronique Margron, Christian Salenson and Jean Guilhem Xerri. Presentation document of the Study Commission and Scientific Council : [https://intranet.larche.org/documents/10181/2994508/Study-commission\\_scientific-committee\\_AI\\_final\\_EN.pdf/95e55b3e-f431-4b79-810f-f74bc0fb3b31](https://intranet.larche.org/documents/10181/2994508/Study-commission_scientific-committee_AI_final_EN.pdf/95e55b3e-f431-4b79-810f-f74bc0fb3b31)

The report is organized into 7 parts. The first part, historical, aims at examining some of Jean Vanier's biographical elements, by specifically verifying the different stages of his training and studying the human and ecclesial network which he fits in. The next part, historical too, assesses the human, spiritual and cultural continuities between L'Eau vive and L'Arche. The third part, sociological, ponders the practices and representations of governance and the authority at L'Arche with Jean Vanier. Thomas Philippe's and Jean Vanier's abuses are analyzed in the fourth part. Given its importance, the choice was made to develop it more at length than the other parts of this synthesis. The fifth part presents the psychiatric hypotheses concerning the two men. The sixth part proposes a psycho-analytical look on Jean Vanier's trajectory and the seventh a critical analysis of his spirituality.

The investigation rests on a solid documentary basis: the archives of L'Arche, of the Congregation for the doctrine of the faith, the dioceses and religious congregations concerned, from the Dominicans to the Carmelites, from the "Little Sisters of the Holy Virgin" to the Brothers of Saint-Jean, etc. The investigation is also based on a corpus of interviews led according to the methodological rules proper to each discipline represented in the Commission, viz. 119 interviews with 89 persons. As to it, the study of practical theology is based on the reading of 15 books by Jean Vanier, covering his whole period of activity.

Fruitful dialogues have been led with the Dominicans of the Province of France and the Brothers of Saint-Jean who have themselves also set up study commissions, the first concerns Thomas Philippe and the second his brother, Marie-Dominique Philippe.

Being independent, the Commission was free to choose its method and interpretations. Nothing is stated without a careful checking of the sources and testimonies.

The researchers have been determined to make the result of their work public, under their scientific responsibility, so that the culture of secret carefully maintained for decades should be done at last. The report is an academic work, with the scientific exigence and the academic rules that go with it. It rests on very numerous excerpts from correspondences and testimonies that this synthesis only partly quotes, without mentioning the references present in the report. Whereas the

synthesis recounts the main conclusions and hypotheses of the report, only the latter, with its in-depth, carefully documented analysis, is authoritative and commits its authors.

**Part 1 :**  
**Jean Vanier's journey (1928-2010)**

## CHAPTER 1

**The son of a well-off family (1928-1950)**

Jean Vanier was born in Geneva in September 1928. Everything has already been told by his biographers and by Jean Vanier himself regarding his childhood between Switzerland and Canada, his teenage years as “cadet” in an English military school, his years of service as officer in the Royal, then Canadian, Navy. “A good boy” as he describes himself, he willingly accepts the family model proposed to him, which rests on three pillars: the army, the service of the State (Canada, the English monarchy, the Empire) and the Catholic Church.

**He will be vastly influenced by a family environment in which religion is central and the events of life, including everyday life, interpreted under the angle of Providence.**

His father, Georges, for a while considered entering the seminar. His mother, Pauline, also questions herself about her religious vocation. Jean Vanier’s grandmother on his mother’s side and his mother herself have been spiritually counselled by Fr Almire Pichon (1943-1919) who was himself the confessor and spiritual director of St Thérèse of Lisieux.

In November 1949, Pauline Vanier becomes “tertiary” of the Nogent Carmel, under the spiritual direction of Thomas Philippe, whom she and her husband met in 1947. So, when Jean Vanier goes to L’Eau vive in 1952 after 8 years in the Royal and then Canadian Navy, he is meeting up with a monk who counsels his mother.

It is on the basis of the analysis of a letter from Thomas Philippe – not kept in the archives – and with his parents’ very active support that he makes his decision. On hearing it, Pauline Vanier is, according to Thomas Philippe’s phrase, “in admiration of the ways of Providence”,

which not only allow her to meet up again with her son in France after years of separation, but also entrust him to a priest that she admires.

There is strong probability that Jean Vanier only discovers female sociability upon his arrival at L’Eau vive, the first institution he frequents in which he is in mixed company. Reading him, the image he gives is that of a devout and amiable officer cadet, then of a sporty young officer reading his breviary – almost a seminarist –, not really given to studying, who cherishes the idea of a healthy body in a pious mind. He does not seem to have ever been in love.

## CHAPTER 2

### Jean Vanier, Thomas Philippe and L'Eau vive (1950-1956)

**As he joins the L'Eau vive community, Jean Vanier means to devote himself to God by beginning to discern his vocation. What he expects to be a short period of transition will be prolonged over six years, eventually constituting the founding experience of his life.**

Located in Soisy-sur-Seine, in the immediate vicinity of Le Saulchoir, the convent of the Dominicans of the Province of France, L'Eau vive was funded by Thomas Philippe in 1945 as an international training center. Halfway between the religious community, the Christian youth hostel and the American-style university campus, the center proposes an initiation to theology and philosophy as well as an introduction to contemplative life, resting on Carmelite mystique and a strong Marian devotion.

Thomas Philipe, a Dominican, embodies an intellectual and mystic current distinct from the historical Thomism prevailing at Le Saulchoir. He relies on the relationships woven during his Roman years and his title of “master in theology” to get himself faithful supports and make his project known. Fr Suarez, the Master of the Dominican order, Pope Pius XII, Mgr Roncalli (future John XXIII), Mgr Montini (future Paul VI) all look favorably on the project. There are more than 60 students in 1952, summer sessions gather more than 100 participants around famous keynote speakers such as Jacques Maritain or Fr Charles Journet. Marie-Dominique Philippe, a Dominican, is also frequently called upon to give courses.

L'Eau vive functions in close connection with several women's communities, with which it forms “a small contemplative city on the

outskirts of Paris”, where Thomas Philippe often preaches and assures many spiritual directions. The Dominican nuns' convent of the Cross and Compassion, located in a property nextdoor to L'Eau vive, is deeply marked by the influence of its former prioress, Mother Cécile, Thomas Philippe's sister. The latter only leaves the convent to go and found a new community in Bouvines, on a property of her Dehau grandparents. Close connections also exist with the Christ-Roi Carmel in Nogent-sur-Marne, where sister Marie-Madeleine du Sacré-Coeur (Marie-Madeleine Wamberghe by her maiden name), a first cousin of Thomas Philippe's is living. Very strong links at last exist with the Épiphanie convent, which belongs to the Dominican congregation of Notre-Dame-des Tourelles, the intellectual vocation of which makes it the ideal partner to propose trainings to the women members of L'Eau vive.

The brothers Philippe's uncle, Fr Thomas Dehau, acts, in the words of Jean Vanier, as the “hidden prophet” of the spiritual family of L'Eau vive. He is one of the great figures of the Dominican order in France during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He preaches in contemplative women's communities and is the spiritual counsellor of many Catholic intellectuals. Very present in the life of the Philippe family, he very likely counts for much in the choice made by eight out of his younger sister's twelve children to take the cloth (three girls as Benedictine nuns, one as Dominican, and four boys as Dominicans). He is also “spiritual father” to several of them, including Thomas, Cécile and Marie-Dominique Philippe,

About that time, Thomas Philippe develops a system of unorthodox beliefs and practices. According to what he himself said, it would all begin in 1938 as he is teaching at the Angelicum in Rome, where he considers he received “very obscure graces” characterized by the implication of “sexual organs”. He would then have experienced a mystic union with Mary. This takes place in front of a fresco called *Mater mirabilis*, located in a chapel of the Trinita-dei-Monti convent. “I was caught in my whole body, all night, in recollection and very intimate union with Her. It was like knowing Mary anew.”

He feels the need to impart those “graces” onto others and develops theological arguments to justify his sexual practices with nuns or young lay women aspiring to a religious vocation. The places concerned are

the convents of contemplative Dominican nuns (Étiolles and Bouvines), Carmels (Nogent, Boulogne-Billancourt and Figeac) and the L'Eau vive community itself.

Mother Cécile Philippe pushed several of her nuns into her brother's arms while having homosexual relationships with several of them herself and incestuous ones with her brother. There is no proof that Marie-Dominique Philippe may have entered into action as early as the first half of the 1950s, but strong suspicions are weighing on him: he encourages one of his brother's victims, whose spiritual director he was, to carry on practicing with him. It must be noted that Paul Philippe (without any family connection with the Dehau-Philippes), who played a central role in the instruction of Thomas Philippe's trial as Holy Office Commissioner, reports that Thomas Dehau in 1956 admitted having done "mysterious things" with several nuns.

At the end of the year 1950, some outsiders perceive some first signs of the secretly developing disorder. The first statement follows a canonical visit paid by the Vicar general of the Paris diocese and Vice-Superior of the Nogent Carmel. He simply writes a rather severe letter to Thomas Philippe and reprimands the prioress, asking her to monitor the monks'-s visit more strictly. He however has not discovered the exact nature of the relationships that Thomas Philippe has with several nuns of the Carmel.

Fr Marie-Eugène de l'Enfant Jésus (o.c.d.) is the first one to bring it all to light in March 1951, which results in the removal of the prioress, while Thomas Philippe is deprived of all his powers for that Carmel. This first measure does not bring about any statement to the Holy Office.

In May 1951, two women, residents of L'Eau vive, alert some Dominicans of the province of France, as well as Fr Charles Journet, about what they were submitted to. Those two denunciations result in the opening of a procedure at the Holy Office in April 1952.

It is easy to establish that Jean Vanier became Thomas Philippe's spiritual son and fell under his influence. He shares his intellectual tastes, his devotions, his ways of praying. His unwavering commitment to his spiritual master results in his being presented as "Thomas Philippe's most fanatical disciple" in a report to the Pope. The phrase is used while the Holy Office has no definite proof yet of his implication

in Thomas Philippe's sexual practices, simply because of his staunch dedication to the Dominican between 1952 and 1956 to defend him and allow L'Eau vive to survive.

Acknowledging such a situation imposes to ask oneself about the mechanisms of Thomas Philippe's hold over Jean Vanier throughout that period. The Commission was able to distinguish two stages in the process.

From September 1950 until Thomas Philippe's departure from L'Eau vive on 3 April 1952, a relation of spiritual filiation is progressively woven between the two men without Jean Vanier being introduced to the Dominican secret beliefs and practices. Jean Vanier perceives L'Eau vive as imbued with the evangelical spirit of the first Christian communities. Thomas Philippe's influence is manifested in readings, such as that of Fr Thomas Dehau's most famous book. Hardly two months after Jean Vanier's arrival at L'Eau vive, Thomas Philippe chooses him to accompany him to Rome on the occasion of the proclamation of the Assumption dogma. Several trips give Jean Vanier the opportunity to spend long moments with Thomas Philippe. He places himself under the Dominican's spiritual direction, listens to his sermons, attends his talks and feels touched by his Marian spirituality. One of the first gestures that Thomas Philippe poses to initiate those he counsels is to make them pray "with their heads placed on his heart, as St John did at the Last Supper". The Holy Office recorded the testimony of a woman indicating that Jean Vanier often prayed on fr Thomas's heart.

50 years later, in 2009, Jean Vanier still very precisely remembers what his feelings for the Dominican then were: "His words penetrated my heart and opened it. Listening to him and in his presence, I had a taste for God, to love Jesus and Mary, to follow Jesus to the end. I felt transformed in his presence. He was a presence of God for me. I still remember the talks he gave "on silence" today, as if it were yesterday. This shows how deeply Jesus used him to enter into me."

The second stage, between April 1952 to the end of the trial in May 1956 sees Jean Vanier's being initiated to his spiritual father's sexual practices and the development of his leadership qualities as the new head of L'Eau vive. From his own testimony, Jean Vanier dates his initiation into the mystico-sexual practices two months after Thomas Philippe's departure from L'Eau vive. He then has an intimate relationship with

Jacqueline d'Halluin, one of the women, close to Thomas Philippe and "initiated" by him. She will play an important part at the beginnings of L'Arche. In a 2016 interview with officials in charge of l'Arche, Jean Vanier reports that the two of them "were praying that day, when suddenly that woman found herself in his arms." Jean Vanier refers to it as to a founding spiritual experience at the origin of his vocation and of which the foundation of L'Arche would be the fruit.

Even absent, Thomas Philippe is informed with precision about Jean Vanier's initiation to the "graces" and the major role of Jacqueline d'Halluin and Anne de Rosanbo. The latter, a former novice at the La Croix convent, later on joined L'Eau vive where, "initiated" by Thomas Philippe, she become one of his most fervent disciples. In a note from Thomas Philippe, which can be dated from 1952, we can read this extremely significant passage: "Dearest Jean. Just a word to assure you of my very deep union. I so strongly feel that our meetings bring us many graces; they fortify us; they bring us life. [...] M. obviously wants to use A. [Anne de Rosanbo] and Jac. [Jacqueline d'Halluin] for you. They are the ones to give you counsel and strength; they take the place of N. [Thomas Philippe] and I think that you don't need to seek light elsewhere...".

The officials of the Dominican Province of France inform a certain number of protagonists of the charges against Thomas Philippe, to silence the latter's defenders and take control of L'Eau vive. But among several people close to Thomas Philippe, this communication develops the durable conviction that this is slander. This is first the case with Jean Vanier's parents. This is also the members of the Board of Administration of L'Eau vive's position. L'Eau vive finds the same support with the members of the Félix Dehau Foundation who are all first cousins of Thomas Philippe's.

Jean Vanier and the L'Eau vive team can therefore rely on that group of influential personalities convinced that their cause is right, who oppose themselves to the Dominican Province of France and defend the position of Jean Vanier, in charge of the home.

After the complete breaking of relations with the Dominican order, when the doors of Le Saulchoir closed to the students of L'Eau vive, only the nucleus of those faithful to Thomas Philippe remains, chiefly

consisting of a small group of women. Jean Vanier imposes himself as the leader of this group of resisters and develops an intense lobbying activity, particularly within the Church.

At the end of the trial, the balance of power remaining in favor of Jean Vanier and the L'Eau vive women determines the Holy Office to impose the immediate departure of Jean Vanier and the group of women surrounding him. The decision to close down L'Eau vive is taken on 28 May 1956.

Work on the archives permits to confirm that Thomas Philippe who, since 1952, had been forbidden to communicate with the members of L'Eau vive, continues to influence Jean Vanier from the various places where he is held incommunicado, through intensive exchanges of correspondence and direct encounters. Jean Vanier and his master quickly become experts in the art of secrecy and dissimulation. With Jean Vanier's help, Thomas Philippe carries on his mystico-sexual relationships with the women remaining faithful to him. He calls those the "tout-petits" [the little ones].

In complete duplicity, Jean Vanier and the members of L'Eau vive display a strategy aiming at dissociating the community from its founder by making a distinction between Thomas Philippe's public teachings, irreproachable according to them, and his private teachings which, still according to them, would not concern L'Eau vive. We must here point out the relative lack of action of the Holy Office between June 1952 and October 1955. During the 1952 to 1956 period, Thomas Philippe is shifted from one place to another. He spends two years in Longueil-Annel in the Oise where an institution for difficult teenagers led by Doctor Préaut is to be found. The latter, an important supporter of Thomas Philippe's, will play an important role in his, and then the "tout-petits" ', installation in Trosly-Breuil in 1964.

It is a new, particularly serious, testimony that urges Fr Paul Philippe, who had become Holy Office Commissioner on 30 May 1955, to take up the investigation again with an energy that vastly contrasts with the slowness of the previous period. Apart from the elements that he records as to the scope and exact nature of the facts, he is informed of an abortion that took place in 1947, to which a "mystic" sense is imparted, with a veneration of the dead foetus as something sacred, linked to the

“Most Holy Virgin’s secret”. The aborted baby is the fruit of the sexual relationships between Thomas Philippe and Anne de Rosanbo. Mother Thérèse, the former prioress of the Nogent-sur-Marne Carmel, confirms the facts and admits her implication. Nothing in the sources indicates that Jean Vanier was informed.

As early as December 1955, Thomas Philippe is moved from Longueil-Annel to Barra near Naples to isolate him from the members of L’Eau vive and prepare his trial. In May 1956, he is recognized guilty of serious sexual abuse of adult women, implying the sacrament of penance, false mysticism to justify such acts and an organized abortion. His condemnation deprives him from excising any form of ministry, either public or private. The faithfulness of Jean Vanier and the members of L’Eau vive to Thomas Philippe consequently leads to the dispersion of the group by the Holy Office. This will not prevent the “tout-petits” from remaining in touch with each other.

## CHAPTER 3

### Quasi priest and prophet

#### **A thwarted and finally prevented desire of priesthood**

The Commission recounts Jean Vanier’s vocational itinerary, very different from what he and his biographers later on described.

It is within the close circle of Thomas Philippe’s disciples that Jean Vanier internalizes the beliefs of the group with growing intensity. Through the correspondence between the two men, one discovers how insistently the master signifies to the disciple what “love of predilection” Virgin Mary has for him in particular: “The Holy Virgin has shown me many things for you. She wants to introduce you more and more to her privacy. She will also perhaps ask you many sacrifices; but her love will eventually overcome everything; and be assured that what She reserves for you comes from a love of predilection on her part”.

This mission entrusted to him through Thomas Philippe’s mediation becomes, in Jean Vanier’s eyes, his vocation. While he claims his conviction that he is being called to priesthood to those close to him, this project become intertwined with the secret mission that he is assigned. For Jean Vanier, the public assertion of his vocation for priesthood is also a means to reassure his family and friends, to provide himself with a camouflage. This is the sense in which Thomas Philippe writes to him *a propos* his mother at the end of 1952: “As to your mother, be careful in yr relations with Pi [Anne de Rosanbo] and Pa [Jacqueline d’Halluin]; do make it felt that you are pursuing your studies in view of priesthood and that your priesthood vocation is stronger than ever”.

In 1954, Jean Vanier initiates the procedure with a view to be ordained by contacting the archbishop of Quebec. He thus evidences his will not

to be incardinated in France, to avoid falling under the authority of a bishop hat might want to enquire about L'Eau vive.

In May 1956, he is certain of his soon-to-be ordination. But following Thomas Philippe's trial, the Holy Office opposes it, demanding several years' training at a seminary so as to "detoxify" him from his attachment to his "Master" and to make him understand that a priest is in the service of the universal Church and not of a closed circle.

This comes as a hard shock. In December 1956, Jean Vanier decides to put his ordination project on hold. His choice is motivated by his "absolute" faithfulness to Thomas Philippe. His "expectation" to know "what Jesus will ask from [him]" gets confused with his expectation of his master's "liberation".

He will devote eight years to this expectation. For the sake of his parents and friends, he repeats his need to "pray in solitude" so as to listen to what Jesus expects from him. The commission could recount his itinerary during those eight years; his periods of solitude and stability hardly ever last more than two months at a time. In his correspondence, Thomas Philippe devotes long developments suggesting the line he must take to reassure his parents on his vocation and stall them. It is to protect his own secrets that Thomas Philippe advises his disciple to do his utmost to prevent his parents, worried about their son's precariousness, from seeking advice about his vocation from other churchmen. Thomas Philippe advises Jean to engage into a career that he might use "as a screen concealing hidden and solitary life".

Documentary research highlights the stratagems used by Thomas Philippe and his disciple to try and alleviate the sanction and enable them to get publicly into contact again. Their mutual conviction is that the "graces" they benefit from are superior to whatever else in the Church, including when an approach of Pope John XXIII, whom "the Good Lord does not enlighten", proves unsuccessful. Fr Paul Philippe is the one enlightening John XXIII, who asks Jean Vanier to "leave fr Thomas", something that Jean Vanier is not able to do. Later on, he will write: "I left with a wounded heart, but peaceful inside. I knew I was too strongly linked to Jesus through Fr Thomas to leave him. [...] I could only leave him by being unfaithful to Jesus and to what He was expecting from me".

To make him accept this sacrifice, Thomas Philippe promises him immediate access to "exceptional mystic graces" and to a degree of "mystic illumination" close to his own, hence the missions that Jean will carry out for him in "hidden life". The first of those is to make up for his absence among the "tout-petits", i.e. the "initiated" women, namely Jacqueline d'Halluin and Anne de Rosambo plus a few other women who join them as of the Autumn of 1959 – "They [Jesus and Mary] alws. make me very strongly feel how plsed. they are with you, with the sacrifice of your priesthood that you have spontaneously, freely, offered them – for the moment at least – as a testimony of faith in those mystic graces and to the inxard call of the Holy Spirit; they more and more install a deep, intimate, union betwn. us. I so strongly feel that they unite me to you more intimately than to my brothers the priests and monks and a fortiori to my natural brothers, specifically because of your sacrifice, which gives you a part of predilection in Their Hearts. You have become ne with me and the [illegible word] tout-petits, bec. y. have accepted not to have any personal life, any apostolate, to be Jesus' tt. petit servant".

Letter after letter, the same elements are repeated in Jean Vanier's correspondence: an apology of littleness and abandonment into God's hands, sacrifice, hidden and solitary life, rejection of the world and the denunciation of the "pride" ready to pounce on those who hold visible function in the world and in the Church. He assimilates some of a priest's roles, especially that of accompaniment and spiritual guiding. From his master, he learns how to use the charismatic register and lays the bases of a spiritual authority relying on direct relationships with divinity.

With the development of L'Arche, Jean Vanier will successfully develop an activity as preacher and spiritual writer. He multiplies retreats and talks in France and Northern America. This entices him to put in a new application to be ordained without going through seminar in January 1975. He is encouraged in this by Mgr Stéphane Desmazières who, since he became bishop of Beauvais, Noyon and Senlis in 1985, has attached himself to the nascent community and indefectibly supports it. "Jesus" is the only source called upon by Jean Vanier to confirm his vocation to serve the Church through L'Arche.

The Congregation for the doctrine of the faith, worried at the exclusive and restrictive desire of Jean Vanier to be ordained for L'Arche rather than for the Church once more opposes itself. This refusal also comes from Fr Paul Philippe, who has been made cardinal. He has not forgotten the condemnations in the 1950s and identifies the risk to see the disciple pursuing his spiritual father's work (In his initial application, Jean Vanier writes that if he is ordained, it will be to help Thomas Philippe at Trosly-Breuil), including in the latter's sexual practices: "It is our duty to reply to this interrogation with the utmost clarity: whether at L'Arche or at L'Eau vive, no charge has ever been laid against Jean Vanier as to chastity. A fear however remains: in case he had been "initiated by Fr Thomas Philippe into his erotico-mystic theories, will he not be led, one day, to put them into practice in his own life, as his spiritual father thought he could, or rather should, urged, as he said, by the Holy Spirit ? let us hope not".

For Jean Vanier, for whom, since 1954, faithfulness to Thomas Philippe has prevailed over the one he has for the Church, this refusal puts an end to a desire he has been carrying with him for 25 years. The hypothesis may be put forward that this thwarted desire to become a priest has shaped Jean Vanier's complex and ambiguous relation with the Church and also contributed to shaping his very "free" style as preacher and spiritual witness. In a letter of 1991 to a lady friend in which he comes back on the refusal of his application for ordination, he gives up "wasting time to reform the Church" and announces his wish "to be the Church where he is".

## CHAPTER 4

### Philosopher and theologian

**Fifteen years of Jean Vanier's life are spent under the sign of philosophy and theology studies, very strongly marked by Thomas Philippe's influence and biased interpretations of Teresa of Avila, Thomas Aquinas and others.**

From 1950 to 1956 when he gets his PhD, Jean Vanier follows a rather disjointed philosophical curriculum as far as institutions are concerned, but unified in spirit around a few classics (Aristotle, saint Thomas Aquinas, Cajetan, Jean-de-Saint-Thomas). He begins his philosophy and theology studies at L'Eau vive and Le Saulchoir before moving on to the Institut catholique de Paris.

It is interesting to note how he uses philosophy as a screen to conceal the 1956 canonical sanctions: the philosophical school of L'Eau vive would be a "tendency that must be crushed", according to him. It would be "doctrinal" and not disciplinary reasons that would have led to Thomas Philippe's removal.

On several occasions, Jean Vanier thus musters a few recognized spiritual authors and philosophers to eschew the sanctions pronounced by the Church authorities and defend Thomas Philippe. The most striking example is his referring to an erroneous, fallacious passage from saint Teresa of Avila to "disobey his director in order to obey a revelation" and justify disobedience, or again to Cardinal Cajetan, a famous commentator of saint Thomas Aquinas, who calls up the idea of the possibility for a priest stricken by "unfair excommunication" to "say mass secretly".

As for his PhD project, it is built up in a dialogue with Thomas Philippe, his spiritual master and "master in intelligence", and Marie-Dominique

Philippe, then philosophy professor at the University of Fribourg, as well as with Fr Lallemand, professor at Institut catholique de Paris and a great supporter of L'Eau vive, who will supervise his thesis. Its title is "Le bonheur, principe et fin de la morale aristotélicienne" [Happiness as the principle and aim of Aristotle's ethics]. It will be defended in 1962 and published in February 1965.

His PhD in moral philosophy appears to Jean Vanier as a lifebuoy after the failure of his application for priesthood and, in a sense, as an alibi. Rather cynically, Thomas Philippe actually was presenting this "thesis in ethics" as "a screen". It must be noted that, despite the important part played by the latter in this thesis, his name does not appear among the usual thanks, a sign that the links between the two men must still be concealed.

In Jean Vanier's theologico-philosophical reflections, several elements of a different nature are essentially present. There is, for one thing, the influence of Aristotelian philosophy and the ethics of happiness, but also an interpretation of saint Paul's thought on the moral of life under the Spirit. Those two elements do not tie up similarly with his actual behavior, but two theses may be delineated: Aristotle's philosophy is not operating to prevent Jean Vanier from deviating and can even foster deviance; one can also observe a theological justification of some deviances from a twisted interpretation of a life under the Spirit that would be "above moral law".

So, during the defense session of this thesis, Jean Vanier sums up his views on Aristotle's philosophy: moral perfection is not in the "acquisitions", not even that of virtues, but only in the person's alignment with God. What is lacking here is a form of verification of this alignment by the acquisition and practice of virtues. When it is not balanced by the presence of an objective norm, the "moral of happiness" may actually cease to play its role as a landmark for action. And when the thesis is published, Jean Vanier, in conclusion of his work, poses the question on the knot, essential for a Christian, that is constituted by the balance between the reason at work in free will and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. For him, Christian morality does not seem to rest so much on philosophy and reason as on mere faith and mystique, the possibility of a passage between moral and mystique without a mediation is

open, without any consideration of moral at the level of natural reason. In contradiction with Thomas Aquinas, Jean Vanier thus poses the hypothesis of the theoretical possibility of a Christian mystique without a morality founded in reason, since Christian morality would be essentially founded in mystique.

The Commission managed to read a fragment excised from the official conclusion of Jean Vanier's thesis. If we follow it, there is nothing to prevent the sexual relations of Thomas Philippe's disciples with one another: since Thomas Philippe has "received" a "private revelation", that this revelation has been verified given that the gifts of the Holy Spirit and not reason are what moral is founded on, the question of the "morality" of the acts committed is solved.

## CHAPTER 5

### The saint and the star

**For decades, in the institutions close to L'Arche and the media, Jean Vanier appeared as the living embodiment of the Gospel, the secular star of Catholic renewal under the pontificate of John-Paul II.**

A charisma of softness, peace, tenderness and charity, attention paid to handicapped people, eloquence that touches the hearts, the accompaniment of persons on their way to God and inner liberation, service to the poorest, the weakest, to outcasts. When Jean Vanier dies, his death is saluted with an abundance of praise throughout the world, giving the sentiment of his sanctification by the media.

It is nevertheless the work of L'Arche that publicizes Jean Vanier's figure, not the reverse, and assures his recognition by the media. One of the first awards he received, in 1973, is thus given him on behalf of the foundation, "for its actions in favor of handicapped people all over the world". While still alive he is borne onto altars by what his foundation of L'Arche represents.

In Jean Vanier's family circle, they are craving for holiness, they formulate this desire privately in their correspondence, any decision in their existence must be a "call from God", any success at an exam is the sign of a "special protection" of Providence, they hold their close friends, children, parents, spiritual parents as "saints". Beside his parents who very early describe him to their circle as an apostle, God's friend, many of the people that Jean Vanier meets say how struck they are by his godly inclination. Among Thomas Philippe's admirers, his filiation with that "living saint" reinforces their conviction that he benefits from a divine election.

The group of L'Eau vive ceaselessly proclaims the saintly reputation of Thomas Philippe – a saint wrongly blamed by Rome. For more than 60 years, from 1952-1956 until 2015, the line of interpretation defended is that Fr Thomas is a saintly priest being slandered. In the public letter of May 2015 that follows the revelation of the abuses committed by his spiritual father, Jean Vanier still does not judge Fr Thomas and once more says to what extent, in his eyes, the latter had been "God's instrument", a "man of God who led him to Jesus".

The reflections that Jacques Maritain notes down in his diary had better have been known earlier: "To my mind, Fr Thomas is mad. Fr Marie-Dominique knows the facts and says that since his brother is a saint, everything is OK. Another madman. The devil is raging in this incredible affair", or again: "Charles Journet and Fr Paul Philippe [from the Holy Office] definitely enlighten me on the history of Fr Thomas. For me this is an extraordinary case of schizophrenia – too rich a wine [a sincere craving for sanctity, etc.] in a double-bottomed goatskin, the rot of which had made the wine turn into perversion."

Thomas Philippe's and Jean Vanier's reputations of sanctity will prevent the victims from speaking out. It will serve the abusers as a concealing screen. For Jean Vanier it will become a means of seduction.

**Part 2:**  
**The “Secrets of the mystic sect”.**  
**Continuities and transfers**  
**from L’Eau vive to L’Arche.**

**The finalities and the publics concerned of L'Eau vive and L'Arche are poles apart. But in the background, the human network and cultural elements pass from the one to the other.**

As early as June 1964, Jean Vanier writes to his parents: "Raymond has come to Trosly with me. He could tell you about the projects of L'Arche, for such is the name of the foundation... Noah's Ark that gathers all the small animals to save them and floats (but not a word to the Holy Office !) on L'Eau vive ! It is also the Ark of Alliance: Mary, Mater Misericordiae opening her arms to all the miseries of the world."

From L'Eau vive to L'Arche, the continuity is secretly assured by a nucleus of men and women sharing the conviction of a new divine mystery that requires to keep mum on their sexual practices. The Commission considers it possible to keep the term of "sect" to design the group. It is a sect – with its clergy, clerics or lay people like Jean Vanier, its rites, such as praying on someone else's heart, its specific dogmas, its private prophecies and "Marian maximalism", etc. It is a sect hidden within an institution at the heart of the Church. If the sect at the background of L'Eau vive is no longer quite the same as the one that founds L'Arche, the nucleus remains the same. The events of the years 1956-1964 lead to the intensification of an underground culture, a solidification of Thomas Philippe's argumentation and an overestimation of the notion of spiritual and intellectual poverty.

Fr Paul Philippe keeps up this term of "sect", calling it "mystic" – "seta mlistica" – in a 1977 report addressed to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "At L'Eau vive, the secrets of the mystic sect, even to their confessors, were imposed under oath on the women initiated. Similarly, in the case Jean Vanier had today been made Fr Thomas Philippe's 'continuator', he would certainly have sworn never to speak, never at any cost."

## CHAPTER 6

### Private correspondences

The funds of archives consulted contain about 1 400 letters, either written by Jean Vanier ("active correspondence") or received by him ("passive correspondence"), which can all be said to be "private" letters. Among them a subset of some 340 letters was found in a file entitled "NFA" [Not For All], which consists essentially of letters from Thomas Philippe, Jacqueline d'Halluin and Anne de Rosambo.

For a historian, it is classic work to analyze private letters, knowing that correspondences are fragmentary, allusive, sometimes opaque. The interpretative difficulty of those correspondences is hermeneutical. While no sexual interpretation is to be imposed on any possible expression of tenderness in the correspondence, one must not yield to the reverse excess which would consist in a form of pious naivety and would wish to only see evangelical softness in some ambiguous phrases.

**Jean Vanier obviously arouses passion among the women who are writing to him. One can observe an abundance of spiritually ambiguous letters, at the border of the carnal and the spiritual. Amorous writing becomes a rewriting of the liturgical mystery, with the inclusion of phrases drawn from the Bible in terms more than ambiguous as a sub-text.**

For instance, the letters between Jean Vanier and Mother Marguerite-Marie (1904-1984), the Mother superior of the Little Sisters of the Virgin in Thomery (Seine-et-Marne) evidence Thomas Philippe's influence on Jean Vanier's writing and allow to observe the diffusion of the former's doctrines by the latter. They express a theology of the loving union carried by mystic language. "Jesus' love" becomes the basis of moral; the nun is invited to give up intelligence and privilege a reli-

gion of love. Ambiguity is carefully cultivated. The vocabulary used is spiritualized. The relation of “hearts of flesh” is designed under the vocable of “little retreat”; it is called up by the image of “a dive into divine Love”. Through the terms employed, the relationship goes much beyond strict spiritual friendship. They wish to meet up “at night”. They seek “tranquility” and a form of solitude between the two of them. Jean Vanier invites the nun to come and see him in Paris, in his little room, because the place will be “tranquil”. The Convent becomes “a nest of love”, “an oasis of love”.

A network of carnal terms is being built-up letter after letter. Jean Vanier and the nun are “united” (in prayer) and “in very deep union” (in Jesus’ heart), they “penetrate” (the mysteries through Love), they are “hidden in the bosom” (of the Immaculate one), they must “sink into” (God’s heart), seek the “good pleasure” (of God). In their correspondence (God’s or Mary’s) “pleasure”, a word in which it is hard not to possibly also read that of the two that pray or “have a retreat together”, is recurrent.

Jean Vanier underlines his poverty, his misery and the lack he feels. By dint of saying he is “broken”, the “break” becomes a means of seduction. Similarly, the “beauty” of the bride is her “poverty”, her “littleness”. Love, for him, is defined as a “blessed night of intelligence”. The invitation to give up “speculative intelligence” is repeated ceaselessly. One must also note the absence of any feeling of guilt, since God gives himself away in the relation and “the name of the bride is mercy” – “Never mind what one does, actually, provided one do [sic] what little Jesus wishes, provided one is his little toy...”.

Another example is Jean Vanier’s exchanges with Brigitte, a married woman. With her, his expression is totally different. To help the Commission, Brigitte took the initiative to forward the letters she had received from him. The correspondence essentially dates from the years 1980-1990, but it is prolonged until the very last years of Jean Vanier’s life. Brigitte was interviewed by the Commission, so that, contrary to the case of Mother Marguerite-Marie, it has oral explanations confirming the sexual nature of the relationship at hand on top of the letters themselves.

In this correspondence, a certain number of inhibitions have been dropped. Jean Vanier thus does not shirk from referring to his genitals,

styled as “sacred”. He calls up his intimate union, in prayer and in the flesh, with Brigitte, whose hands, lips and breasts trigger his “gift of the body”, the gift of “the sacrament of love”, characterized, in hardly veiled terms, by erection (“I am giving you my body [...] rising for you, towards you, turning towards you”) and the emission of seed (“This thirst of love [...] bursts out towards you and in you”).

The theorization of natural relationships as “a sacrament of divine love” is a very Philippian theme. According to the pattern already perceived in the correspondences with Marguerite-Marie or Catarina, another correspondent, one notices a spiritualization of the relation and the frequent use of Biblical references. The sexual relation becomes “a sacrament”. “The bridegroom’s tenderness”, “the bridegroom’s fire”, “the wedding night”, “nuptials” keep cropping up in explicit terms.

## CHAPTER 7

**Men and women in the sectarian dynamics**

**L'Eau vive and the founding group of L'Arche would never have been able to function without the personal commitment of initiated women, some of whom were very rich.**

The Holy Office investigation has established the implication of five convents of nuns in Thomas Philippe's mystico-sexual practices. There were many exchanges between those monasteries and L'Eau vive, with young women staying at the students' hall while discerning their religious vocation while others, on the contrary, left their convent to join L'Eau vive.

The testimonies gathered by the Holy Office investigation allow to establish that Thomas Philippe drew quite a few women in his mystico-sexual practices. His was a well-oiled organization, hiding his thrysts with nuns or lay women from the rest of the community or visitors. He meets the women he "counsels" in his or in the young women's rooms. There, he shares the "graces" he has received. In her statement to the Holy Office, one of the women reports: "We thought we were being confirmed in grace. We could not sin as regards purity thanks to a special choice of the M.H. Virgin, who had revealed us the secret of her own life and of her own intimacy with O. L. We were already living with the Fr and among ourselves what we would be living in the celestial city: the carnal union of Jesus and Mary will be at the center of the celestial city in place of the Cross. We were believing in the end of the world".

In a report dated March 1977, Fr Paul Philippe writes that the other women initiated used to call Anne de Rosanbo "the queen" or "the bride". This central role explains why she was early removed from L'Eau vive,

following the first statements. It is also perhaps to stay at a prudent, but not too far, distance from the community (28 km) that she installs herself in a little villa at Villebon-sur-Yvette, which she calls Loc Maria (Mary's place in Breton), which, together with her Paris flats, will become a meeting point for the "tout-petits" until L'Arche is founded.

Central to the group is a man perceived as a prolongation of Christ. From the moment he is evicted in 1952, Thomas Philippe assigns Jean Vanier, his disciple, the "divine" mission to make up for him at L'Eau vive, especially as protector of "the initiated". The latter thus becomes the masculine referent of the group, replacing the master in his absence.

Anne de Rosanbo's and Jacqueline d'Halluin's letters reveal that their relations with Jean Vanier are not at the same level.

Some letters evidence the intimate knowledge Jacqueline d'Halluin has of Jean Vanier's personality. She gently admonished him, for instance in a long letter on humility in which she invites him not to seek virtue so hard to better find it. In other letters, what flourishes is courteous love. One occasionally has the feeling that one is reading the correspondence between two young lovers: "I am saying good-bye with a tender kiss", "I am kissing you quite divinely". Jean Vanier sometimes sends flowers or parcels. She sometimes sends him "hairlocks" "to spread through your room... for the pleasure of finding them". Their love is also carnal. Jacqueline d'Halluin refers to their nights together, the love beds and the drawn curtains.

Like Jacqueline d'Halluin, Anne de Rosanbo uses the term « pussycats » to refer both to herself and Jean Vanier. The relation however appears less fiery than with Jacqueline d'Halluin. Her older ties with Thomas Philippe give her an almost maternal role with Jean Vanier. The two of them have agreed to limit written proofs of proximity and affection. The intimacy expressed in their letters is not the exact reflection of their relationship. They spend long moments together. In February 1959 as Jean Vanier is recovering from hepatitis in Torbel in Switzerland, she thus comes to visit him and spends almost a month with him. That same year, she comes for a long stay with him in Fatima. A note of 1961 reveals their intimacy despite the rule they had fixed themselves: "Pussycat dear, I'll write again tomorrow. I hope everything is fine. On Tuesday night, eventually, I'll manage to be at v. cha. [Villa Chanez]

to take advtge of a qut. litl. puss all hot with spiritual things as soon as he arrives" [Jean Vanier is coming back from Rome, where he has seen Thomas Philippe].

According to Jean Vanier himself, what welds the two women and him are the moments they can spend, two or three at a time, with Thomas Philippe. Since the Holy Office has strictly forbidden the latter to see his "initiated" women or Jean Vanier again, those meetings are secret. They generally take place in Rome, or in Bouvines when Thomas Philippe returns there in Summer to see his parents. It is difficult to give an exact count of those meetings, which occur two or three times a year. They are less frequent during his stay at the Frattochie Trappe (1956-1959) and take the form of fleeting encounters in the agricultural landscape surrounding the Trappe. A letter however evidences that at least once, during that period, Thomas Philippe advises to choose a hotel close to the Trappe, which must be "big enough for there to be many comings and goings so that there should be less notice of the people entering and leaving". To camouflage himself, he asks Jean Vanier to prepare "overalls, such as the ones worn by mechanics or motorcyclists" which should be "ample enough to be able to wear it, if need be, over the robe", as well as "a leather balaclava that they [motorcyclists] sometimes wear to protect themselves from the wind"; As to preparing the "little ones" [the women], he recommends that they "rest as much as possible to be ttily. at Jesus' disposal".

In a letter of 1957, Thomas Philippe asks Jean Vanier to attentively scrutinize the "effects" of their prayer together. The perceptible will here is to seek proof of the authenticity of those "extraordinary graces" lived together. In another dating from the beginning of 1958, he insists on the exceptional character of the spiritual life of the "tout-petits". It then seems clear that he is referring to the mystico-sexual "graces" binding the group together. The "tout-petits" will have to wait in silence till the persons of the Trinity express "all their pleasures of love". This may possibly refer to times of collective sexualized "prayer" which we know to have existed at the beginning of L'Eau vive through a statement given to the Holy Office.

July 1959 seems to have been the starting point of a widening of the group. Thomas Philippe's greater liberty at Santa-Sabina seems to have galvanized the energies to renew with former women residents of L'Eau

vive and "initiate" new ones. As of the Summer of 1960, Jean Vanier rents a flat in Rome, which he presents in a letter to Thomas Philippe as a "refuge" that "appears to be a much more saintly place than a Convent, a true house of Nazareth, a true house of pleasure".

If the sexual aspect only emerges at rare moments in those exchanges of letters among the "tout-petits", what is described is a corruption of Christian spirituality and prayer, with graces reserved to a selected group, the necessity of collective intimacy in prayer, the disappearance of the ego and personal identity to the benefit of total passivity to receive the Spirit's "indication".

This practice of sexualized prayer exchanged with different "partners" does not prevent the emergence of personal attachments. This is at least the desire perceptible in Jacqueline d'Halluin's letters, which however cannot be fulfilled, since the mystico-sexual practices of the "tout-petits" are not exclusive. The relationship is not patterned on marital, exclusive love. It thinks of itself as "supernatural" in essence and therefor implies both celibacy and a multiplicity of partners. But this does not stop Jacqueline d'Halluin from expressing her suffering in front of such a situation: "It Is true to say that the more one loves, the more one suffers. But is it my fault if Mary gave me so many b. [bridegrooms] ? One's heart is really entirely given to each of them and suffers for each as if he were the only one [...] How can we salt the earth, but with our tears ? Is this not the only salt that we have ?".

On the eve of the foundation of L'Arche, the group of the "tout-petits" has recovered a certain dynamism and, managed, against the will of Rome, to secretly maintain strong links, by carrying on their mystico-sexual practices and even initiating new participants. In its report, the Commission records many epistolary testimonies attesting this.

As early as 1963, Thomas Philippe's return to France enables the "initiated" to consider gathering again shortly. The foundation of L'Arche (the name, put forward by Jacqueline d'Halluin, is retained in May 1964) primarily results from this wish to meet up. For them, Thomas Philippe's "liberation" heralds the return of happy days that they have been hoping for since 1956.

Thomas Philippe, Jean Vanier and Dr Préaut have been constantly in touch since L'Eau vive was closed down. The psychiatrist, who is

heading an institution in Longueuil-Annel, will offer Thomas Philippe a solution corresponding to his and his circle's wishes.

The first home of L'Arche opens on 5 August 1964 by welcoming Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux, as well as a third person who will be taken back to hospital the very next morning. The foundation quickly musters the help of persons outside the circle of L'Eau vive. Oral or written evidence by witnesses of those days provide an overall view of the presence of the "tout-petits" at L'Arche in those first years and to distinguish two types of presence: those women who had an active role in L'Arche and those who came primarily in order to be with Thomas Philippe again. The correspondences definitely show that the specific connections existing before 1954 remain wrapped in secrecy until the 1980s for the members of L'Arche who are far from imagining their machinery. The place of the women, especially of Jacqueline d'Halluin and Anne de Rosambo, is to be noted: they are simply not mentioned in Jean Vanier's authorized biographies. But in documents meant for a more limited diffusion, Jean Vanier points out the implication of Jacqueline d'Halluin on several occasions, to give her pride of the place, a memorable role in the foundation.

The success of the community reduces this original sectarian nucleus to an element among others. It will however have left its mark on L'Arche through its spiritual influence and its conception of man and poverty. As they become diversified, the recruitment networks allow the arrival of persons with varied profiles and communities founded in North America or India are founded in very different contexts from that of Trosly.

## CHAPTER 8

### Jean Vanier, the Carmel and L'Arche

**Jean Vanier's links with the Carmelite order prolong a tradition that dates back to his grandmother on his mother's side**, Thérèse de Salaberry Archer, "Ganna", whose spiritual director, Fr Almire Pichon, s.j., had also been the spiritual director of part of the Martin family, including its most famous member, saint Thérèse de Lisieux. Almire Pichon also counseled Pauline Vanier who, once married to Georges, multiplied her contacts with Carmelite nuns in England, Canada and France.

Through Thomas Philippe at the end of the 1940s, the Vanier parents and eventually Jean himself get into contact with the Nogent Carmel and weave strong links with the prioress, Mother Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus. It was in that Carmel that Thomas Philippe's deviances were first identified.

The sources presented in the Commission report reveal that at least six of the nuns of the Nogent community, including the prioress, joined Thomas Philippe in his mystico-sexual practices and that three of them persist in "keeping up the spirit" at the conclusion of his trial. They also show what special place this community seems to occupy for the Dea-hu-Philippe "spiritual dynasty". The hypothesis seems to be founded that the Vanier parents, whether they were ignorant of the serious events that had taken place at the Nogent Carmel or could not believe and assess them exactly, chose to remain faithful to the friends they had made there. Caught in the same system of beliefs, Jean Vanier, as to him, will still maintain at the end of his life that Mother Thérèse had been unjustly persecuted.

From the very first months of the foundation of L'Arche, strong links were struck between the Abbeville Carmel and the first helpers at Tro-

sly. The second community founded in France, La Merci, is located in the vicinity of Cognac with the support of the prioress of the local Carmel. A little later, the Ambleteuse community, as for it, is founded with the help of the Abbeville Carmel.

Between the Carmelites and the new communities, many exchanges, spiritual and occasionally material, are established, some of which are lasting to this day. If the Abbeville Carmel supports the first communities of L'Arche and their members, they in return admit applications from several young women in quest of their vocation. The roster of the sisters of the Abbeville Carmel in the 1970s and 1980s – the Carmel closed down in 1998 – shows that the rare entrants are members of L'Arche or close to it.

With the Cognac Carmel, a bundle of elements evidences the fact that the Carmel and its prioress durably placed themselves in close proximity to Marie-Dominique Philippe and Jean Vanier and, beyond, with the communities the two men founded: L'Arche and the Brothers of St John both installed a home in the vicinity of the Carmel. The first visit by the two men and Jacqueline d'Halluin dates back to the Summer of 1959. The retreats the Dominican came to preach in Cognac for over 40 years often bore on the Song of Song. After him, Jean Vanier also became one of the usual preachers of the Carmelite community.

The Commission could access a few of the letters addressed to Jean Vanier by three Carmelite nuns. Two of them passed through the Nogent Carmel before being assigned to others (this is the case of Marie-Madeleine Wamberghe, one of Thomas Philippe's cousins, who was sent to Abbeville). The third became prioress of the Cognac Carmel in 1964.

Those letters reveal a delirious Christology, in which Jean Vanier becomes the Christ and the bridegroom. Some of them present themselves as fiery love-letters. They are letters addressed by women to a man; the liveliest of them pass without a transition from mystique to eroticism; they quote passage from the Bible, misinterpreting them. Within the methodological limits of historical research, Commission has decided to publish large fragments of them in its report, since they are very significant of vast mental and theological confusions and indicate numerous breaches of the Carmelite rules. Thus a letter from M.-M. Wamberghe in 1966: "M.t.a. [Mon très aimé = My most

beloved], I am giving you everything, yesterday evening, during the talk by Fr H. which was very complex, Jesus absorbed me whole, glued to Ton c. d'Ép. [Ton coeur d'époux = you bridegroom's heart], I was getting drunk on all the substance of Love and life and this morning I totally gave myself away, as if you were here. Oh yes ! I am passing into You and You are passing into me and there is only a single flame rising straight up to the Father, all light and pure; o my beloved, do come and inflame your little poorer and poorer girl".

What is striking is the existence of two parallel narratives: the official one is that of a fine synergy between contemplative nuns, apostolic clerics and lay people, the other, secret, is that of deviant vocations. The regulators did not function. The principle of a special election of certain nuns, posed by the brothers Philippe, makes transgression desirable. The nuns are durably maintained in a double life, which forces them to painful exercises of dissimulation. It was good for the legitimacy of L'Arche and St John to be able to avail themselves of the support and prayer of the Carmels. It was also good to be able to offer to lay people such places where to recharge. In a sense, Jean Vanier as well as the Brothers of St John had an interest in making sure those women remained Carmelites.

## CHAPTER 9

### Jean Vanier and Marie-Dominique Philippe (1950-1976)

Jean Vanier and Marie-Dominique Philippe first meet in the Autumn of 1950 at L'Eau vive where the latter is invited to teach and where he accompanies a certain number of young women. They are sixteen years apart. Their links are extremely tight and involve the Vanier and the Philippe families in the broader sense. Those links are reinforced at the very moment when Thomas Philippe is condemned and L'Eau vive is closed down. **The order of those links is that of a spiritual and intellectual direction; they inscribe themselves in a common history.**

The year, 1956, of Thomas Philippe's condemnation is also the year when Jean Vanier attends Fr Dehau's last moments and meets the brothers Philippe's parents in Bouvines. It is also the one when the Vanier parents meet Marie-Dominique Philippe. 1976 is the year of the last letter retrieved of those from Marie-Dominique Philippe to Jean Vanier. It is definitely not the end of the story since Marie-Dominique Philippe will intervene on several occasions yet in retreats for L'Arche helpers, but it is clear that, after 1976, the year the Brothers of St John are founded, the links between the latter and L'Arche lose in proximity – without any apparent distension – to become more institutional.

The relationships between the two brothers Philippe are not easy to grasp. Between 1957 and 1962, the two naturally meet and exchange letters. Marie-Dominique Philippe goes to Italy several times to meet his elder brother who also happens to be his godfather. One can notice his stubborn defense of Thomas for the sake of family ties. What is also visible in Thomas Philippe's letters to Jean Vanier is an invitation both

to confidence and prudence towards Marie-Dominique. Incidentally, the latter is not part of the first circle of "tout-petits" even if we know that he too was sanctioned in February 1957, following his brother's condemnation, for covering the latter's actions, but also on strong suspicions to have had mystico-sexual relations with nuns. He is no longer allowed to confess, direct spiritually or teach whatever may have to do with spirituality. Marie-Dominique Philippe very cleverly eschewed the sentence, for not only did his condemnation remain secret, but the penalty was adapted upon a request by the Master general of the Order. He is fully rehabilitated [not absolved] in June 1959 on behalf of a grace of mercy on the part of the Holy Office, which urges him to henceforth lead a "truly priestly life".

As concerns spiritual direction, it appears that Marie-Dominique Philippe advises Jean Vanier at least twice, in 1956 and 1976, to remain with Thomas Philippe and give up incardination in the diocese of Quebec and a lengthy training in a seminar, so as to remain at L'Arche.

The documents that are both the most complex and the most precise are Jacqueline d'Halluin's letters. Reading her, we see that she shares the "graces" given by Mary and Jesus with her three "little pussycats", Thomas Philippe, his brother and Jean Vanier, but the correspondences between the three men are silent on that point.

**Part 3:**  
**Authority and governance in L'Arche de**  
**Jean Vanier**

**This part examines Jean Vanier’s impact at L’Arche in terms of governance and the exercise of authority. It explores whether this could have encouraged forms of control and abuse.**

From the point of view of the humanities and social sciences, authority is neither an attribute nor an individual competence, but rather, a relational register. Jean Vanier’s main form of authority was charismatic and here we examine several facets, in particular, the virtues and personal gifts attributed to the holder of authority by those who consent as well as the affective and emotional bond that unites them. But we cannot diminish this charismatic authority to only prophetism and emotion; we also take account of the social and institutional mechanisms that authorized, framed and shaped Jean Vanier’s charismatic authority.

The commission also paid attention to the exercise of persuasion – a mode of conversation for obtaining the consent of others. The absence of disagreement or the passive implementation of a decision made by the authority holder does not necessarily imply a lucid choice on the part of the person obeying; any relationship of authority may engender relationships of influence, leading to multifaceted abuses. The possibility is increased when the authority takes a “charismatic” form, this, without checks and balances.

## CHAPTER 10

### **L’Arche, an ambitious project**

In the context of the 1960s, many utopian initiatives emerged, breaking from a society considered to be conservative and too consumerist. The experience of L’Arche was based on three types of utopias. Catholic utopias; people coming to Trosly in the hope of leading a Catholic life and the vision of an evangelical conquest of social hierarchies. Community utopias; people driven by strong social criticisms and a desire for radicalism, particularly in terms of shared life and the pooling of salaries. And finally, medical-psychological utopias; where psychiatrists and medical or medical-social professionals denounced the confinement of people with psychic or mental disabilities and proposed innovative ways for care and inclusion.

Despite their heterogeneity, these three types of utopian motivations came together to shape the project of the community of Trosly. The intersection of these utopias created a counter-cultural communal way of life which recognised people with disabilities as people of equal dignity, or even of superior value on the spiritual level, as formulated in the writings of Thomas Philippe and taken up by Jean Vanier and others.

**Elements found in the archives have enabled the commission to reconstruct the stages of the foundation of L’Arche very differently from what is told by the official history.**

When the first home opened in 1964, in a house that Jean Vanier had just bought to live with Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux, the legal framework for a much more ambitious project was already in place. This L’Arche home was considered, from the outset, as the first “experimental” stone in a large-scale plan. The project was supported by the

Society for the Education and Protection of Deaf and Dumb Children (SIPSA), which considered it to be an annex to the Val Fleuri Centre in Trosly, opened four years earlier by Dr Préaut. Jean Vanier became a member and deputy treasurer of SIPSA at the beginning of 1964, then became its president in July 1967 - until its dissolution in 1986.

This relationship had many advantages, including the ability to receive donations and bequests and to benefit from day rates, a source of income. Jean Vanier developed links with political and administrative authorities based on the legitimacy of SIPSA. The essence of the L'Arche community was, for Jean Vanier, from its foundation, that of a service organisation connected to public action, intended to welcome several hundred people with disabilities. Thus, the dissemination of a founding myth designed to give meaning should not hide the keen attention paid by the founder to the conditions of the development of L'Arche. Moreover, from the outset, there was a desire to combine two intentions: to live an unprecedented and autonomous adventure based on utopian roots, while playing the game of partnership with the public stakeholder, the only one capable of giving access to the resources essential to the growth of the project.

## CHAPTER 11

### The exercise of power

Trosly-Breuil is where it all started. It is the community to which Jean Vanier and Thomas Philippe belonged until their deaths, as well as other important figures at L'Arche. Trosly is the place where Jean Vanier invited all new partners to come and discover the spirit of L'Arche and the space from which he drew many examples for his globally distributed speeches and writings. It was also a training centre and a place of retreat for members of L'Arche from all over the world.

**It was within the community of Trosly that the majority of the cases of control and sexual abuse investigated by the commission took place. People accused of sexual abuse have been members and have held positions of responsibility there, victims still live nearby.**

The commission decided to study the community's constitutions. These articles, initially influenced by the constitutional model of religious orders, are documents that organized the governance of the group, distributed powers, defined the procedures for identifying the main leaders and the modes of regulation, evaluation and control of power. They have shaped the governance of many communities in the International Federation of L'Arche.

This analysis distinguishes three periods.

The first period, from 1964 to 1979, was characterised by Jean Vanier holding all positions of legal, functional and symbolic authority. By the end of the 1960s, the formalisation of the project and an operational framework was needed. After some reflection with Jean Vanier, Thomas Philippe wrote a first draft. It served as a blueprint for the first constitutional texts drawn up in the following years.

The frequency and duration of his stays abroad, as well as his many commitments and the development of new communities, forced Jean Vanier to delegate by defining new functions (workplace leaders, assistants, etc.), Jean Vanier decided alone on those appointed. As of July 1974, he wanted to divest himself from certain managerial functions, which he was not able to do before 1980. Still, the need to rethink the operational structure and the chain of command was shared, and the position of director in charge of day-to-day operational aspects was created. Jean Vanier nevertheless continued to decide on everything, relying on a Community Council mainly composed of people he had appointed and in which Thomas Philippe and himself were *ex officio* members. The concern for harmonisation and consensus around the founder, bearer of spiritual authority and executive power, was permanent.

During this period, although it was established that the community would remain open to all, a shared set of Christian values was presented as essential to a full member of the community. Jean Vanier wrote a letter to the members of the community of Trosly in October 1976, in which he invited “brothers” and “sisters” to get involved “with the poorest members of our community, the most lost and in need, in order to build a true, open and welcoming Christian community together”. This idea and formula foreshadowed the Covenant, “announced” for the first time by a group of L’Arche members from all over the world two years later, in 1978, at the Pierre-qui-Vire Abbey at a retreat led by Marie-Dominique Philippe.

The second period, from 1980 to 1998, was marked by major legal and institutional transformations and by the proliferation of new constitutional texts. It began in 1980 with Jean Vanier’s withdrawal from the position as director of the community. Three dynamics were observed: a more complex decision-making process; a visible “catholicisation” of the model of authority and of the community project; and the preservation of Jean Vanier’s participation and ability to control.

SIPSA was dissolved in 1986 to be officially integrated into the *Federation of L’Arche-en-France*. The original community of Trosly was experiencing significant changes in its operational structure; characterised by the centralization of powers in the hands of the community council: the spiritual and political reference of the community. There

was no external control, nor any real internal counter-power. The establishment of direct power relations between the highest and the lowest level of the hierarchical organization, by favouring the centralisation of decision-making and control, led to the marginalization of the intermediate levels. Moreover, this led to a feeling of having to operate in an environment steeped with “unspoken” rules.

The community government texts were distinguished by an increasingly assumed character of religious identity. The constitution adopted on 29 October, 1987 explicitly affirmed the religious nature of community life and authority. Thus, until the mid-1990s, the appointment of a community leader was subject to a letter of confirmation by the bishop of the diocese.

In those years, Jean Vanier kept a great influence which was visible by the legitimacy that the other members awarded to his word and in the preservation of privileged interpersonal relations with him. Thomas Philippe, for his part, remained devoted as spiritual leader of *La Ferme*, where he was sole master, and to the celebration of daily mass for the whole community. He departed from Trosly in 1991. He enjoyed great respect due to his charisma, and some consulted him for personal guidance or confession. During the 1990s, Jean Vanier’s participation in the decision-making bodies of the community was gradually reduced. Moreover, this did not prevent him from being invested in the process of appointing officials. His main focus was, however, the protection of the autonomy of La Ferme - Thomas Philippe’s place, and attention to the spiritual life of the community.

In the third period, after 1998, the decision-making chains were somewhat clarified, the power of the person in charge was limited and the community’s governance was formally registered in an organisational chart which extended beyond the community level alone. The Federation of L’Arche in France could closely follow the running and the direction of the communities and could position itself as the frame of reference for the vision and the spirit of L’Arche. A mid-term and end of term procedure was introduced for evaluating managers.

In the recent period, though the Catholic roots of the project remain explicit, belonging and commitment re-emerge as important questions in a de-Christianised context – the majority of the assistants in the com-

munity of Trosly are not of Catholic confession and for a growing part, without religious confession. However, the description of the double mission of the community remains strictly identical to the previous decades, being both a medico-social structure, approved by the public authorities, and a community integrated into the Catholic Church. The community priest remains one of the primary authority figures alongside the community leader and the deputy leader. For the first time, the constitution recognized the responsibility of the community vis-à-vis the confirmed member. This translated into commitments in terms of training, support and financial aspects such as retirement. The right to individual recourse was also instituted in the event of a serious conflict. This evolution was a sign of the alleviation of the spiritualised and providential perception of commitment, where material or contractual responsibility was limited. The recognition of the responsibility of the community also indicated the end of the personal relationship between the caller (founder or another charismatic figure) and the called.

For Jean Vanier, this period marked a reduction of his official role and his presence in community government bodies. Nevertheless, he remained the founding member, who was regularly consulted and whose view and opinion still weighed on many decisions.

The commission found that the evolution of the exercise of power at the international level had major points of chronological convergence with these three periods of evolution at Trosly. The founder, prophet and guide, Jean Vanier, played the role of international leader during the first decade. In 1975, he announced his intention to relinquish his position as international coordinator, but in practice he still exercised a strong role of authority until the end of the 1990s. International leaders at the time mentioned how it was impossible to make an important decision without his consent and how much the trust relationship they shared with Jean Vanier was essential to the legitimisation of their position. Jean Vanier was particularly active in the development of new international communities and he could sometimes ask people to found a community in a country without necessarily consulting the leaders of the federation.

A turning point was reached in 1999 after Jean Vanier decided to leave all international responsibilities and agreed to give more latitude to the new leaders of the federation. In 2005, the “Identity-Mission”,

a process of collective redefinition of the values, project and the foundations of belonging at L’Arche was launched despite Vanier’s initial mistrust. This marked a key stage in the evolution of the International Federation and the communities. Jean Vanier would nevertheless remain an essential figure until the end of his life and the successive international leaders strove to maintain a relationship of trust with him. Beginning in 2014, the revelations about Thomas Philippe’s sexual abuse of women and the first testimonies concerning Jean Vanier, kept him even more at the heart of the concerns of the international officials.

## CHAPTER 12

### **The authority of Jean Vanier. A sociological perspective**

**Understanding the way in which Jean Vanier exercised authority and how he influenced others in the exercise of their own authority at L'Arche is crucial.**

Interviews with approximately 50 leaders or former leaders at L'Arche provided essential material for this analysis. Also, it allowed us to identify the nature of the “emotional community” that developed between these leaders and Jean Vanier. Borrowed from Max Weber, this expression designates this singular group, which is distinguished not only by the affective bond that connected these members of L'Arche to Jean Vanier, but also by the fact that it is precisely this intense bond which established the power relations that united them.

Jean Vanier was a “master” who “impressed” and who was “looked upon with great respect”, he was sometimes referred to as a “father” or as a “brother whom we love”, or more rarely, as a “friend”. The stories attest to the dynamics of the relationships with Jean Vanier, acknowledging his capital role in the personal, professional and spiritual trajectories of the leaders at L'Arche.

Several registers emerge from these stories. They make it possible to identify the main reasons Jean Vanier's authority was seen as legitimate and why he aroused so much admiration and attachment.

The first register is that of the prophetic character of Jean Vanier. His discourse seemed legitimate not only because of his specific rational knowledge, his capacity to transmit a conceptualised religious thought or an ethical doctrine, but because there was a shared belief in the fact

that he carried a revelation which transmitted a divine message. Certain leaders at L'Arche implicitly crossed a step in believing that Jean Vanier was himself divine, in his person.

The second register is that of the confident and confirming guide. Jean Vanier was able to offer simultaneous spiritual, personal and professional accompaniment. In the testimonies we gathered, there were no situations where Jean Vanier would have expressed a feeling of incompetence in an accompaniment. While many confirmed that they had never been imposed a decision, in some cases, however, Jean Vanier indicated which decision must be taken. Members spoke of having made a personal decision relating to their love life following the advice of Jean Vanier, this, in order to better devote themselves to their missions at L'Arche. These relationships reinforced the feeling of being chosen, leading to a form of “return loyalty”: since he is counting on me, for which I feel gratitude, I must, in return, welcome and follow his opinion and advice.

Finally, there is the register of the clear-sightedness of the founder-leader, of his wisdom and his lucidity. Jean Vanier was supposed to have a prior knowledge in terms of defining what L'Arche is and what it should be. His capacity for work impressed, particularly his ability to write, the large number of retreats and conferences he gave, his incessant travels around the world, and his ability to invest himself not only at L'Arche, but also in other related projects, such as the Faith and Light movement.

In his image, the exemplary member of L'Arche was distinguished by his life choices - to be “given” to the work of L'Arche and to his brothers and sisters at L'Arche, and for some, to Christ.

Finally, if Jean Vanier's speeches, attitudes and positions were such an important reference for the leaders at L'Arche, it was also because they were sensitive to the recognition of his authority by public and religious institutions. In particular, the ecclesial legitimisation of Jean Vanier's authority was visible in many ways: oral or written messages of support from Catholic dignitaries (including Popes), the presence of Catholic priests at several L'Arche communities, and the regular presence of seminarians serving an “internship” at the L'Arche communities.

Jean Vanier also encouraged and justified the legitimisation of this form of charismatic authority. From 1966 to 2016, he regularly taught

courses which dealt explicitly on the recognition of good authority, not only at L'Arche but also outside (at conferences, retreats and in his writings). By its recurrent nature, the subject seemed to have taken on a certain importance for Jean Vanier which we can see by the permanent nature of his exploration of this theme over his years of teaching.

Jean Vanier used three figures of authority to which he gave similar characteristics: the educator, the father and the shepherd.

The authority of the educator highlights a series of human qualities and relational skills: an ability for listening, availability, supporting independence, educational or restorative assistance, and the concern for the establishment of a relationship of trust. Even if the relationship of authority is a one of help and support, it must be above all a relationship of friendship. The role of the leader is to be the "confidant", he is invited to exercise his authority over the sentimental, emotional and spiritual life of the people placed under his responsibility. Even though Jean Vanier sometimes mentioned the danger of close-bonded relationships and influence, he never gave any specific examples.

The second figure is that of the father. It mainly refers to the family father, while occasionally borrowing from the figure of the heavenly father. The father must love, guide and challenge the child, not only because of the latter's failings which are characterized by his weakness, but also by the psychological fears that turn him inwards. This relationship also responds to the objective of building up the community body, which must be experienced by its members as a family. Here Jean Vanier invited us to reflect on the limitations of the power of those in charge and the sharing of authority by using the image of the parental couple.

The figure of the shepherd was Jean Vanier's main model of authority. The shepherd acts as a guide. According to Jean Vanier, he develops a personal relationship with each member of the flock, he shows compassion and must "help members grow". The figure of the shepherd is also sacrificial and is similar to that of the suffering servant of Isaiah: the shepherd must give his life in the service of the sheep. Finally, the authority of the shepherd implies a role of teaching and transmission. The shepherd is bad if, on the one hand, he does not access the emotions and intimacy of the people placed under his responsibility, and on the other hand if he seeks order before divine intuition. The shepherd exer-

cises spiritual authority. He must be in the image of Jesus. The scope of intervention of the shepherd in the life of those over whom he exercises his authority is very extensive: not only the interior and spiritual life of the person, but also the personal and professional life choices.

Thus, Jean Vanier's discourse on authority was marked by the complete absence of any reference to existing institutional forms of authority (state, judicial, ecclesial, medical), their tools, or their regulations. The principles that prevailed in L'Arche's mode of government were of a spiritual order, and the holder of legitimate power received it from God, without there being any question of ecclesial discernment or regulation by a third party.

Jean Vanier's training sessions on authority relationships relied on the loving, confident and enlightened submission of members of L'Arche. This authority relationship was demonstrated by strong interpersonal relationships involving the exposure of one's intimacy, through the sharing of emotions, intuitions and personal suffering.

In all their diversity, and to varying degrees, the relationships of authority at L'Arche were historically marked by this asymmetrical charismatic practice which, under certain conditions, led to abusive power dynamics.

According to Jean Vanier, regarding the question of the limitation of the leader's power, this depends essentially on the leader himself: that is to say, not only on his personal intention to consider the criticisms, opinions and ideas of those around him, but also on his ability to listen to his "little inner voice". For members, the tools available for the validation and limitation of the power of the shepherd are personal psychological dispositions (belief in oneself and in others, attentiveness to the suffering in oneself and others, listening to oneself and to others) as well as tools and spiritual dispositions (prayer, attentiveness to the signs of the divine, attentiveness to having these signs confirmed by a partner).

In line with Thomas Philippe, Jean Vanier reaffirmed his distrust of scholars. During leadership training, he alerted incumbent leaders to the danger of developing the feeling of superiority. However, this statement was not accompanied by any theoretical or practical thoughts on participation or representation in the exercise of decision-making and government. Jean Vanier focused solely on the figure of the leader with

his personal effort of conversion and attentiveness to his vulnerability as the antidote.

The unanimous speeches of admiration and recognition did not prevent the majority of the leaders that the commission met from pointing out the limitations of the relationship that united them to Jean Vanier. The commission retraced a trajectory which highlights the limits of a charismatic authority not regulated by legitimate checks and balances. These limits are found in similar accounts of women and men who pointed to a dark side in their relationship with Jean Vanier.

These testimonies illustrate the different aspects of an abusive relationship of control. Several underlined their difficulties in assuming a personal desire and in feeling legitimate to oppose Jean Vanier's intuitions, ideas, projections. The main cogs of abusive control are there: collective fascination for the charismatic figure and authority, intertwining between the spheres of intimacy, private life, professional life, and omnipresent spiritualization, etc. Many interviews testified to the violent and destructive effects of these relationships and reported feelings of exhaustion or personal crises, which sometimes led to leaving the community.

The interviews also mentioned a process of release, in particular by imposing a distance with the founder. The tools of emancipation are named: institutions capable of contesting or challenging the decisions or positions of the charismatic leader, a diversity of interlocutors and spiritual accompaniment outside L'Arche. The commission observed that several interviewees took care to confirm their loyalty to the organization and its founder, rejoicing at having managed to distance themselves, without ever having had to break their relationship with Jean Vanier.

The accounts of the leaders interviewed showed the existence of a form of equivalence and close interweaving between three objects of belief: Jean Vanier (charismatic figure of authority); God (Jesus, friend of the poor and meek); L'Arche (organization pursuing a legitimate mission). The relationship to each of these three parts gives meaning to the relationship with each of the other two. Is it possible to break with one without breaking with the others? Many of the commission's interlocutors spoke about this difficult question.

Have charismatic authority relationships disappeared altogether at L'Arche? Two years of investigation call for vigilance.

**Part 4 :**  
**Abuses at the heart of L'Arche**

**This part of the report directly addresses the cases of assault and sexual abuse committed within L'Arche which were brought to the attention of the Commission.** The Commission defines sexual abuse as the control of one or several persons for sexual purposes, causing harm to this person or those persons. This is in line with the CIASE report, which took on three criteria to identify acts of abuse, focusing primarily on the modes of control that made them possible:

- a power relationship: proximity or dependence is required between the victim and the aggressor, whether this link is familial (parent), institutional (teacher, cleric) or economic (employer). This power relationship can be added to others, based on age (adult over child) or gender (male over female), etc. ;

- exploiting one person's dependence on another: the abuser uses his superior position for his own benefit and to the detriment of the abused person;

- an absence of valid consent, resulting from the asymmetry of the relationship.

The Commission examines the systemic nature of these abuses within L'Arche, by seeking to identify the characteristic elements that are common to the different abusive modes, and by trying to understand the reasons why sexual abuse acts were repeatedly possible over long periods. Without denying what is due to singular inter-individual relations, of the goal is to study the institutions within which acts of abuse were made possible.

The cases that have been revealed to the Commission are heterogeneous as to the nature of the acts, the geographical locations, and the way in which they are reported and interpreted by the persons concerned. While most of them present themselves as "victims" or "survivors" of an abusive relationship, some have rather presented themselves as consenting partners in a transgressive relationship.

On the basis of several dozen cases of abusive relationships which could be reliably documented, the Commission describes not only the patterns through which women could be influence and caught in the web woven by Thomas Philippe and his most faithful disciples, but also the modes of liberation that eventually allowed submitted persons to evade abusive relationships.

One major point is that the Commission decided to take seriously into account the subjectivity of the people caught in these relations blending support, affectivity, prayer, intimate gestures and sexual acts (whether they are denounced as aggressions and abuses, or claimed to have been liberating and fruitful), that is to say, to render faithfully the way these persons named and interpreted what they had experienced.

The Commission is not able to give a precise estimate of the number of people who have been caught in an abusive configuration involving a sexual act or an intimate gesture without consent. The Commission was informed of twenty-five women who, at some point in their relationship with Jean Vanier, experienced a situation involving a sexual act or an intimate gesture. Among them, fourteen were or still are members of L'Arche. Others sometimes maintain personal ties with members of L'Arche. The commission was able to conduct research interviews with eight women. Five women declined the invitation to come and speak up.

The Commission assumes that twenty-five is lower than the actual number of women concerned.

These relationships span a period from 1952 to 2019. They encompass situations dating back to the period L'Eau vive, many of which extended into the time of L'Arche.

Although the Commission's mandate primarily concerned abusive situations involving Jean Vanier, the exploration of the available documents has made it possible to identify twenty-three people, men and women, who were sexually abused by Thomas Philippe, a small number of whom are among the thirty-three victims identified by the Holy Office in the 1950s. Fourteen of them were or are still members of L'Arche. Among them, six women accepted to be interviewed on one or more occasions. As in the case of Jean Vanier, the knowledge acquired by the Commission makes it possible to hypothesize that the figures cited here are clearly below the number of people sexually abused by Thomas Philippe.

The data collected by the Commission indicate that at least three followers of Thomas Philippe have in turn sexually assaulted or abused others. Among these, a woman formerly a member of L'Arche is alleged to have sexually assaulted a man while trying to initiate him into "mystico-sexual" practices.

## CHAPTER 13: Allowing the forbidden. “La Ferme” at L’Arche

**The place known as “La Ferme” was for a long time the visible place where Thomas Philippe exercised his ministry. The Commission’s investigation shows it to have been a place where disciples were initiated and where sexual assaults and abuses were repeatedly committed.**

The constant growth in the number of members of the community at Trosly-Breuil and the great legitimacy of Thomas Philippe’s authority in community life led to providing him with a dedicated place.

In September 1972, SIPSA acquired a “stone barn with a garden, located at a place called La Ferme in Trosly-Breuil”. The design and layout of the oratory and the chapel, intended to accommodate three hundred people, were directed by Jacqueline d’Halluin. A one-room apartment (both bedroom and study) was fitted out for Thomas Philippe.

“La Ferme” meets several objectives: accommodation for passing visitors as well as for members of L’Arche, and dissemination of Father Thomas Philippe’s and Jean Vanier’s writings and teachings. For L’Arche members, the first vocation of “La Ferme” is contemplative and centred on Eucharistic adoration. Designed as a spiritual place for psychologically fragile people, “La Ferme” also was the centre of religious life in the Trosly community. The chapel was consecrated on the occasion of Corpus Christi feast – which was a significant choice for Jean Vanier and Jacqueline d’Halluin, as “their private celebration” of the day of the initiation of the former by the latter.

Thomas Philippe enjoyed great autonomy, had a personal secretary, organized his own agenda consisting of religious activities and receiving visits. Women brought him his meals every day, washed his clothes, etc. Every year, accompanied by Jacqueline d’Halluin, he went on a three-week trip to tour the monasteries where he had sent young women.

Although his name and role are never mentioned in official documents, Thomas Philippe presented himself as the representative of the Catholic Church at L’Arche. He did not hesitate to compare L’Arche to other new communities, defending the superiority of L’Arche by pointing out the number of priestly and religious vocations to which it gave birth. He was venerated by many as a saint, and his founding “mystical experience” was celebrated: the collective memory recalls that during the first pilgrimages to Rome, Jean Vanier led the group to pray in front of the fresco of *Mater Admirabilis*. At “La Ferme”, Thomas Philippe “led everything” in a great disorganization, which made difficult the role of the successive managers of the home. He was committed to creating, in his own words, “a small presbyterium at L’Arche”, to bring together the young assistants preparing for the priesthood. With the help of Jean Vanier, he convinced Mgr Desmazières, then Bishop of Beauvais, that two assistants were to be ordained priests for L’Arche, including Gilbert Adam who was to succeed him as the priest in charge at “La Ferme”.

After Thomas Philippe’s departure in 1991, a new organization, the “Association La Ferme de Trosly” was founded on Jean Vanier’s initiative. He was chairman, and the aim was to consolidate the independence of the place and spread the spirituality of L’Arche. The organization signed with L’Arche in France an affiliation agreement which recognized the uniqueness of its mission. Jean Vanier always paid particular attention to “La Ferme” and its future, keeping a strong influence in the structure. He saw to it that the spiritual heritage of Thomas Philippe was preserved and valued, as evidenced by this address to the members of “La Ferme” in 2002: “Father Thomas, like the Curé of Ars, Padre Pio and other holy priests, brought together men and women who wanted to live a life of prayer and adoration and support him in his priestly ministry in order to bring as many people as possible back to God. “La Ferme” was the place welcoming all these people who came to

meet Father Thomas. And it is true that Father Thomas was a privileged instrument of God for many and also for each one of us”.

According to several testimonies, after Thomas Philippe’s departure and then death, Gilbert Adam sought to extend the work of his master, the vocabulary and favourite themes he borrowed. The testimonies of several managers of “La Ferme” confirm the progressively problematic nature of Gilbert Adam’s presence at “La Ferme”. Evaluations of his terms in office in the 1990s were indeed quite negative and the idea of relieving him of his role was openly discussed. However, according to what many witnesses perceived, he was protected by Jean Vanier and Odile Ceyrac, and remained in place until 2013, when a woman reported to the Bishop of Beauvais that she had manipulated and sexually abuse her.

Since 2016, new managers have been working to refound “La Ferme” and normalize it, in particular by negotiating the departures of Thomas Philippe’s disciples and by diversifying the retreat and formation programs.

In view of the available data, the Commission accepts the hypothesis that “La Ferme” presented strong similarities with L’Eau vive. The most obvious one is that it was centred on Thomas Philippe, who imposed his views on both communities. Disorganization is another common feature. After L’Eau vive, Thomas Philippe was reluctant to develop clear rules that would prevent him from following the whims of the Holy Spirit. The contemplative dimension is a third common point. L’Eau vive was “a contemplative and missionary home”. This dimension was found at “La Ferme” where primacy was given to prayer and adoration. Ultimately, L’Eau vive like “La Ferme” was a place of conversion that generated many vocations. Finally “La Ferme” like L’Eau vive became a place which allowed Thomas Philippe and some of his disciples to perpetrate numerous sexual abuses.

## CHAPTER 14

### Seducing

**Until the end of the 2000s, Jean Vanier’s seduction methods seems to use a number of recurring patterns.**

During a retreat or a conference, the few minutes of discussion in pairs made young women feel personally invited to a human and spiritual adventure at Trosly, which seemed to them to meet their expectations: “He didn’t ask me, he didn’t ask any questions, he just said ‘come’. And for me it was almost like when Jesus spoke to his disciples: ‘Come!’ It was pretty much... there are resonances.”

Some came to Trosly through a third party and met Jean Vanier in the context of community life. Sometimes, the first meeting may have taken place in a religious community which he visited regularly, like the Foyer de Charité of Tressaint. Jean Vanier also seems to have spotted women in different, non-religious contexts.

The community houses of L’Arche appear to have been an ideal setting for seduction, with the involuntary complicity of older members who invited people to meet Jean Vanier or Thomas Philippe individually and who buttressed their reputation for holiness. Being “accompanied” was part of the ordinary life of any member of the community, as was the exercise of Catholic piety.

Life in a L’Arche community was not, however, essential for the relationship to deepen. For example, recently, a young woman left L’Arche after being an assistant and benefiting from Jean Vanier’s accompaniment. The accompaniment relationship continued afterwards, including abusive situations.

Jean Vanier always had the initiative. He was the one who, during a first and (often very) short exchange, invited his visitor to prolong the

experience and often offered accompaniment, which for some led to a «mystical-sexual» relationship. As Brigitte testifies: “An acquaintance of mine wanted me to ask Jean Vanier if he could meet him. His answer was: ‘Yes, but I couldn’t accompany him. However, if you want me to accompany you a little bit, I could do so’”.

Relationship based on trust seem to have built up gradually, sometimes over several years. The “accompaniment” most often blended spiritual, psychological, professional and vocational dimensions: the confusion of genres created a fertile ground for of influence in relationships.

Control in relationships was all the more easily established as there was no real counterweight to hinder the process. While in some cases this recruitment process was effective, it did not always work. When solicited, some women quickly identified and refused the sexual advances made to them, which put an end to the deployment of arguments based on mystical-sexual beliefs.

When the relationship included physical touching, justified by some mystical-sexual theory, it did not need to become a secret, insofar as Jean Vanier regularly received many people in individual interviews. If Jean Vanier gained these women’s trust primarily during meetings of personal accompaniment, he also managed to influence them during various stages of ordinary community life.

As for Thomas Philippe, during the twenty-eight years he spent at L’Arche, his seduction process always followed the same pattern, which had been remarkably stable since L’Eau vive. He devoted a great deal of time to individual meetings, whether for counsel, spiritual direction, or for the administration of a sacrament. His influence was based on the instrumentalization of sacramental rites. It was in his bedroom-office, first in Ms Gsell’s house at Trosly, then at “La Ferme” from the 1970s, that all the people he abused went to meet him. Disciples and admirers of Thomas Philippe also invited newcomers to Trosly to meet him. A woman, identified as “Thomas Philippe’s secretary”, was in charge of his agenda, and of receiving and organising meeting requests.

The Commission studied two testimonies from women who said they had had abusive relationships with Gilbert Adam. They indicated a similar mode of approach, characterized by small signs of thoughtful kindness, great attention, availability, immense gentleness and marks

of affection, sometimes including a material dimension (gifts, financial support). In the cases of Thomas Philippe and Gilbert Adam, the idealization and sacralization of the figure of the priest played a certain role.

As far as the Commission is informed, Marie-Dominique Philippe does not appear to have committed abuses directly within the frame of L’Arche. However, it is established that he was able to maintain relationships, at the same time as his brother, with certain women living at Trosly-Breuil. A victim described the sordid way in which Marie-Dominique Philippe, whose sexual abuse she had suffered for several years, invited her to go and experience other “mystical graces” with his brother Thomas Philippe.

In at least one case brought to the attention of the Commission, situations of sexual abuse with Jean Vanier were prolonged by a sexual assault by Thomas Philippe.

In all the documented cases examined by the Commission, the persons caught in an abusive or transgressive relationship with Jean Vanier were all adult women, without disabilities, Christians, mostly Catholics, with high cultural resources. Half of them came from privileged social backgrounds. At the time when the first mystical-sexual acts were committed, almost all of these women were young adults (20-35 years old), single, married or having taken religious vows.

In the case of Thomas Philippe, the profiles appear different: it can be said that the persons recruited were mostly pious girls, having received an education marked by Catholic discipline and a taboo on sexuality.

One of the common characteristics of Thomas Philippe’s victims seems to have been their psychological vulnerability, which seems to have been less often the case with Jean Vanier.

It appears that all these women were involved in an active spiritual quest at the time of their abusive or transgressive relationship. This privileged attention paid to persons answering a call to a religious vocation (whether they were at the stage of discernment, had tried life in religious communities or had already taken religious vows) is a common point in the identification and recruitment processes of the persons caught up in these abusive or transgressive relationships.

The issue of commitment to celibacy for L’Arche was a central point in the dialogue with Jean Vanier. A woman who had been sexually

assaulted by Thomas Philippe said she felt that sharing with him her feeling of being called to a religious vocation had triggered physical touching on his part.

## CHAPTER 15

### What happened ?

**Situations, gestures and actions are heterogeneous. Some acts of sexual assault or abuse took place within the framework of a relationship of control, others did not, as evidenced by the case of an assistant described in the report. However, it is necessary to analyse them together, insofar as they are part of a continuum of sexual violence marked by the experience of influence, abuse of authority and more generally by the confusion of spiritual, affective and sexual spheres.**

From the end of the 1960s to the 2010s, the posture regularly described is that of Jean Vanier (this is also the case with Thomas Philippe and Marie-Dominique Philippe) on his knees, his head resting on the bare chest of the “accompanied” person. Tactile gestures intensify during prayer and accompaniment (holding hands, heads close together, foreheads touching, hugging each other). The different stories evoke a similar range of touching gestures, covering in particular “kisses on the mouth each time more intense, more passionate”, “voluptuous, avid”, and caresses on the erogenous zones of both partners, particularly the female’s breast. In several cases, the touching progressed to acts of sexual assault. Partial nudity, the absence of coitus as well as the spiritual justification of sexual abuse led Jean Vanier to consider that these were non-sexual practices.

At Trosly, the successive bedrooms-offices of Jean Vanier seem to have been a privileged place. However, several testimonies have revealed that Jean Vanier had access to more discreet spaces, for example, places belonging to third parties such as Jacqueline d’Halluin’s apartment. Among the more discreet places, we identified monastic locations where Jean Vanier stayed during retreats, during which he

“gave the Word”. Meeting appointments were sometimes scheduled late at night.

The testimonies also mention places of abuse in different countries of the world, such as Canada, or India. Judy Farquharson, who was the first to testify in 2016, said: “In India, I went to his room, I had to cross a courtyard with snakes at night to get there. And when I think about it, I went there and I came back, I was like a servant... But there were physical caresses, gestures... and he would ejaculate, and I wondered what was going on. Which is to say, I didn’t feel like there was much... I was just his helper. [...] I just thought that was how we did this Jesus and Mary thing.”

Several testimonies point to a certain dissimulative caution on Jean Vanier’s part. After experiencing one of these “special accompaniment” sessions in the cell of the monastery in which he lived, a young woman said she observed how careful Jean Vanier was to maintain a certain physical distance when they were both in the presence of the monks.

As evidenced by all the written and oral materials that the Commission has collected, several abusive accompaniments by Jean Vanier may have taken place with different women at the same time. Most relationships lasted for several years or even decades. They were always preceded and sometimes followed by supportive relationships without any touching or ambiguous gestures, which later became less frequent until they gradually came to an end.

Because he considered these experiences as “chaste sexuality”, Jean Vanier invited single women, and others living with a boyfriend, married or having taken the religious vows of chastity, women who already had an active sexuality or women who had never had any sexual experience with a partner.

The same diversity is found among the victims of Thomas Philippe. In this aspect as in others, the relationships initiated by Jean Vanier show similarities with the abuses initiated by Thomas Philippe. The Commission met a woman who had been abused by Jean Vanier and then by Thomas Philippe successively. However, interviews, testimonies, and correspondence reveal that the sexual abuses committed by Thomas Philippe differ from the ones committed by Jean Vanier in nature, frequency, and violence. The violence of the assaults and rapes

committed by Thomas Philippe caused traumatic amnesia in the case of at least two female members of L’Arche.

In the current state of knowledge accumulated by the Commission, it appears that – in addition to Jean Vanier (or Jacqueline d’Halluin by whom he had been initiated before the foundation of L’Arche) – at least two members of L’Arche (a man and a woman) have reproduced the format of their master’s abusive “prayers” or “accompaniment”. Interviews have shown that Jean Vanier and Thomas Philippe did encourage other members of L’Arche to exercise affective-sexual-spiritual practices beyond their own circle. Women and men consulted Jean Vanier and Thomas Philippe about the rightfulness of the hidden relationships (affective and sexual) that they then had with a cleric or with a woman who had taken religious vows. The answers they received could only arouse their astonishment, even their dismay. A single person, member of L’Arche, related this dialogue as follows: “I had a relationship with a Jesuit [...]. And of course, we asked ourselves: ‘But what should we do with it?’ And with all the normal questions that such a relationship entails! I spoke to Jean about it and I spoke about it to Gilbert. And their reactions were more than curious... And then I said to myself: ‘What’s going on here?’ I didn’t understand, but today I understand. [...] I was relatively close to Jean, and above all close to Gilbert. And when I told them this story, Jean’s reaction was to say... He was ecstatic. Yes, yes, he was totally in ecstasy [laughs], and he said to me: ‘But it’s so beautiful in you that the physical and the psychological should always go together!’ And I said to myself [laughs]: ‘I expected anything but not that!’”

## CHAPTER 16

### Convincing

“The Father never used violence with me. I always acted with complete freedom, at least outwardly, because internally I was bound by the fear of displeasing the Blessed Virgin by refusing, as he always repeated to me, and also by a vow of obedience”. These lines from the testimony of a woman who denounced the acts of Thomas Philippe in 1952 **express a characteristic element of the influence exercised in this system of abuse. It is not established by physical violence, but by the deployment of a moral constraint, supported by arguments resting on the theological, spiritual, emotional and psychological registers, as well as by the use of peer validation.**

The acts belong to the same set of experiences that the abusers called “praying together”. Jean Vanier himself, talking about his own initiatory experience with Jacqueline d’Halluin, described it in these same words: while they “prayed together”, they would find themselves “in the arms of one of the other”. This relationship can be considered to have continued for several days and to have represented, in his own words, “a peak in [his] spiritual life”.

In order to better characterise the control process, the Commission endeavoured to analyse the arguments used by the abusers to convince the abused. This was done by relying on the words used in the available documents (correspondences and autobiographical accounts) or on the testimonies of the people involved in these relationships.

The first type of argument used is on the mystical and theological register. The first justifications which the Commission discovered are those developed by Thomas Philippe. In 1938 in Rome he said he had experienced a mystical-sexual union with the Virgin Mary who allege-

dly revealed a “secret” to him: Jesus and Mary were supposed to have had mystical-sexual relations with the aim of rehabilitating the flesh and inaugurating the mystical relations that will be experienced in the Kingdom. According to Thomas Philippe, it was after Christ’s resurrection and probably after his Ascension and Mary’s Assumption that the establishment of a mystical and carnal bond between Jesus and Mary was fully achieved. A nun abused in the early 1950s testified that he argued that caresses had the function of transubstantiating her female body into that of Mary, thus assimilating these sexual exchanges to a sacrament. The same nun also recalled that he sought to justify this incestuous model by affirming that “there is no line of demarcation between maternal love and conjugal love, that there is love in general, which demands total freedom”.

By referring to the biblical passages where God commands to kill (Abraham and Isaac), to sleep with a prostitute (Hosea and Gomer), Thomas Philippe wanted to show that God sometimes asks man to go against his commandments.

The work of the Saint-Jean brothers and the testimony of Michèle-France Pesneau, abused by the two Philippe brothers for many years, show that Marie-Dominique Philippe shared many of his brother’s arguments, in particular those aimed at describing these sexual acts as “graces” allowing sexual practices beyond common morality. Marie-Dominique Philippe also spoke of “positive virginity”, like his brother Thomas who, as reported by Madeleine Guérout, confided that “all this greatly honoured N.S.[Notre Seigneur = Our Lord] and the T. Ste V. [Très Sainte Vierge = Most Holy Virgin], because the sexual organs were, much more than the Sacred Heart, the symbols of the greatest love”. With Pauline, a young woman who reported being abused by Gilbert Adam, the latter used an argument close to that of “positive virginity”: “He went so far as to tell me that God wanted to revirginize everything in me, through him of course.»

Jean Vanier’s arguments were clearly in line with those advanced by his master, with the desire to minimize the sexual nature of the acts committed in favour of the primacy of spiritual communion. He often took up the reference to Jesus and Mary. This reference is explicitly present in two of the five analysed testimonies, and partially in another

two. If the substance of the argument is identical to that of Thomas Philippe from whom it comes, its expression varies a little with the phrase: “It’s not us, it’s Mary and Jesus”. What he suggests here supposes at least a form of mystical assimilation to the persons of Jesus and Mary. The theme of assimilation to Jesus and Mary is, for example, omnipresent in his correspondence with Brigitte between 1987 and 2019. He writes to her that she is called by Jesus to engage in a spiritual process which aims at making her “become Mary”, or even “the heart of Mary”, in a relationship where Jean Vanier is for her the manifestation of the presence of Jesus; in return, she is called to “carry” and “sustain” it. Another woman reports similar remarks: “Several times, I expressed my astonishment to him by saying that I did not understand how I could express my love, as a consecrated person, both to Jesus and to him. He answered me each time: ‘But Jesus and I are not two, we are one’, and: ‘It is Jesus who loves you through me’”.

As already mentioned, for Thomas Philippe, the sexual organs were the symbol of the greatest love much more than the Sacred Heart. For his part, mentioning to Brigitte the operation of the prostate which he had to undergo, Jean Vanier claimed that his genital organs were «sacred», and referred to them as “the sacrament of love”, thus giving a sacramental dimension to his mystical-sexual practices.

The use of references to the spiritual authority of Thomas Philippe by his disciples Jean Vanier and Gilbert Adam is to be noted. Thus, in Brigitte’s testimony: “But at that time, I shared this with him [questions about the nature of the relationship that was beginning] and he said to me: ‘Listen, I understand the questions. You are absolutely right to ask them’. [...] He said to me, “In fact, you need to be reassured; [...] what we are going through, what you are going through, is a little bit... It reminds me of the relationship I had with Father Thomas. Yes’. And so he told me that, and he said to me: ‘You don’t have to worry. It’s true that it’s the Lord who leads us and who leads you, and you have to trust’. [...] Yes, it was in the early 1950s and if you want, I’ll talk to you about it one day.” Or, as Gilbert Adam wrote in a strange e-mail he sent to Pauline’s parents just after she had revealed to them that she had suffered abuse from him: “I want you to know that I was accompanied by Father Thomas as supervisor in the accompaniment of Pauline. If I

did not properly understand and carry out this spiritual accompaniment, I beg to be forgiven. If there is an error, we must blame Father Thomas, because he followed and guided everything. This man suffered so much from the ‘vulgarity’ of the world confronted to the beauty and richness of the mystery of Jesus and Mary in the Incarnation of the Word of God. It is a mystery which can be grasped in the internal forum only, and to which the world understands nothing. Father Thomas had to explain himself, it cost him dearly and he suffered terribly”.

A second register used by the perpetrators of abuse to win the support of people caught in an abusive or transgressive relationship is the arguments of authority by which they hope to obtain obedience. The sacredness of the priestly state is an argument frequently put forward by Thomas Philippe. Jean Vanier, relying on his prophetic aura, was also able to make proposals relating to the priestly function.

The affective register occupies a central place. This dimension aims at creating a sense of election, to convince the other that he or she has been chosen to receive special manifestations of divine love. We have seen that Thomas Philippe used such arguments with Jean Vanier, who then reproduced them. He thus wrote to J. Farquharson: “You are chosen, it is special, it is secret”. As for Brigitte, he wrote to her in 1991: “My little sister Brigitte, I was so moved by your two letters. So moved by the word of the chaplain [...], then by the word that Jesus gave you. May Jesus invite you to foolish trust. He chooses you. He calls you to receive these graces of love that the world does not want to receive”.

The Commission hypothesizes that, in Jean Vanier’s case, the importance given to the affective dimension, defined as a quest for mystical-loving communion, reveals something about his way of assimilating the beliefs and practices of Thomas Philippe. His remarks are therefore perhaps more on a mystical-affective than mystical-sexual level, even if, as he recognizes when describing his initiation, the former led to the latter.

In the arguments deployed by the perpetrators of abuse, this affective and divine election cannot exist without a renunciation to reason, presented as a spiritual battle to be waged against oneself. Often with Thomas Philippe but also with Marie-Dominique Philippe, this last argument intervenes on an accusatory mode, when the person involved

in the relationship asks questions, begins to have doubts and demands explanations. This anti-intellectualism is a constantly reiterated denunciation of the pride that theologians and philosophers draw from their intelligence. The renunciation to reason thus becomes an essential condition of the initiation. This is what Thomas Philippe indicated to a nun who testified in 1952: “He explained to me that it was not up to me to make this discrimination [on what is divine or not], that he was an instrument of God, therefore actually and directly moved by God, that it was therefore to God himself that I refused myself, because my human intelligence was a barrier”.

The last series of arguments that the Commission has been able to identify aims at isolating the person under influence by arguing that “the world” cannot understand these graces, and that consequently, it is necessary to seek elsewhere guarantees of what is experienced, with the help of persons designated by the perpetrator of the abuse,. This argument takes the form of an injunction to silence by invoking the secrecy that naturally surrounds these graces that “the world does not want to receive” and cannot understand.

The systemic dimension is particularly visible when the perpetrators of abuse intervene directly to support each other, in order to strengthen the hold exercised over their respective victims or try to prevent them from speaking out when they attempt to free themselves from the control they are submitted to. So in the early 1990s, Joseph, a man who had just learned that his wife had been sexually abused by Thomas Philippe at “La Ferme”, was answered by Marie-Dominique Philippe, to whom he had confided: “He was a little bit angry, and said to me: ‘You are not in the conscience of Father Thomas’. Then he told me about Shem and Japheth who covered Noah’s nudity by walking backwards so as not to see his nudity (Gn 9, 23). [...] He also told me that after our wedding, he shouldn’t have done this. The idea that Father Marie-Do. wanted to convey to me is that there are things that one cannot understand, and that one should not judge Father Thomas’ intentions”.

## CHAPTER 17

### Consenting

**From the perception of people considering themselves as “survivors” or “victims” of abusive practices, or partners in a transgressive relationship, the Commission examines the question of their “apparent consent”.**

Consent should not be confused with giving in or with sexual desire. It goes from the explicit “yes” to a whole range of behaviours whose interpretation is malleable. The significance of these behaviours can be grasped only by analysing the situations of interaction and the relational configurations that made them possible.

The loss of benchmarks and the feeling of confusion are signals indicating the existence of a possibly abusive situation. The testimonies received by the Commission reveal the disorder, the incomprehension and even the overwhelming disarray experienced by these women. One of them testifies: “I did not know if it was good or bad. After the first time, I was totally lost. [...] Even afterwards I had trouble distinguishing if it was good or not, if it was part of the accompaniment: to be chosen, chosen by Jesus: John substituted for Jesus. [...] Despite everything, he continued to be my guide. He had a hold on me. At the same time, it also made me feel good”.

All the stories of people caught in an abusive or transgressive relationship also mention trust in the abuser, reinforced by the certainty of his charisma. If the victim gives in, it is first of all because she believes that the words, actions and intentions of the interlocutor-abuser are good, despite her feeling of confusion. One of the common points between these women is to have been spiritually accompanied under control. This is also observed when the relationship with the abuser

had been built previously in a moment of existential distress, or during a personal tragedy, and he then appeared as «a saviour». – “He is like a ‘midwife’ for me since he leads me into life. [...] JV’s physical gift is unbearable to me. He is confusing and dangerous. Yet I don’t stop him because his motives are good. The last thing he wants is to hurt me. ‘I can’t imagine what I would do without you’, I told him. But his desire is to free me, to give me life, and for that the umbilical cord must be cut. Wait: he told me he was the midwife”.

Under control, the conviction of the superiority of the author of the abuse prevents the questioning of sexual touching as well as of the discourse that justifies it. For some, the relationship is intimidating, and they are afraid of displeasing if they openly formulate fears, misunderstandings or doubts: “I didn’t want to disappoint him. But I couldn’t do it. So, I remained hesitant... And during all this time, things continued with Jean at this level”.

In some cases, the fear of displeasing is associated with the fear of being abandoned. And sometimes this asymmetry leads to the legitimate consideration that the expectations and needs of the abuser take precedence over those of the abused person. Several women have expressed their intention to put themselves at the service of this exceptional man without putting more worries on his shoulders: “I remember that once, when I had not seen him for quite a while, I became aware that he was on his knees in front of me, and I silently told myself that I had to force myself a little in front of this man with such a big age difference, to cuddle him, to cajole him, but that feeling would not last long...”

Convinced of the charisma – even of the sanctity – of the abuser, all witnesses stated their conviction that he was “God’s representative” or at least the mediator of the divine will concerning them. This is particularly visible in the stories of women for whom the religious vocation, the spiritual quest, and the desire to respond to a divine call are intimately intertwined with the abusive experience. Accepting the initiatives of the abuser may have been, for some people, a way of trying to deepen their spiritual lives. Many were convinced by the discourse of justification and sincerely believed that they were the chosen beneficiaries of a “divine secret”. The mystical-sexual belief may have been facilitated by the feeling that it was part of the spirituality inherent in L’Arche. For

others, the turmoil and discomfort felt is seen not as a wake-up call, but as proof of their lack of faith and unworthiness, as Judy Farquharson, a “survivor” of an abusive relationship with Jean Vanier, put it: “I rather thought that the problem came from me, that I did not have the right spirituality and that, consequently, I did not understand the importance of what was going on. [...] That’s how I felt: unworthy of this special relationship. Not understanding or believing that I was ‘chosen’, ‘special’, and not being able to tell anyone made me feel ‘not good enough’ and that feeling stayed with me for many years”.

Several people testified to their conviction of having been introduced to a form of liberating relationship, a source of spiritual and personal fulfilment. Jean Vanier himself testified to this when he spoke of his first experiences with Jacqueline d’Halluin. A person described her relationship with Jean Vanier as a most welcome experience of deep love, firmly anchored in Trinitarian love, basically accepting the intertwining of affective, spiritual, and sexual spheres. Nevertheless, she told the Commission later that she would no longer engage in a relationship of this nature, and that she now perceived its abusive dimension.

At the other end of the spectrum, several women requalified their apparent consent as an abdication of their critical capacities. This is the case not only of persons for whom the temporal distance from abusive situations is the greatest, but also of persons who had chosen to be accompanied psychologically, and sometimes also spiritually, with the intention of finding a way out of the multiple psychological, affective, spiritual, sexual consequences caused by relationships with abusers.

About the abuses committed by the Philippe brothers, a woman stated: “He put my conscience to sleep”. Michèle-France Pesneau described the abdication of her critical abilities as follows: “My capacity for reasoning is silent in the face of this monk who had told me, once before, that I should ‘above all not try to analyse’ what was happening in my spiritual life, of which he had already taken control, combining the abuse of spiritual power with sexual abuse”.

For her part, Eva, a consecrated laywoman who had been caught in an abusive relationship with Jean Vanier for several years, wrote: “I must have seen, I saw, how much my actions and his went against my virginal gift to Christ... This is where I can see a hold on me, like a fas-

cination in fact. I was no longer capable of a critical view of these acts and of this secret love. Fascination because I was irresistibly attracted although it felt ‘strange’”.

Finally, other women claim to regret a posteriori their intimate gestures with Jean Vanier, as well as the confusion in which this had momentarily placed them, while claiming not to have been upset or lastingly affected and refusing to identify themselves publicly as “victims”. This positioning was not encountered among Thomas Philippe’s victims.

For these women, the suffering caused by the awareness of betrayal, friendly and professional, is the dominant feeling today: “You know, I mean, about this story, I do not consider myself a victim. But I feel deeply betrayed at the level of friendship and at the level of my vocation, because what Jean was experiencing was not celibacy. And yet he encouraged celibacy among the people of the L’Arche,; so there is a real feeling of betrayal. I mean, celibacy is clearly defined as the absence of genital activity, and what he was doing was...”

Talking about the consent of people caught in an abusive or transgressive relationship is detrimental for the victims and quite advantageous for the aggressors. This amounts to implicitly assuming that the victims were free and responsible – which was usually not the case. This also means transferring the responsibility to them, by ignoring or even cancelling that of the oppressor, and suggesting in passing that without their collaboration, the abuse could not have occurred.

The Commission emphasizes that if the focus of its report is placed on acts of a sexual nature, the testimonies show that they are but one dramatic dimension of a more global problem of multi-faceted manipulations. The stories make it possible to observe various forms of internalization of norms, judgments, expectations and representations in terms of social relations and sex.

## CHAPTER 18

### Undoing the hold

**The process of abandonment involves the restoration of the link with the outside world and the confrontation with otherness, allowing the unveiling of the system of abuse.**

The durations of abusive or transgressive relationships vary greatly. Some seem to have lasted only a few weeks, while others seem to have lasted entire adult lives. This is the case of those who, from victims, in turn became perpetrators of abuse, like Jean Vanier, and seem to have based their entire existence on the beliefs justifying the system. In the case of Jean Vanier, the abusive relationship with two women extended over a period of a few years (from approximately two to five years), while other women talk of a period of one or more decades. In the case of Thomas Philippe, the abusive relationships lasted for some eighteen months, eight years or fourteen years, twenty-four years with Marie-Dominique Philippe. For Gilbert Adam, the relationships described by Pauline and Élodie lasted from a few years to a decade. The dozens of cases studied seem to indicate that the longer the dimensions of existence in which the relationship of influence (spiritual, psychological, professional dimensions, etc.) was exercised, the longer the process of abandonment took.

Some women say they took the initiative to break up, when they no longer felt able to live in a relationship that caused suffering, a feeling of “chaos” or “collapse” or saturation. Thus Hélène and Eva, who had been caught up in a relationship with Jean Vanier, said: “Then I no longer felt comfortable behind closed doors in this form of relationship; I then expressed that it did not make sense to me and that this form of relationship between marriage and celibacy was going nowhere”. And: “When it

went very far, as if it had been agreed between us, I had this impression of becoming an object because he spoke little in these cases; he showed his love. And it took several days for me to recover internally”.

A second type of moment of rising awareness is the intervention of an outside person, who challenges the person under influence when they talk openly about what they are experiencing (even in euphemistic terms). Thus Cecilia, abused by Thomas Philippe at L’Arche, said: “So in ‘80 I met Donna and she asked me what was up and... I became all... all purple when she said to me: ‘«D’you pray in the nude?’ And then... it was she who told me: ‘But that doesn’t come from God!’ And I think that I immediately knew that she was right and immediately I... Here I took the plane, I came back and I never went back to see Father Thomas for spiritual accompaniment...” With the help of a few incisive words, Donna Maronde Varnau, who had confronted Thomas Philippe a few years earlier, awakened Cecilia to the reality of her situation.

The moment of rising awareness can also be caused by a disagreement between the perpetrator of the abuse and the person under the influence.

The testimonies underline how slow and difficult the process of abandonment is once the realization has occurred. It is painful to place a moral cursor, to name and to denounce a deleterious experience. It is painful to confront the perpetrators of abuse and those who support them. It is painful to break away from the circle of trust, whether friendly, fraternal or professional: the break often leads to an additional penalty of side-lining and isolation. The pain is also linked to the harassment inflicted by the perpetrator of the sexual abuse. It should be noted that, in the case of Jean Vanier, no woman reported pressure or harassment on his part. It seems that each time he simply accepted the person’s decision. But he expressed his incomprehension and showed no sign of guilt. The Commission hypothesizes that this type of response is a sign of Jean Vanier’s confinement in the system of abuse and his inability to consider and sympathize with the harm that may have occurred.

After having expressed to Jean Vanier her desire to put an end the sexual relations, Hélène testified: “His answer was: ‘Yes, but it does us good!’ He seemed not to understand how this form of relationship could raise questions for me and despite my questioning he apparently did not wish to try to understand. I then stated my wish not to completely

interrupt this relationship, but that it could remain on the level of friendship, which he immediately accepted without resorting to any spiritual blackmail or any pressure in any way”.

If calling for the help of psychology professionals may have been a necessary support on the path to abandonment, the collective and institutional dimension is also important. Victim support associations offer sharing groups between victims, publish testimonials and resources to feed the reflection and journey of other victims. Speaking out contributes to raising a collective awareness of the existence of common and repeated abusive mechanisms, but also, to a certain extent, to the formation of a collective identity of Jean Vanier’s or Thomas Philippe’s “victims” or “survivors”. These individual trajectories of abandonment benefited from a collective process of transformation of the gaze posed on the founders within L’Arche, by lifting the veil on the mechanisms of collective blindness. An example is the meeting of October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, between four of Thomas Philippe’s victims, as described by Michèle-France Pesneau. At Trosly-Breuil, several of the victims also found significant listening and support among some members of L’Arche, in a community that struggled to hear the voices of the victims and to become aware of the system of abuse it had sheltered.

Due to the weight of shame and guilt, the fear of appearing disloyal to L’Arche and its founders, and above all the fear of not being believed, reporting abuse is difficult, especially since it concerns people whose notoriety and aura are very strong. Many people had an unfortunate first experience of speaking up. Corinne’s testimony is an illustration of this: “In 2010, I was in a retreat in silence, and all of a sudden these facts, these images resurfaced. I spoke to the priest of the retreat about it; he replied that it was not good, but no other reaction, no support, advice, or reaction. Six months later, I decided to write to JV to say that what he had done was unbearable to me and still is today. I couldn’t say these things and I wanted to make sure he read this letter, so I hand-delivered it to him. He read it; he said to me: ‘I thought it had been good’. He didn’t tell me anything else. I was bruised and disappointed by his reaction, his non-recognition”. How indeed to speak out and denounce publicly, after the weak reaction of this priest and the absence of empathy and dialogue with Jean Vanier? Hélène, for her part, recounted an

even more humiliating experience: “I tried to talk about our relationship with the abbot of a monastery who knew him. He would not listen and quickly said that I was fantasizing. Also the same reaction with another person who knew him and whom I trusted”.

The denunciation of the abuses by the victims was essentially made to the leaders of L’Arche or the Catholic Church. No complaint to the French or Canadian judicial authorities has been filed to date. The only case of a judicial report made in 2013 concerned Gilbert Adam and was dismissed. The people the Commission met did not feel ready to come forward publicly before the abusers died. The possibility of initiating legal proceedings against them is now extinguished. Generally, the victimised persons testified confidentially. Some of them, however, judging the institutional response insufficient or feeling the need to help other victims, chose to share their testimony publicly.

The Commission also questioned how the leaders and members of L’Arche reacted. The Commission was, in full transparency, able to consult the abundant documentation gathered by the crisis unit that had been mandated to that end (including a detailed logbook of the events that had occurred, correspondence between the parties involved, minutes of meetings and testimonials.).

Regarding Thomas Philippe, it was mainly the representatives of the Catholic Church who acted to verify the facts, listen to the victims and collect new testimonies. With the stated desire to protect the confidentiality promised to the victims, only a simple summary of an investigation report was given to the leaders of L’Arche, the result of which was made public in a letter dated April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015. The investigator met thirteen people and identified nine victims. This allowed a first group of victims to be listened to. However, due to a lack of sufficient publicity within L’Arche, several victims were not aware of the ongoing process, and came forward too late during the following months. Although this first investigation marked a major turning point in the process of denouncing abuses and went on to trigger other testimonies, it appears a posteriori incomplete and undersized, given the scale and seriousness of the problem. No historical work was carried out while the conviction of Thomas Philippe in 1956 was known to all the actors. Similarly, no link seems to have been made with Pauline’s accusation of sexual

abuse by Gilbert Adam, who was recognized as a disciple of Thomas Philippe’s, and although his case had been investigated by the Bishop of Beauvais just a year before. Finally, it may be surprising to note that Jean Vanier was not questioned by the investigator.

These observations are not intended to make an a posteriori judgment, but to point out the blind spots in the process of collective abandonment. Jean Vanier remained protected by his aura of founder and great spiritual figure, so that what women had to say could not be fully expressed, L’Arche Internationale relied totally on the Church. As a result, the investigation was deprived of a multidisciplinary dimension, with the contribution of personalities from outside L’Arche and the Church, which are essential for a better understanding.

Nevertheless, it was a major turning point in the denunciation of a system of abuse, by allowing the revelation of its existence by the leaders of L’Arche and by the press, which was to trigger a chain reaction of other testimonies, and notably the first ones concerning Jean Vanier.

However, it is important to recall here that this process of speaking out placed some of the victims in difficult situations. Thus Michèle-France Pesneau was confronted with the hostile reactions of those who, at the start, were openly in denial, those who thought that too much fuss was being made and that too much importance was given to these abuses. Jean Vanier’s complicit silence also was an obstacle.

In December 2014, as the investigation on Thomas Philippe was ending, those in charge of L’Arche received a first report from a woman who clearly expressed her distress and the abusive nature of her relationship with Jean Vanier. However, she insisted on remaining anonymous and affirmed that she did not want L’Arche to exploit her testimony. She essentially wanted to warn officials of other future testimonies concerning Jean Vanier. This was what led the leaders of L’Arche not to respond to her report.

Judy Farquharson’s testimony arrived in May 2016. International officials reactivated the crisis unit they had created for Thomas Philippe and engaged in collegial work to analyse the facts. An opinion requested from a psychologist and a psychoanalyst outside L’Arche called for caution. The woman who testified accepted that the leaders of the various bodies of L’Arche Internationale be informed of her tes-

timony but did not want it to be known beyond this restricted circle. The woman who had testified in December 2014 was recontacted and maintained her wish not to be involved. To this should be added the negative response that the Dominicans opposed the leaders of L'Arche Internationale who had asked them to open their archives concerning Thomas Philippe.

Under these conditions, the crisis unit decided to wait for new information while preparing to receive them and disclose known facts in front of the members of L'Arche and a wider public.

The leaders of L'Arche met regularly with Jean Vanier and insistently asked him to explain these relationships, as well as their possible link with Thomas Philippe's practices. On the possible similarity of this relationship with his master's, he gave no explicit confirmation, but admitted having had a relationship of this type with Jacqueline d'Halluin.

Jean Vanier retained all his aura at that time. The desire to obtain answers from him went through a form of negotiation where progress was made respectfully. While giving certain guarantees of openness, Jean Vanier said as little as possible and managed to drag things out. It was a difficulty for those in charge at L'Arche, despite their strong desire to reach the truth, to free themselves from the strong ties that linked everyone to Jean Vanier. It was also difficult for the institution to ignore the priority of its unity and its perpetuation.

The only solution was to outsource the survey process. This was the option chosen when a new report was completed in March 2019. In fact it was necessary to wait for the announcement of the investigation concerning Jean Vanier in June 2019, a few months after his death, for the reality of the system of abuse within L'Arche since its foundation to be fully admitted.

**Part 5 :**  
**Psychiatric hypotheses**

## CHAPTER 19

### Abuse, delusion and perversion

The events that have left their mark on L'Arche, and more particularly on the action of its founders, Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier, are a fascinating but difficult subject for psychiatrists.

Fascinating because these events span nearly a century. It's been a long journey for historians to ensure we understand the complexity and many ramifications. Difficult because psychiatrists are generally advised against providing a diagnosis of people they have not been able to examine directly. There is a constant risk of reductionism in psychiatry. It is important not to reduce an individual to the pathological traits attributed to them. This is one of the lessons learned from living with people with disabilities.

However, and in the first instance, once these principles are established, the ethics of psychiatry permit the formulation of hypotheses, provided unfounded certitudes are avoided.

Apparently, Jean Vanier never sought help from a psychiatrist or psychotherapist, despite encouraging their role at L'Arche. As he wrote in the book entitled *Leur regard perce nos ombres*, the collection of letters with Julia Kristeva: "Your irritation is perhaps a sign that your psychoanalyst's eagle eye suspects something unconfessed behind my smile and expressions of gratitude. You're not wrong. I have - perhaps we all do - fears, prejudices, hidden elements, things we avoid that we don't want to or cannot see. Personally, I don't feel the need to pursue this work on myself any further." Was he too aware of his flaws? Was he afraid that the nature of what he called "hidden elements" would be deduced? It is regrettable that he did not consider analysis useful: his trajectory might have been different.

#### *Sexual abuse*

The sexual acts attributed to Jean Vanier by several women are qualified as abusive. Divested of spiritual justification, they demonstrate typical characteristics of this kind of behaviour.

The psychiatric point of view reinforces what has been described previously. Gradually developed intimacy to the point of sexual acts is very destructive because the abused person considers they share responsibility for their humiliation. They begin by thinking they are chosen, then realise they are not unique, used rather than loved. They understand that, despite its duration, the relationship is stereotyped and limited to brief encounters. Feelings of bitterness or anger ensue. It is possible they will suffer from their experience with Jean Vanier years later, when the loss of this apparent support could cause mental breakdown. Only long psychological analysis can help them to move on, if it is possible.

As is almost always the case, the abuser minimised or ignored the suffering they inflicted on their prey and felt no guilt. "My conscience is clear," said Jean Vanier when talking to a former psychiatrist for L'Arche, Erol Franko after the first complaint about him. He defended himself, saying he considered they had given their consent freely, adding with almost amused detachment: "In fact, I think those women must have been in love with me." When women told him how much they had suffered from their relationship with him, he never acknowledged the abusive nature of his conduct.

#### *Jean Vanier's personality*

Jean Vanier is characterised by several personality traits: charisma, seduction, manipulation, tendency for secrecy, desire for popularity, force of persuasion and suggestion, avoidance of frontal conflict, and authoritarianism. He was an exceptional leader, as demonstrated by L'Arche's success and expansion across all the continents in just a few years. Jean Vanier displayed abundant energy, constant creativity, and a desire to help with affection and humour. He was an admired speaker and had resounding success around the world.

Jean Vanier also had the ability to trust his employees and challenged them to test their capacities. They didn't all succeed, but his trust was powerful leverage for positive results. He showed highly deve-

loped social intelligence and was adept at seducing people from diverse backgrounds with extraordinary conviction.

Jean Vanier did not disclose much. Was he on guard, constantly on the lookout because he had so much to hide? Was the construction of his character in danger if contradicted. Did he need to maintain the mystery, letting others project their own fantasies on L'Arche's founder? Was his reserve a result of his education? Undoubtedly, some or all of the above.

Each personality is too rich and unique to be categorised, and this also applies to Jean Vanier. Psychiatric categories of pathological personalities are not easy to apply in his case. On the other hand, the Enneagram Personality Test, in which some L'Arche members received training, can be applied with caution. It distinguishes nine personality types. As is often the case, Jean Vanier attributed himself a different type to that attributed to him by others who were undoubtedly more objective. He attributed himself type 6, whereas an Enneagram specialist and others attributed him with type 3, typical of leaders for whom popularity and success are priorities. Type 3 personalities lie and pretend to project a positive image. They are vain. Enneagram Type 6, which Jean Vanier considered himself, strives for recognition of their integrity and fears deviance. Type 3, on the other hand, aims to project a positive image and lies readily.

From another complementary point of view, a psychoanalyst might consider that Jean Vanier's personality was not structured, similar to a borderline state, neither psychotic nor neurotic Perverse behaviour and delusional beliefs are also possible.

### ***Thomas Philippe's influence***

Thomas Philippe had a deep influence on Jean Vanier. Remember that Thomas Philippe had a strong influence - even psychological hold - on Jean Vanier's mother. It is fair to presume that Jean Vanier was the ideal prey, given his immaturity and unstructured personality, lack of direction, and the extreme and constant religious fervour he had always been surrounded with.

### ***Jean Vanier's sex life***

It is unknown whether Jean Vanier's initial discovery of sexuality was his experience with Jacqueline d'Halluin or the discovery of a

different sexuality, dulcet and steeped in religious fervour. It is, however, clear that this experience marked him significantly.

An undated letter from Thomas Philippe to Jean Vanier seems to refer to physical intimacy between them, but also suggests that the distinction between the sexes is outdated except "for divine games of love".

Jean Vanier pursued the sexual behaviour of the *tout petits* group which he joined. According to currently available testimonies, this sexual behaviour only concerned adult women. There is probably a network of women who could be considered abused around the world. The full extent of his acts is yet to be determined. There are mixed allusions - coded and not - to joys of past and future sex in his letters to various nuns and laywomen, confirming dates and references to Jesus and Mary, sometimes in the same sentence with the same fervour.

### ***Thomas Philippe's "erotic madness"***

Thomas Philippe's case may seem totally incongruous. He would not have completely surprised psychiatrists in the late 19th century. Thomas Philippe's case suggests a form of disorder described by Benjamin Ball book *La Folie érotique*, published in 1888. In the hallucinatory form of this disorder, where sexual arousal is central, Ball speaks of hallucinations affecting the genitals, in some cases reaching orgasm. It is probably this kind of delusional sensation that Thomas Philippe experienced. His delusion began in 1938 with his "wedding night" with the Virgin Mary at the age of 33, or that is at least when it reached its full extent. His account may correspond to a primary delusional experience, which strongly suggests hallucination.

During various meetings between 1952 and 1956, Thomas Philippe was reported to appear "disturbed" by many people. In June 1952, Father Paul Philippe, who questioned him regularly, wrote to the master of the Dominican order: "I dare say that F. Thomas scared me for the first time." He expressed hypotheses of schizophrenia and early dementia. The Holy Office sought several specialised psychiatric assessments. They were unanimous regarding serious mental disturbance.

### ***Characteristics of Thomas Philippe's delusion***

Delusion is defined as an idea that a person holds on unshakeably.

“Delusion is not in the theme, it is in the conviction,” said French psychiatrist Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault. Their commitment cannot be corrected despite evidence to the contrary.

Testimonies, especially by Thomas Philippe himself, point to the hypothesis of chronic delusion relatively structured around the primary delusional experience of a physical union with the mother of Jesus. The hallucinations seem to have been physical rather than visual, hence affecting the sexual sphere. Typical of delusional people, Thomas Philippe was reluctant and, above all deceitful, conscious that his words were difficult for others to accept. However his conviction was total - one of the signs of delusion - and he never sincerely expressed the slightest doubt or admitted the pathological nature of his mental condition.

Thomas Philippe was convinced he was announcing a new age for the Church. His message was too innovative to be understood, but it would be understood later. This attracted hostility, and, in his view, the disgrace of being considered mentally ill. The “followers” and their master had special privileges and placed themselves above all authority and common morals. The term *tout petits* (little ones), and the focus on the poor, humble and disabled don’t easily hide an immense megalomania and pride.

The delusion of Thomas Philippe was shared with a limited number of “chosen” people. It was hidden, to use the term which is omnipresent in this whole affair, because its followers were still aware of its scandalous nature.

A form of confusion is perceived without respect for the differences and distance between divine and human beings. Thomas Philippe, like Jean Vanier after him, gave the impression of living intimately with Jesus and Mary, repeating their supposed relations with their victims. Their victims were no longer considered to be people or individuals, but instruments and objects used to carry out these acts. The protagonist identified with Jesus or at least declared to act in communion with him.

### ***Healing in perverse mode***

The behaviour of Thomas Philippe and his followers can also be categorised as perverse. In some cases, sexual abuse is the result of individuals mixing psychosis and perversion, but it is not always easy to

separate them. These perverse traits influenced the way Thomas Philippe exercised his control over all his followers, and therefore Jean Vanier.

Thomas Philippe’s theological reflection commands total submission to the divine personalities, and as a result, total submission by his victims to their representatives: “Jesus loves you through me”. Various testimonies gathered by the Dominican Paul-Dominique Marcovits depict Thomas Philippe as authoritarian and unconcerned about others, eager to satisfy his impulses, justifying his practices with religious arguments. He deceived the women he abused. They were impressed to have been chosen by this “*Saint homme*” (holy man) who ordered them to say nothing

Thomas Philippe possessed all the characteristics of a sexual pervert: moral transgression, ritualised sexual practice in an imperious and exclusive way to achieve the satisfaction he needed, considering the partner as a mere object to serve his satisfaction, and justifying sexual practices with a higher goal. A Holy Office document written by Father Paul Philippe describes him as a “subtle pervert”.

Thomas Philippe was beyond morality and reason, and therefore felt no guilt towards the people he abused. He justified himself, considering he practised a higher order of sexuality and celibacy. Such reflections were strongly echoed by Jean Vanier. In his 1984 work, *Homme et femme Il les fit*, he also contrasts genital sexuality with a sexuality of “love and celebration”. More generally, this book, like many Jean Vanier’s writings and remarks, must be read and can be fully understood from the perspective of Thomas Philippe’s teachings. For example, this typical passage: “Jesus was not an intellectual. He was a simple labourer, the son of a carpenter. His mother remained silently hidden, at the service of the body of Jesus and the mystical body.”

### ***Shared delirium***

If we consider Thomas Philippe was delusional, how can we explain all the people who followed his teaching and practices, starting with Jean Vanier? Were they also deluded?

The delusional conviction among Thomas Philippe’s disciples was described in a letter from Father Ducatillon to Father Paul Philippe dated 13 June 1956: The impression that emerges from the first inves-

tigations on behalf of the Holy Office – an impression shared by His Excellency Mgr. Renard and by Mr. Canon Huyghe – is that we are confronted with souls who are ready for any external submission, without the slightest hesitation or resistance, but who will be very difficult to convince internally. They seem to have taken refuge in an inaccessible zone of defence. They offer no external resistance, but nor is there any indication that they really acknowledge or regret their errors. They are strangely serene and sure of themselves.”

Father Paul Philippe responded: “I am, like you, astonished by the reaction of Father Thomas’s intimate disciples. In front of each name, you are almost invariably obliged to note: “She recognised without difficulty that the decisions were founded, not requiring any explanation”, etc. This attitude is so similar to Father Thomas’s attitude that I tremble at the thought that these poor girls remain attached to him internally.”

More generally, Jean Vanier retained certain aspects of Thomas Philippe’s delusion and perversity, particularly physical aspects. Otherwise, he developed a more personal work in his writings and actions.

One of the characteristics of induced delusion is the disappearance of delusion when the inducing agent is removed. This was not observed in Jean Vanier who never escaped the hold of Thomas Philippe, to whom he was faithful until his death.

### *A narcissistic perverse nucleus within the Catholic Church*

Thomas Philippe had wide influence on founders of religious movements. Several communities founded since the 1970s and led by people who had been spiritually guided or influenced by Thomas Philippe were known for sexual abuse, such as the Saint-Jean community, founded in 1974 by Marie-Dominique Philippe. Not to mention Ephraïm, founder of the Béatitudes, who said Thomas Philippe approved sexual abuse. Thierry de Roucy, at the origin of the non-governmental organisation Points-Coeur was also influenced by Thomas Philippe. He was reduced to a secular state in 2018 due to sexual abuse and abuse of power.

All these facts are reminiscent of Paul-Claude Racamier’s work on narcissistic pervert nuclei with varying degrees of far-reaching toxic effects. He establishes their similarity with shared delusion disorder between two people, but which can also be applied to larger groups. “A

perverse nucleus is based on a kind of delusion: a delusion of grandeur that does not appear deluded from outside. The feelings of omnipotence and invulnerability that drive leaders of a perverse nucleus are much more than a fantasy: they are an intimate conviction - unreasonable, unshakeable, delusional. The essence may be delusional, but the modalities of pragmatic application are precise and adjusted socially (...). After all, perhaps the manoeuvres of a perverse nucleus are simply the actions - socially quite skilful - of a delusional duo or trio?”

Given the many people who suffered from Thomas Philippe’s spiritual and sexual abuse, directly or indirectly via followers who shared his delusion and reproduced his actions, and in the first instance his brother Marie-Dominique and Jean Vanier, this can be described as a perverse toxic nucleus within the Catholic Church. The photograph of these three men received by Pope John-Paul II speaks volumes about their ability to infiltrate, seduce and deceive, whereas the Vatican was supposed to be aware. It also speaks volumes about the dysfunctions of the ecclesiastical institution.

The same question applies to L’Arche and the possible toxic role of its founders. The existence of shared delusion is quite clear and constitutes a plausible diagnostic hypothesis. The social skills were real, but this did not explain the success of L’Arche, because the “delusion” was reserved to a limited group and only affected a certain sector of their personality. Despite observed signs of Racamier’s perverse nucleus, there is little evidence that its toxicity deeply infiltrated L’Arche. This is probably because it was not a closed environment, which is often the case for congregations, and that the many communities that developed were led with great autonomy. Also, many different assistants arrived quickly and from all over the world with no control over their profiles and the doctrine was not motivated by active proselytism.

**Part 6 :**  
**Observations by a psychoanalyst**

## CHAPTER 20

**The dangers of an unrecognised solitude**

How could such a charismatic man, so inhabited by the Word of God; a man who was so compassionate with people with a disability be incapable of empathy for the women he secretly seduced?

The psychoanalytic approach adopted to analyse this stark contrast is based on S. Freud's theory, and complemented by Donald W. Winnicott's work. Winnicott shed light on the importance of the environmental impact on a person's development saying: "When I look, I am seen, so I exist." **This approach therefore requires a detour through the history of Jean Vanier's childhood and his interrelational and intergenerational experiences.** Note that Thomas Philippe used his interpretation of the mother-child relationship to justify his "mystical" conception of relationships between men and women.

Jean Vanier's and his parents' stories show to what degree such embracing and tender attention was lacking. All three grew up in families abound with ideals but extremely anxiogenic due to a lack of sensory and emotional interaction. Jean also experienced two parallel extremes. There was an illustrious aspect: his father Georges, a war hero, had prestigious posts, giving him access to relations with the world's greatest figures including several popes. At the same time, there was the terrifying aspect of the war, many moves, financial problems, and his mother Pauline's regular bouts of depression. There was no security on which to build trust, except perhaps the security attributed to Providence.

How can a young man, Georges, offer the young girl he is courting trench maps and a box containing the mud from his boot the day he lost his leg? He had no idea of Pauline's feelings or desires, nor any

inclination to understand them. His wife described him as "imprisoned in his armour." His main concern was to project the image of a hero, a man of honour and duty who sacrificed himself for his country. Unlike her husband, Pauline was haunted by a negative image of herself which prevented her from taking an interest in others. Georges was raised with Jansenism where law, duty and the fear of hell prevailed. On the contrary, in Pauline's case, love and mercy were the priorities.

Jean Vanier's relational experiences during childhood were chaotic and very distressing due to constant insecurity. He suffered relentless separations with an unpredictable mother and an absent father. For Jean, life was invented directly in the relationship with God. His daily entries in his 1941 and 1942 diaries refer to Mass and Communion, but never mention his entourage, a characteristic shared with his Father's letters to his mother during the Great War. Similarly, it is difficult to find a mention or description of a comrade or friend in Jean Vanier's letters to his parents.

Life generally begins by taking root in the body and senses. Constant emotional exchanges with the environment help to put feelings into words, and creating a personal space away from the other. The opposite seems to be the case for Jean who in the absence of friends and loving relationships, found his real life directly in his relationship with God, in the "spiritual" realm.

The clinical term for Jean Vanier's condition is "functional limitation": due to distortions in early emotional relationships, subjects suffer from intense internal insecurity, linked to the anxiety of being abandoned if the other moves away or of falling under their control if they approach. Autonomy and dependence are painfully jeopardised. This helps us to understand his immense solitude, but also what people who knew him frequently referred to as his need to control, sometimes even described as "manipulation".

Jean Philippe (Thomas by his religious name) and Jean Vanier had very different childhoods but they both featured omnipresent religion and the development of feelings of acute abandonment and insecurity. Despite an age difference of over twenty years, they identified with each other, seeing their own reflection in the other. This revelation of their identities helps to understand the existential importance of their meeting.

Thomas Philippe's mystical theory seems to have provided an unhopd-for remedy for the anxiety triggered by emptiness and abandonment, confirmed by God's presence "embodied" in the relationship between Jesus and Mary. According to Thomas Philippe, supernatural life was real life, the only life he knew and that was worth living. He believed he was responsible for making it known. Here is what he wrote in *La vie cachée de Marie*: "Mary, beloved mother, the Bride, the immaculate, had a life completely different to ours; in her there was no "me", this reflective consciousness that constantly refers to itself, this excessive activity that attempts to impose itself on an aggressive mode and seeks pleasure."

Thomas Philippe justified his practices with evangelical precepts of self-abnegation and sacrifice. He absolutised "self-abnegation" as "all good", in radical poverty, smallness, silence, a void. He also denounced "everything bad" as a representation of reflexive consciousness, wanting to use words to describe experiences of pleasure and displeasure, urging to choose pleasure for itself. And if there is no me, there is of course no search for pleasure as such, and therefore no guilt. Mary exists only to love and be loved: "Jesus does not give Mary his body in a sacramental way; from the Annunciation it is a real and physical love relationship that he is given to her." These are the "instructions" conveyed to Thomas Philippe's disciples: the body of a woman is reserved for the pleasure of a man "who is the visible representative of God". Man and woman giving themselves to each other is a sacrifice in the silence of love, united by the Holy Spirit.

Jean Vanier's relationship with Thomas Philippe fulfilled all his deeply buried emotional needs. For the first time, not only did he no longer feel alone, he felt loved by someone, and someone who didn't make him feel trapped, because it reflected God's love for him: "I discovered something unique with Father Thomas. I discovered through him, through his word, through his whole attitude, that I was loved by God."

His thirst for relationships with people with disabilities confirmed the existential importance of touch, of contact for developing a relation and - if necessary - reinforced his acceptance of Thomas Philippe's conception of sexuality.

He wrote the following in *Homme et femme il les fit* (1984): "A boy abandoned by his mother and placed in foster care does not receive the

physical affection he needs. His whole body calls for a woman-mother's tenderness. Take Georges who lives in one of our communities. He has an almost uncontrollable need to touch and caress women, to attract them to him. His need to touch and be touched is not necessarily linked to genital sexuality. It is not, strictly speaking, an expression of sexual drive. It is his deficient body crying out, wanting to be loved and appreciated by a mother. The body remembers the deficiencies of physical affection."

He could be describing himself. In *Jésus le don de l'amour*, he expressed another form of the flesh/divine equivalence in the gift of oneself to the other, transfiguring sexuality: "The Word did not become flesh as one puts on a garment which one then removes, it is the flesh which becomes divine. It becomes the means by which this life of love of God, in God, is communicated. This life is not an idea taught by books or teachers. It is the presence of one person to another, the gift, the total gift of one to another, Heart to heart, Communion in love." [...]

He goes on to speak about *interpersonal love*. The words sound true, making it difficult not to accept them spontaneously. Yet the notions behind the words are confused. Like Thomas Philippe, an abysmal lack of authentic experiences of shared pleasure and physical connection prevented any process of separation from another person, with whom it would then be possible to develop connection.

Rather than transforming the contradictions: Good/Evil, Self/Other, for Thomas Philippe, they were transformed into paradoxes of life, abolished in an absolute spiritual relationship that mixes the same with other, sensation with affect, the body and the soul. All that is left is submission to the will of God. Any human relationship Jean experienced - sexual or not - was only important for the relationship it allowed with God. This explains that most of the intimate relationships he had with women were considered in prayer and the silence of worship.

The diverse feelings expressed in the different testimonies of women who had "intimate" relationships with Jean Vanier demonstrate his extremes.

Extreme good: a desire to give himself totally to the other, echoing his total investment in faith in "a God-Love".

Extreme evil: unable to build a secure inner foundation, it was almost impossible for him to feel empathy when another person manifested its

difference. It distorted his desire for communion. Apparently, he had little empathy and felt no guilt in that case. How could such a strong advocate of mercy answer Judy who asked him about his conduct towards her with: “I’m sorry, that was your experience?” “There is what you experience - next to what I experience - they are not the same.”

It is a recurring theme: his body, his sensations, his affect were a wasteland. Thomas Philippe’s theory provided an escape with no guilt. Thomas Philippe could not play the role of a third party for Jean Vanier. On the contrary, he reflected his own image, like a mirror, closing in on him again.

Faith in a God-Love gave Jean Vanier “another place to put his experiences”, perhaps helping him to partially escape Thomas Philippe’s hold. Unable to develop a real otherness, the openness given to him, this impulse for sharing and very strong commitment to action were transformed under certain circumstances into an emotional hold and abuse of power, of which he was unaware. Even more toxic, this abuse of power was justified by religious arguments used to convince followers.

In Jean Vanier’s case, there was no perverse organisation with the resulting pleasure of destroying, humiliating or reducing others to manipulated objects. He was, however, trapped by the absolutisation of a Love that excluded him from any idea of Evil. He was a prisoner of his adoption of Thomas Philippe’s delusional ideas and system of abuse.

**Part 7 :**  
**Contribution to a critical analysis**  
**of Jean Vanier's spirituality**

The theological “investigation” endeavours to characterise the spirituality that supported the expansion of L’Arche, but also fostered abusive behaviour towards certain women. We suggest there is a link between Jean Vanier’s spirituality, developed over decades in his conferences, retreats, articles and books, and his observed behaviour, both positive and negative.

This analysis applied practical theology which involves diverse reflection, both ecclesial and social, exploring speeches, interviews, and written works of various genres. For Jean Vanier, extracts of some of his books where he outlined his reflection were patiently explored.

This research was conducted in several stages. A first review of some books allowed us to observe the massive use of the word “communion” when L’Arche assistants were invited to enter into a covenant with core members. A working hypothesis emerged: If L’Arche is built on a spirituality of covenant with people with disabilities, Jean Vanier mainly promotes a spirituality of communion which is rooted in a form of Carmelite mysticism and an anthropology, both inherited from his spiritual father, Thomas Philippe. A dangerous lack of otherness emerges here.

## CHAPTER 21

### **Jean Vanier: a new spiritual master?**

The wide diversity of style in Jean Vanier’s books is striking but many common points are quickly identifiable in this disparate collection. Jean Vanier mainly wrote about his personal experience of living with people with disabilities. Secondly, he claimed he wrote as a disciple of Jesus, featuring a testimony of his faith with a mystic tone. Finally, he wrote to teach and transmit, to encourage new vocations among “wounded” people, to find new assistants for the growing number of L’Arche communities.

A strong reference point is constantly emphasised: living closely with fragile, poor, wounded people and being converted by them, personally and collectively. The connection is always related to the way Jesus lived, loved and chose mainly abandoned and marginalised people. More than an idea, it is a practice demonstrated by the existence of L’Arche communities. The credibility of his entire written work is based on this undeniable reality.

His writing style is purposefully simple, with no intellectual jargon, in tune with social trends. Jean Vanier knew how to relate to his contemporaries and young people who aspired to an ideal of fraternal, sober and genuinely evangelical life. He dared to think outside academic frameworks, exploring diverse cultures and religions, cultivating an ideal opposed to competition, individualism and useless wealth.

Drawing on common features, Jean Vanier’s written work can be classified as “spiritual writings”, as even his anthropological reflections were inspired by biblical revelations. But references to the scriptures evolved over time, gradually omitting precise references. His citations became increasingly implicit, referring most often to John the Evan-

gelist. He clearly says he aimed to touch the heart rather than speak to reason. This might explain the freedom he took commenting on the Scriptures of which he claimed to be an authority.

When Jean Vanier no longer quoted full text from the Holy Scriptures, he increasingly opted for psychological and imaginary interpretations. When referring to scenes from the Gospels, he described conduct by Jesus and other details that do not exist in the biblical narrative. This suggests that he was not referring to the true meaning of the biblical text, rather distorting it to express his own reflections.

When he described the life of Jesus in Nazareth before his public ministry, Jean Vanier invented elements that are not in the Gospels, apparently seeing the spirituality of Nazareth as the heart of the life in L'Arche communities. He highlights the idea of a well "hidden" "secret" and "mystery". These words, recurrent in Jean Vanier's writing, ultimately refer to the way of experiencing "communion" between Jesus and his mother rather than with the Holy Trinity.

We now know that this relationship is at the heart of the incestuous form of Father Thomas' spirituality. Of course, Jean Vanier only referred to "divine communion" between Mary and Jesus, but all his vocabulary maintains a mysterious atmosphere. The "initiates" understood these references differently to other readers. His reflection aimed for accessibility to the widest population, but he seems to slip into a coded language that specifically addresses the followers of his delusional mysticism. For example, he plays on a possible interpretation of "*les tout petits*" to refer to disciples of Jesus in The Gospel of Matthew. The hidden life of his followers would become like Nazareth, a form of spirituality developed at L'Eau vive by Thomas Philippe. Only readers aware of Jean Vanier's permanent support for his spiritual father can see behind the veil. Other readers will pass over it, not seeing any ambiguity. Most will enjoy the spiritual expression.

Despite his links with the Catholic Church, he refers to it rarely and the commission does not observe any real reflection about the Church. Was it a subject he preferred to avoid? Jean Vanier was essentially critical of the hierarchical dimension of the Church. He opposed the idea of a universal Church open to all mankind, because Jesus can speak to each heart. His Church, the one he loved, was L'Arche; the "wounded"

people whom he identified with Jesus himself, and those who answered the call to personally tend to the "poor". His Church needed priests so that the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the Eucharist shaped the ways of living in community. The expression "my Church" first appeared in a 2012 book, *The Signs of the Times*. It features twice in the same passage which many people will agree with: "It is through the Church that Jesus called me to bring good news to the poor and proclaim the liberation of those who are captive and oppressed. I am grateful to my Church for the nourishment of the sacraments, for the word of God and the inspiration given by the successor to Peter. [...] However, I am disappointed by the loss of allegiance and enthusiasm among members of my Church which makes it hard for them to commit themselves to the poor to bring them the good news of Jesus. Too few ecclesiastical officials affirm that faith in Jesus is intimately bound to this commitment to the poor."

Every single book mentions the need for spiritual accompaniment. He preferred "filiation" accompaniment which was clearly expressed in the book *Communauté lieu du pardon et de la fête* (*Community and Growth*). This slant corresponds to his own experience with Thomas Philippe who placed excessive value in the role of guide. This was demonstrated in his attraction for the Indian tradition of gurus who train their disciples with close ties and lengthy assimilation. Jean Vanier also evoked the role as guide, model and witness. The commission observes that these two modes may present risks. For "filiation", is there a real degree of freedom? As for "guidance", it may become too directive if the guide thinks he knows the path the person should follow.

There is no doubt that Jean Vanier took on two roles, as founder of L'Arche and as spiritual master and bearer of a new spirituality – with the proximity to the "wounded" as a common theme.

## CHAPTER 22

### A spirituality of covenant?

Some L'Arche assistants "announced the Covenant" to explain their decision to pursue their work with people with disabilities. The first assistants made their commitment during a retreat led by Marie-Dominique Philippe in 1978, during a Eucharist. It later took place during a celebration including the "washing of the feet" rite. This commitment was neither a sacrament nor a consecration which entailed entering in the consecrated life as defined by the canonical law of the Catholic Church. It was, however, important for people because it cemented a community-oriented life with people with disabilities, within a relationship of closeness specifically qualified as covenant. This Covenant was practised at L'Arche until the 2000s.

In his rare references to the covenant in his books, Jean Vanier presents it as interdependence experienced between the assistant and person with a disability who carry each other. This reciprocal covenant made it possible to love and let oneself be loved, to welcome the weakness of others and our own. This focus on reciprocity erases the idea of asymmetry – key in the covenant relationship between God and humans – but also the differences between the parties.

In the books *La communauté lieu du pardon et de la fête* and *La source des larmes*, the Jean Vanier's spirituality seems to operate with two covenant models. The first is Christological, evoking the relationship with the "poor", the other is nuptial, referring to the intimate relationship between the believer and God.

To illustrate the community relationships of L'Arche between assistants and people with disabilities, Jean Vanier evokes the covenant between Jesus Christ and the poor. In his writings, there is a shift towards

an essentialization of the poor as a figure of Christ, as Jesus himself. "The poor is Jesus" and conversely "Jesus is the poor". This is problematic because if we only see Jesus in the Poor, do we also see the person behind the face of Christ? Does the person feel loved for themselves if we identify them with Christ? If one of the actors of the covenant disappears behind the other, the reality of the covenant collapses. The consequence of this fusion between Jesus and the poor can have three problematic repercussions: the deletion of the singularity of suffering, the disappearance of the person's own identity, and the sacralisation of the body.

The role of the body in Jean Vanier's spirituality is also revealed in extracts concerning Jesus and Mary. The body itself becomes a spiritual element with a Eucharistic vocabulary (gift of the body, "real presence", food). Without even trying to make a direct connection with Thomas Philippe's deviant spirituality focusing on Mary, the commission points to the overvaluation of the body, "a channel perfectly open to grace" and of touch. This role of the body, beneficial at first, leads to possible excesses if discernment is lacking.

Jean Vanier showed no discernment when he talked about touching the bodies of people with disabilities: "I discovered that bathing was a special moment of communion. His little naked body was relaxing and taking pleasure in the warm water. He was so happy to be touched and bathed. The only language he could understand was tenderness through hands: a language of gentleness, safety, but also a language that through my body and its vibrations precisely revealed to him that he could be loved, that he was good, and that I was happy with him. By touching him, I received the tenderness he wanted to give to me."

This clearly demonstrates activity conducive to abuse due to exacerbated spiritualization. We repeat the commission has not received any reports of abuse on people with disabilities.

Still, it is surprising to see a lack of further study on the "touching" of Jesus in Jean Vanier's work. In the Gospel of John, the scene of the disciples' washing of the feet is not centred on touching, where the verb is "drying". The focus is on the reversal of roles where the master becomes the servant. In any case, the touch of Jesus liberates speech, even when he gives the order to be quiet. Words of gratitude spring forth, instead of being impeded as in the case of abuse.

The nuptial aspect is recurrent in Jean Vanier's spirituality. Attentive reading of his work leads to the conclusion that God as spouse (of the person, of the people) has more weight than God as a liberator. The reciprocal bond of belonging comes first in this notion of covenant. Furthermore, for Jean Vanier, the fact of "leaving the Divine Spouse" is an expression of sin. The importance given to the nuptial dimension of divine love reinforces, if need be, the emphasis placed on relationships of "communion".

## CHAPTER 23

### A spirituality of communion?

Jean Vanier's books abound with vocabulary centred on love, Jesus' love for human beings and the universal aspiration for love in relationships. This love is expressed in terms of "compassion", of "communion" but gradually, one of these terms becomes omnipresent: communion.

The use of the word communion is far more prevalent in the second edition of *La communauté lieu du pardon et de la fête (Community and Growth)* than in the first, where it is almost absent. This is even more striking in the book *Toute personne est une histoire sacrée* where the word communion features over 250 times, much more than "love" or "unity".

Communion, defined as a relationship of mutual trust, is a fundamental human aspiration from birth. Jean Vanier's uses the expression "consciousness of love" for the love of an infant, which is inspired by Thomas Philippe.

This extrapolation suggests communion as a lost paradise to be found again. Hence, the significance of becoming like a "little child" again to rediscover communion. In a retreat, Jean Vanier contests psychologists who refuse to talk about love coming from very young children. On the contrary, he insists on this "love of trust", a form of love "we have lost".

For Jean Vanier, communion is superior to action, central to spirituality and his anthropology: "Father Thomas considered this relationship of communion, founding principle of any life based on relationship, as essential to understanding spiritual life and the life of faith. He helped me place communion at the heart of my anthropology."

In more spiritual writing, he refers to "nuptials" and fusional tendency mentioned above. Communion becomes "marriage" and "nuptials". He portrays Jesus as the Bridegroom, the Beloved, "to enfold

each person in the embrace of love” and “the Bride, wounded by love, all her flesh crying out her thirst for the presence of the Beloved, the Spouse, in order to receive his love and to give herself to him entirely.”

Is this use of the term “communion” typical in Thomas Philippe’s writing? On this point, the commission must refer to the analysis to be made by the Dominican brothers. We can simply quote Xavier Le Pichon, who confirms the significance of this aspect: “Father Thomas began to write a lot. He became more than just a scholar of Saint Thomas. He was someone who wrote extensively. He renewed his theology. He began to have this new vision of raw material, of the body, as if he had freed himself from being the disciple of Saint Thomas and was becoming a sort of creator-theologian.” And from that time on, as Jean Vanier pointed out to me in 1994, “the words that constantly kept coming up again within the writings of Father Thomas were communion and gift.”

Extensive research on the content of the word “communion” in Thomas Philippe’s work is required. But the conclusion is obvious: that is exactly where we need to look next!

## CHAPTER 24

### A “Carmelite” mystic?

There is no need to have heard the revelations about Thomas Philippe’s perverted mystic spirituality to identify the mystical tone prevalent in Jean Vanier’s books. The tone is intentionally Carmelite, given the regular references to Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila and the occasional reference to Saint Thérèse de Lisieux. The usual Scriptural references of these mystics are also present, especially the *Canticle of Canticles* and the Gospel of Saint John. It seems to us that in the end, mysticism reinforces Jean Vanier’s desire for fusional communion with God – and with people within the scope of shared faith. Jean Vanier’s deep mysticism facilitates his rupture with rationality and his lack of attention to individuality.

The study of the writings of Jean Vanier presented in the commission’s report demonstrates that mystical life is his intimate “secret”. Ecstatic tones are frequently expressed, raising questions and revealing a deviation from the Carmelite tradition which attaches so much importance to the purification of the senses. Teresa of Avila warns readers that the comparison of the sacrament of marriage to spiritual marriage is “a crude comparison”: “The difference is certainly huge. In the covenant which I am talking about, everything is spiritual and that which is corporeal is far removed from it; the consolations and spiritual aspirations that our Lord gives us are thousands of miles away from the kind of satisfactions two spouses must enjoy.”

Nevertheless Jean Vanier seemed convinced to be living a mystical union, “nuptials”, “marriage”, “spiritual marriage” with God. Jean Vanier was consistent and did not refer to any other mystical model of the Christian tradition: his only reference is indeed Carmelite, essentially Saint John of the Cross.

This acquisition seems coherent given its double filiation. Jean Vanier evoked the Carmelite roots of his father who was an assiduous reader of Saint John of Cross and Thérèse de Lisieux. His second source of Carmelite heritage was his spiritual father, Thomas Philippe. The analysis to be made by the Dominican brothers will reveal more about Thomas Philippe's teachings about St John of the Cross. It is highly likely that erroneous interpretations will shed light on some of Jean Vanier's remarks.

Over time, Jean Vanier tried to offer a mystical approach, independent of religions, focusing on encounters with the poor, which reveals us to ourselves and opens us to an encounter with God. This mystique became a new "wisdom" for the transformation of the world. This shift from a Carmelite mystic to a universal mystic is astonishing. Why keep a mystical side at all costs? The encounter with the "poor" does not need to be mystical, it just needs to be experienced deeply and in truth. In the absence of arguments and grounds, Jean Vanier's discourse proves to be elusive, disjointed and not very credible on both the rational and the theological level.

## CHAPTER 25

### A persistent affiliation to Thomas Philippe?

In almost all his prefaces, Jean Vanier expresses a word of gratitude to his "spiritual father" Thomas Philippe, with whom he said he founded L'Arche. The autobiographical account in his works is interesting in view of what the commission has brought to light. References to his spiritual father are recurrent and confirm the very deep bond that united them. In *Toute personne est une histoire sacrée*, he recounts Thomas Philippe's invitation to Trosly in 1963: "I had the impression that he knew, that he could guess all the good and the bad in me - my secret - that he loved me and accepted me the way I was. It was liberating for me. It is wonderful to be seen, to be recognized as a person who has a destiny and a mission".

In the same book, he talked about his qualities as a "strong and effective" leader, admitting he was sometimes overwhelming and hurtful towards his collaborators. He described how his expression of authority evolved, but that he had always been insecure when confronted with opposing opinions. He also recounted his great fears and anxiety. His greatest fear was of abandonment, of being betrayed, but also betraying others: "One of the greatest bereavements of life, is the bereavement of honour, the fact of being despised or seen as someone who betrayed a cause." This statement from 1994 refers to a statement reported by one of his biographers in 2015: "To deny Father Thomas would have been like committing suicide". The almost Christ-like role that Thomas Philippe and the absence of the personal call of Jesus in his stories about conversion are astonishing.

In several works, Jean Vanier appeals to mystic tradition of St John of the Cross or the Thomistic tradition in a distorted way for the benefit

of his own convictions, both to exonerate his master and to justify his own silence. His speech is so ambiguous that it is sometimes difficult to know who he is really addressing. Is there an underlying message for the small group of “initiates” apart from all other readers?

The report presents several examples of this double level of language. The possibility of deliberately ambiguous writing, addressing a wide audience but also “initiates”, appears highly probable, especially in his first publications. For example: “Jesus is not just any prophet [...] His words are important, but even more important are his person, his heart and his body. It was his body, through its intelligence alone, that radiated the perfection of divine force. It is in his body, a channel perfectly docile to grace, that he was in total receptivity to the power and love of the Father.”

This rehabilitation of the body can be understood through an anthropological perspective which counters the long-standing depreciation of the body experienced by Christians. This aspect can unfortunately also serve as a support for the “initiates” who had erotic spiritual practices. If the body is considered a privileged channel for grace, it is easy to justify many gestures between a spiritual father and the people he accompanies. “Perfect docility” was indeed required during physical touching, particularly by Thomas Philippe, according to the testimony of women accompanied and abused by him.

## CONCLUSION OF PART 7: The wheat and the chaff

**This critical analysis of Jean Vanier’s books leads us to observe that he operated on two distinct levels. Firstly, based on intimate, secret mysticism related to “spiritual marriage” with the distortions mentioned. Secondly, based on spiritual commitment to the “poor”, giving them a key role in conversion and the transformation of our relationships in society.**

The two levels meet, as if gradually unified under the term communion, communicating but never coinciding. No mysticism is shared with the “poor” despite their sacred role, representing Jesus himself. Communion with them is not mystical in the sense given by Jean Vanier, that is in nuptial union. It is essentially emotional, psychological, human.

This raises another question. Why doesn’t Jean Vanier ever discuss these people in terms of their own unique spirituality? He recognises their spiritual depth by claiming, in his usual vocabulary, that they possess a “conscience of love rather than a rational conscience”. He does not, however, explore what they could share with us about faith, Christian or otherwise. Paradoxically, a form of denial of the original spiritual existence appears here, marked by the seal of the experience of disability.

At times, the two levels –intimate spirituality and spirituality of commitment – meet. For instance, the way he envisions spiritual transmission to assistants is impacted. Jean Vanier is very attached to a filiation-oriented accompaniment, which assumes “communion” with a “model” accompanier. This bond then becomes a place of possible abuse.

His anti-intellectualism probably hampered multidisciplinary reflection at L’Arche. Although Jean Vanier gave consideration to the psy-

chological dimension, especially necessary in the accompaniment of “wounded” people, he played with confusion between the mystic and the spiritual without ever questioning it. This confusion unfortunately contributes to the process of psychological control over accompanied members.

It is strange to see the blindness of even highly competent intellectuals and theologians who never questioned the substance of Jean Vanier’s teachings. This silence may have led people to believe there was nothing wrong. This form of approval was consolidated by the bond, known to all, between Jean Vanier and many of the Church’s personalities.

Was Jean Vanier trying to pass on Thomas Philippe’s esoteric teaching in his written work? Answering this requires distinctions. On the one hand, the primary aim of his books was to inspire the vocation of living in community with “wounded” people. They valued the blessing that the *tout petits* represent and question, understandably, the way we live in society and in the Church. On the other hand, the most visible elements of Thomas Philippe’s teachings in Jean Vanier’s works concern anthropology, “the consciousness of love” of the very young, the importance of touch, of tenderness in the relationship between parents and infants. These elements are omnipresent in Jean Vanier’s books and are indeed inherited from Thomas Philippe, though rarely referenced as such. Yet, this anthropological core is essential to the doctrine in which body and sexuality are involved in a mysticism centred on nuptial union. This is precisely where Jean Vanier most clearly shows a form of allegiance and a will to pass on this fake mysticism. His conception of the covenant and communion as a nuptial ritual, minimising people’s individuality, is proof of this.

Although heir to Thomas Philippe’s thinking, Jean Vanier invented his own spiritual path, mixed with psychology, creating a form of universal mysticism that included the perspective of a nuptial communion. It is therefore reasonable to say that he inherited a way of thinking and living in communion favourable to spiritual and sexual abuse, especially in accompaniments, rather than a structured religious education faithful to Thomas Philippe. Jean Vanier did not consider himself to be an intellectual or a theologian: his texts lack the precision necessary for us to define the mystical doctrine that constantly flows through them, deforming and falsifying the tradition of Carmelite mysticism.

Finally, it is difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff in each of Jean Vanier’s books. They demonstrate the human complexity of this founding figure whose harmful dimension cannot be denied.

The theological view of the commission’s report invites us to look to the future by further exploring the original and enriching experience of L’Arche communities. This can take many directions: continuing to build the spirituality lived within L’Arche based on the experience of living together with people with disabilities; fostering the cross-disciplinary development of this experience by embracing all dimensions of vulnerable people; envisaging a cross-analysis of knowledge between assistants, people with disabilities and intellectuals on themes that concern all members of L’Arche communities.

## **General conclusion**

The file is heavy. The diagnosis may seem harsh. It is now not without support.

After more than two years of investigation, the commission was able to analyse the mechanisms deployed by Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier: influence, sexual abuse, collective delirium, deviation of notions at the heart of Christianity, incestuous representations of the relationship between Jesus and Mary...

From 1950 to 2019, the incredible persistence of a perverse core through the decades raises questions. The sanctions adopted by the Church in 1956 did not produce the expected effects. A culture of secrecy and lies explains the truncated and recomposed accounts of the story of L'Eau vive and the founding of L'Arche. The support of a recognized and well-off family and high level social network contributed to manipulating the Catholic hierarchy. The insufficiencies of communication between the various authorities of the Church are obvious, although it is necessary to recognize the difficulty for any institution to keep the memory and maintain a great vigilance over such a long period. Nevertheless, the non-disclosure of the exact causes of the condemnation of Thomas Philippe by the Holy Office is precisely what allows him to maintain his reputation for holiness and to rewrite history as he pleased. Finally, the rapid development of L'Arche and, consequently, of Jean Vanier's notoriety, constitutes a last essential explanatory factor.

Contrary to what the accounts of the founding of L'Arche say, there is no "revelation" defining the founding moment. The primary intention, which from December 1963, pushed Jean Vanier and the former members of L'Eau Vive to plan to settle in Trosly-Breuil, was to gather around Thomas Philippe, whose release they had been waiting for since

1956. The “mystico-sexual” beliefs they received from him are the cement that pushes them to refound a work. If the choice to turn to people with disabilities appears in this perspective as a “screen” for this reunion, it coexists from the start with a sincere intention to devote oneself to people with disabilities. The “providential” opportunity that presents itself thanks to Dr. Préaut, is consistent with the orientation of «les tout petits» towards the “poor par excellence”, who would be preserved from intellectual pride by their deficient reason. By welcoming, from August 1964, people with mental disabilities, they are confronted with a radically new otherness: that of these people, whose support requires the acquisition of professional skills; that also of the public authorities which finance their reception, and which therefore impose legal frameworks and exercise a right of control.

The elements of the founding story must be placed in the context of this confrontation. Jean Vanier says he heard, like a call, “the primal cry of people with disabilities”. Coming first to join Thomas Philippe, he enters, with the foundation of L’Arche, in an unexpected dynamic, and embarks on a path of which he did not suspect the fruitfulness.

The report of the commission attests that Jean Vanier reproduces with many women the mystical-sexual relations such as Thomas Philippe conceived them. Without necessarily declaring themselves all victims, the women who testified underline the confusion between the spiritual, affective and sexual planes, which characterized the relationship. The analysis of the writings of Jean Vanier indicates the presence of strong continuities with the “theology” of Thomas Philippe. How to understand that ?

If the original sectarian nucleus indeed formed a microsystem at the heart of L’Arche, in the light of the facts of abuse identified by the commission, it does not seem to have developed. The rapid development of the communities and the arrival of numerous people with different profiles and motivations, to which are added the elements mentioned above (control of the public authorities, presence of outside professionals) explain the limited diffusion of the sectarian core and its exhaustion within L’Arche.

However, the results of the survey call for vigilance. If, in the state of its knowledge, the commission observes that none of the people

that Jean Vanier “initiated” (abused) reproduced in turn these mystical-sexual practices, configurations of influence “at the imitation of Jean Vanier”, particularly in his mode of exercising authority, may have existed and perhaps still exist in L’Arche.

The last abusive relationships known to the commission date back to the mid-2000s, and since 2014 a process of individual and collective awareness has been developing within L’Arche. The mandate given to this commission to establish these facts is a striking sign of this. However, the commission urges caution, as one knows that the process of speaking out can be slow for victims. This is why if the commission worked with the desire to try to understand the mechanisms at work, it did so even more with the conviction that their exposure in full light is the indispensable condition for their extinction.

