

Jean Vanier Talk at Donor Dinner
St John the Compassionate, 17 June 2008
Notes

This is holy ground ... where God resides ... people with needs come here. Jesus said: when you give a meal, don't invite family, friends—invite the poor. Don't remain in the clan where we tend to flatter each other; don't close up in a clan – open up ... to those who are pushed aside – then you will be blessed (Luke 14). At the table, we meet each other.

You help people find jobs, get work, and that's good. But there's something deeper needed in the human heart: community, family. St John's Mission is creating community: to appreciate one another, to love one another. It's not just doing things for people, but to reveal to them that they are special, they are beautiful – because the marginalized have become lonely. Our society is a competitive society. We want to be the best, strong, powerful, efficient. In a culture of competition, some win, many lose, many more are victims. A culture of competition becomes quickly a culture of depression—that's what we're becoming—a culture of depression, and a culture of anguish. People feel lonely, unwanted, pushed aside; and loneliness gives rise to anguish, to the sense that I'm nobody, I'm no good, nobody can care for me—an inner pain, a throbbing pain. This quickly becomes either a place of violence or a place where people need the experience of forgetting, which leads to drugs.

St John's is a place where people gradually come out from loneliness. But it's not easy. The anguish of loneliness gives rise to violence, to suicide, to drugs. It's too awful, so they go into another world. Sometimes to help this, people move out of the drugs, they go back to loneliness and back to drugs again.

This is the vision of St John the Compassionate. Compassion isn't just doing things for people, it's revealing to people: You're beautiful, you're a child of God, you have value. Their anger isn't just against society—our competitive society—but the greatest pain is when people become angry with themselves, and begin to hate themselves. This is one of the greatest pains.

How to move from a society of competition to a society of welcome? Is it possible? People accepted as they are? At the heart of the Mission is a deep belief that every person is important. Gangs—a complex question—when you're very lonely you can get into a gang, it gives security, it gives a being with others.

We're in a complex world. The belief here at the Mission is the belief that each one is important, whatever their situation. A community can't take in everybody but it can become a sign, a sign that in this broken city there's a place

where people believe that love is possible. Love, not just as an effective reality. For example, there was a leader of the L'Arche community, who was formerly caught up in prostitution. In Sydney, she was walking in the park, and she took in her arms a man who was dying of overdoses. His last words were: "You've always wanted to change me. You've never accepted me as I am." Of course we want to help people change, but first they have to discover something—that somebody loves me, that I'm precious. Compassion isn't first of all doing, changing, though we must do what we can for people. First of all it's the way we look at them, accept them, listen to their story, accept them in their extreme brokenness, and as they discover they are someone, maybe they can begin to change—as we reveal, You're important.

I see many similarities between St John's and the communities of L'Arche. We have the privilege of welcoming people, people like Patrick, people who weren't able to go to school or find jobs, a lot of pain—in a world of competition, based on the value of winning, people are pushed aside—not having value. It was the pain of people like that. The important thing for Patrick is to know that he's loved—not because he's working in the bakery—you discover that you're precious and then you start doing things.

Jeannine came to our community at 40. She had epilepsy, and hemiplegia (one leg and one arm paralyzed). She quickly manifested much violence, not hitting people but violent in words, breaking things. In our community, if somebody's violent you should try to stop them; but the essential thing is to try to understand, to help people to verbalize. Jeannie listens to people at St John's, so they can tell their story, tell their anger, without people telling them what to do, but so they can hear: I understand. Jeannine was angry with her own body; angry because when her mother died she was "placed," "put" in our community, she hadn't chosen it; angry with God because she couldn't have children of her own. It's important to say "I understand - I'd be angry too" - it's normal to be angry, to be violent. Can we do something about this? How can we help? This can take many years, there's too much pain, it takes time. Jeannine was able to choose another home and that was important to her. Many people with disabilities have been told what to do but not asked their desires. She knew she was being listened to. She didn't like working in our workshops, she worked but it didn't give her life. Singing gave her life, and she loved to dance. As she sang and danced she began to discover she was someone, she had a place. Later, her anger came back: her legs couldn't support her body any longer, and she needed a wheelchair. Becoming dependent made her angry. That's normal. Let's talk about it. Losing her independence made her angry, but then she discovered that as you get weaker you're obliged to say, "I need you." That's the

heart of community—that's where community is being born, that's where church is being born, that's where peace is being born. We need each other. When we say "I need you," that helps the other person to find love, to leave the clan, to open up, to discover we can give life to each other.

There are lots of similarities between L'Arche and St John's. We want to love each other. We need help. As people are called forth to give help, they give life too. I've been in my community now 44 years, I take all my meals there.

The greatest desire of a human being is peace. The greatest fear of humans is war, conflict. I lived through the war of '39-'45. Two things happened: the discovery of Auschwitz, and Hiroshima/Nagasaki. Today so many people live in situations of conflict, 40 million are refugees. Peace can only come as we start coming out of our ghettos. I was once in Serbia, in the north where there are Hungarians, with a Faith and Light community, in a village that was half Serbian Orthodox and half Hungarian Catholic. I realized the Serbian Orthodox had their schools, their churches, their banks, their groceries; and the Hungarian Catholics had their schools, their churches, their banks, their groceries. I said: "Do you meet each other?" Is that peace? They're not speaking. Yet you're my brother, my sister. We are all of this incredibly beautiful human race. Peace is not the absence of war. Peace is breaking through the barriers that separate groups. Peace is meeting. Tell me your story. I'll tell you about mine. Your vision doesn't put min in danger. We belong to the same human race.

The community of St John's is a model, a sign, a sign of peace, in a world where many are locked up in their own little gang. As petrol moves out, we begin to realize we're part of a human family; the prices are rising because we're all interconnected.

I rejoice that Fr Roberto invited me here, that I could be with you, to see this community of peace, loving each other, giving 2,500 meals a month as your questionnaire says. And I thank you for being. In our communities, we're terribly fragile. A community like this is fragile. As soon as we're just people, we're fragile. Our communities aren't made of cement, they're made of human, beautiful hearts, that have been broken and are on the way to healing.

Jean Vanier