

L'Arche's values of accompaniment, vulnerability, and mutuality are bigger than Jean Vanier

Such values have shadow sides. They are also desperately needed in the world.

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E.S.A.T. L'Arche d'Aigrefoin à Saint-Rémy-lès-Chevreuse (© Nicolas DUPREY/ CD 78 via Creative Commons license)

When Jean Vanier died last May, tributes poured in. He was praised (including in these pages) for the vision that inspired more than 150 L'Arche communities—each built around “core members” with intellectual disabilities—and in turn the wider church and world.

But an investigation into Vanier, initiated by L'Arche International before he died, was recently made public (see [news story](#)). Six women, including former L'Arche community members (not core members), allege that Vanier sexually abused them. Their stories are notably similar, and the inquiry found no reason to doubt them. It also revealed that when Thomas Philippe, Vanier's mentor, was sanctioned by the Vatican in 1956, Vanier knew that one reason was Philippe's own abuse of

women—yet he cleared a path for Philippe’s involvement with L’Arche anyway. For decades, Vanier used his status at L’Arche to harm others.

He also appears to have weaponized his own influential ideas. L’Arche values spiritual accompaniment: community members are expected to accompany others, and be accompanied themselves, in relationships emphasizing mutuality that transcends status. Several women report that Vanier initiated sexual contact within an accompaniment context. “I was frozen,” one reported. “I was unable to distinguish what was right and what was wrong. . . . He told me that this was part of the accompaniment.”

Another L’Arche hallmark is the embrace of vulnerability, that of core members and others alike. Vanier’s accusers described their own vulnerability at the time in question. “I was very upset and very vulnerable,” said one; Vanier’s response was to tell her to come see him late at night.

Values like these can be twisted; they have shadow sides. Within a communal context, accompaniment relationships can be fraught with problems of power. Vulnerability and mutuality can eclipse individual dignity instead of nurturing it. Add the patriarchal theology of the priest Vanier saw as his “spiritual father”—Philippe reportedly once silenced a victim’s protests by calling himself an instrument of God—and the danger comes into focus.

Yet mutuality, vulnerability, and accompaniment are also genuinely, desperately needed in the world—no less now than before these allegations. Such values are bigger than Vanier, and they continue to shape L’Arche communities and their witness for the better.

L’Arche is centered around people with far less power than its founder had.

It took courage for these women to report the harm caused by Vanier, given his status and the threat a reckoning might pose to L’Arche’s work. L’Arche International’s response has been largely impressive as well. The investigation its leaders launched last year was truly independent, and when it came back with damning evidence, they took that evidence seriously. They have unequivocally condemned Vanier’s actions, and they are working to improve existing accountability systems. Like the women who came forward, L’Arche International’s leaders know that their work has never been about Vanier.

L'Arche communities around the world know this too. They embody it. They aren't centered on a spiritual celebrity once thought to be a lock for canonization. They are centered on some of society's most vulnerable members, whose presence brings life to all involved.

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