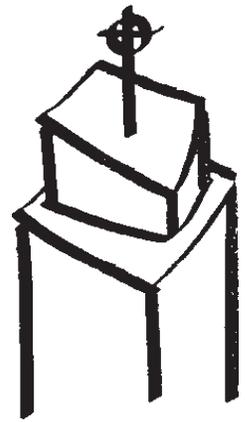


OUR FAMILY



NEWS



For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

Summer, 2019

A Community of Love

Over the last eighteen months I have become a backyard birdwatcher. Inspired by friends who have wonderful stories and pictures of the birds that visit their many feeders, last spring I hung what is both a regular and a hummingbird feeder from the eave that overlooks my patio. It is clearly visible from my kitchen table, so I prepared to observe the parade of visitors as I drank my morning coffee. At first, the only ones who knew there was a new eating spot in town were sparrows and cowbirds, neither a particularly flashy breed.

Nevertheless, I persisted, adding a second feeder and being more intentional about keeping them stocked. Eventually, the word got out to other species, especially during the extreme cold of last winter. As I filled the feeders and scattered large handfuls of seed on top of the snow, I began noticing an increasing variety of diners. Four pairs of cardinals became regular visitors, as did a pair of red-bellied woodpeckers and some juncos. With the spring came finches, doves, and a warbler who stays only long enough to grab a snack. The “regulars” form a kind of community. The sparrows come early in the morning, but the cardinals prefer the afternoon, and the doves the early evening. Oh, yes, they squabble and, quite literally, “get into a flap” about who can perch where, but in the main they all seem to have their needs met.



As I watched “my birds” this spring, I was reading some of the works of the late Jean Vanier who died in May of this year. Primarily known for his establishment of L’Arche communities throughout the world, Vanier is also a gifted spiritual writer who has thought deeply about what it means to be truly human and to live in community as a fully human person. I began to see some connections between my growth in appreciation for the birds and Vanier’s work and writing.

Perhaps a little about Vanier’s background is appropriate to begin. Born in Switzerland in 1928, Jean was the fourth of the five children of Georges and Pauline Vanier, devout French-Canadian Catholics. His father was a decorated hero of World War I who became a diplomat, serving in Europe until 1940, when he

moved his young family back to Canada, away from the approaching Nazi troops. In 1941, at age thirteen, Jean asked his father for permission to join the Royal Naval College in England. He was commissioned as an officer and served in both the Royal Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy during World War II.

Vanier had two defining experiences early in his life.* In 1945, he and his mother were part of a group who welcomed former prisoners of Nazi concentration camps at a railway station in Paris. The sight of those men and women, “their faces tortured with fear and anguish,” caused him to decide to devote his life to peace, though he had no idea what path he would take. After leaving the navy, Vanier earned a doctorate in philosophy and went back to Canada to teach at St. Michael’s College in Toronto. While on holiday in France during the Christmas break in 1953, Vanier went with a Dominican friend and mentor to an institution where developmentally disabled adults lived locked away in harsh conditions, many abandoned by their families. This experience was to determine Vanier’s life’s work.

He bought some property outside Paris and invited two developmentally disabled men to live with him in a community of love. This was the start of what would become L’Arche—The Ark—which now has 149 communities in 35 countries around the world. The disabled residents of L’Arche live side by side with associates, often young people, who come to be part of the community. “L’Arche is not a utopia,” Vanier said in an interview, “it is a hope.” He went on to explain that they attempt to “create a place where we reveal that we love each other.” He calls their way of life “the way of the heart.” Although tasks must be done and decisions must be made, the “way of the heart” is never primarily about solving problems or being efficient. Rather, it is about entering into true relationships with others. This creates a world of shared weakness, celebration, presence and laughter.



A key term for Vanier is "tenderness." We communicate this tenderness not so much through what we say but through looks and gestures, smiles and gentle touching. Indeed, Vanier defines tenderness as the ability to listen to another without judging, to see another without judging, to touch another without judging. Through this we help the other person to discover his or her own beauty, uniqueness and inner light—the meaning of his or her life. Through love a new hope is communicated to that person and, thus, a desire to live and grow. Vanier believes that Jesus’ desire to communicate this loving tenderness to his disciples prompted him to wash their feet at the Last Supper. He knew from his own experience (Luke 7:37-38, John 12:3) the relationship of tenderness that this gesture created.

He did not wash the feet of a group but of each man individually, no doubt looking at him with love, touching him with love, indicating to him that he was beautiful, unique and beloved.

Vanier notes that our society often values the powerful and strong. We divide people into groups based on our own prejudices and feelings of superiority, and out of our own fears. We fear weakness and vulnerability. The poor and the disabled cannot hide their weaknesses, and so we tend to shy away from them. But one of the most important steps to becoming fully human is to recognize and accept our own weaknesses. We must learn to celebrate ourselves and every other person, with all their weaknesses, as sources of joy and life. We must learn to use our words and actions to say to each member of our community, “You are beautiful. You are loved.” And we must learn to say those same

words to ourselves. Vanier notes that Jesus, who was himself poor and vulnerable, is most at home with the poor and is hidden in weak and fragile people. When we discover and accept our own weakness and poverty, we discover Jesus hidden within us.

Vanier admits that “to love is not easy” and living together in community is difficult for human beings. He knows that complex relationships require work. Each community is different. Each one is made up of a group of people who are, themselves, each a mixture of good and bad, who are struggling, hoping, growing. His writings contain many examples from his experience of the struggles involved in living in community, the difficulty in finding the beauty in others and in ourselves. He makes it clear that prayer, both communal and individual, is essential to living a life of true communion with others.

Prayer, Vanier notes, usually requires our stepping back from the realities of daily life. It is a chance to move out of ourselves and to see not just from our own perspective but from the perspective of the vision we seek together, the life we strive to live. Prayer entered into in solitude offers an opportunity “to dwell in Jesus and to let Jesus dwell in me.” In prayer we can open ourselves to the Eternal Love, admit our weakness and frailty and ask to be filled with the Spirit of love and justice and peace. Prayer is not an added luxury but an absolute necessity if we are to bring about the transformation of the world through the transformation of our own small piece of that world, through our attempt to live in communities of love.

Though Vanier’s communities are quite different in nature and membership from those of St. Benedict, I believe there is a key similarity. Early in the *Rule*, St. Benedict tells his monks, “Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way; the love of Christ must come before all else” (4:20-21). He expands on this with some details. Monks are “not to act in anger or nurse a grudge” and “never give a hollow greeting of peace or turn away when someone needs your love” (*RB* 4:22-23.25-26). Toward the end of the *Rule*, Benedict describes the good zeal that leads to everlasting life. Monks must “support with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior.... No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead what he judges better for someone else” (*RB* 72:5.7). These foundational principles of Benedict’s “school for the Lord’s service” are clearly the same as those of Vanier’s “community of the heart.”

As I try to follow the *Rule* “insofar as my state in life permits,” and to apply both Benedict’s and Vanier’s ideas to my life in the communities of my family, work, neighborhood and parish, I draw new inspiration from my bird community. Some members cry out for attention like the baby sparrows who hopped around my patio, chirping loudly, trying to get their mother to put the seed she was chewing into their mouths and not that of their siblings. Some are outwardly attractive, like the male cardinals whose bright red always catches my eye. Others are small and dull by the world’s standards, like the female finches whose presence I could easily miss if I weren’t paying attention. Each is unique and beautiful and loved. After all, Jesus did tell us, “Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s knowledge” (Mt 10:29).

---Kathy Martin

* As this is not intended to be a scholarly article, I will not include individual footnotes. Everything used comes from Vanier’s works, including *Becoming Human*, *We Need Each Other*, and Carolyn Whitney-Brown’s *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings*. The interview referenced can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HzIwhLiZ1i8>

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We welcome your submissions to this publication, either instructive or reflective, whether prose or poetry. They should in some way relate to the **Rule of Benedict**, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS

Meetings are held in the abbey church
from 1:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2019

Sunday, October 6, 2019

Sunday, November 10
(Oblate Day)

Passage for *Lectio* at the September Meeting

God created us—because He thought we'd
enjoy it.

Leo Rock, S.J.

The annual oblate picnic is set for

Sunday, July 21,
from 12:00 Noon to 3:00 P.M.,

in the shelter across from the academy.

Please bring a dish to pass and your own
table service and beverage.

Feel free to bring a lawn chair, a deck of
cards, or anything else that you think
might be enjoyable for yourself
or for the group.



Abbey Prayer Schedule

Visitors are welcome to join the monks for Mass and for the hours of the Divine Office. Conventual Mass is celebrated on the first level of the abbey church, the hours of the Divine Office on the second level. The monks' schedule is as follows.

5:45 A.M. Morning Prayer*
7:45 A.M. Conventual Mass**
12:00 Noon Midday Prayer
5:30 P.M. Evening Prayer***
* on Sunday, 7:00 A.M.
** on Sunday, 10:00 A.M.
*** on Saturday & Sunday, 5:00 P.M.

