

Jean Vanier. *Our Journey Home: Rediscovering a Common Humanity Beyond Our Differences*.  
Maggie Parham, translator. New York: Orbis Books, 1997, 251 pp.  
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Jean Vanier was born in 1928. In 1964 he began a community ministry to persons with developmental disabilities by inviting two men, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, to come live with him. Thus was the founding of L'Arche (The Ark), now with 103 communities in countries throughout the world. Since 1981, Vanier has spent much of his time traveling, counseling and encouraging others, supporting new L'Arche communities, and giving lectures and retreats.

*Our Journey Home* weaves together Vanier's personal story and the story of L'Arche with inspiring if sometimes heartbreaking anecdotes, as well as giving some of the philosophy behind his ideas of caring for the weakest and most marginalized in society. Some of this material should be of special interest to the Christian counselor or social worker. While Vanier clearly comes from a more liberal Catholic tradition, his simple faith and selfless dedication in the service of the weakest among us infuses and drives his account in *Our Journey Home*.

Many of the lonely individuals cared for in L'Arche communities have come out of institutions and psychiatric wards, often after years of neglect. Since the 1970's in America, the "half-way house" ceased to be mandated and funded by State and Federal agencies; as a result our city streets are filled with the mentally and physically disabled, weak and broken people with nowhere to go, no community to care for them and help them find simple human dignity and meaning to their lives; the more violent end up stored away in prison wards and mental hospitals.

From the *Charter of the Communities of L'Arche* we read: "These communities, called into being by God, are united by the same vision and the same spirit of welcome, of sharing and simplicity.... The aim of L'Arche is to create communities which welcome people with a mental handicap. By this means, L'Arche seeks to respond to the distress of those who are too often rejected, and to give them a valid place in society." Realistically, L'Arche knows that it cannot *change the world* and be there for every disabled person in every country on earth, but, through perseverance and commitment in its over one hundred communities, "it seeks to offer not a solution but a sign, a sign that a society, to be truly human, must be founded on welcome and respect for the weak and the downtrodden" (website, <http://www.larchecanada.org/charter.html>). Interestingly, from 1986 until his death in 1996, Christian author and profound spiritual guide Henri Nouwen has been a part of the L'Arche Daybreak community in Canada.

Vanier sees that we are all weak in one way or another, our self-reliance, independence, power over others and the world ultimately a lonely illusion. By caring for the weak and needy around us, by making them a part of our lives, we are reminded we all need caring community, what Vanier calls "true communion" with others, being vulnerable, open and honest, humble and serving one another. "True communion is a gift of the heart to help another to be as fully alive and free as possible. It is a pouring out of self for another" (p. 42). Vanier's is an idealistic vision, and can be approached from a purely secular or socialist ideology, but because of Vanier and others like him, it is also a concrete and peculiarly Christian reality in little places around the globe, small lights in a dark world showing forth what it is to live out Kingdom values.

"Humanity today is at a cross-roads," writes Vanier. "Technology enables us to do everything, except to bring people together in love and thus make our world a happier and more loving place. Technology alone brings material progress. It gives power. It takes us some way towards conquering the moon and stars. Is it not now time to come back down to earth, to rediscover the beauty of our earth, of humanity, of each one of us? Then we can reach out together to the weak and the poor, using all that is good and humane in technology, so that our hearts and intelligence can be transformed through compassion...one heart at a time" (p. 250).

Admittedly, *Our Journey Home* is not of the literary or theological quality of the works of a Henri Nouwen, Reinhold Niebuhr or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Nonetheless Vanier's book is a humble, delightfully-written spiritual account of service to the poor and needy that would make a wonderful companion to such recent studies as Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline and Freedom of Simplicity*, Tom Sines' *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy*, or Ron Sider's *One-sided Christianity*. *Our Journey Home* is an inspiring and practical journal on living and working out the Christian faith in the day-by-day.