

## The Foot-Washing in John 13:1-20, in the context of *L'Arche*

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**Abstract:** *This paper is a theological reflection on a practice that expresses the spirituality of Jean Vanier and L'Arche. The focus is a project with members of L'Arche designed to elicit the meaning of the foot-washing as it is actually celebrated in L'Arche communities. Central to this study of the foot-washing in John is Vanier's text, Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John.<sup>1</sup> The situation in L'Arche acknowledges the rules of different churches and the consequent exclusion of some people from the Eucharist so it is against this background the foot-washing stands out as a sign of unity.*

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**Key Words:** Vanier; *L'Arche*; Eucharist; Foot washing; John's gospel; community; disability.

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**I**n August, 1964 Jean Vanier welcomed Raphael, Philippe and Dany into a small house in a village north of Paris. With this action Vanier established the first of now one hundred and forty *L'Arche* communities around the world. People with an intellectual disability are at the heart of *L'Arche* communities and are named the core members. There are assistants who come to support people with a disability, living together with the core members to create a home. While Vanier is a Catholic, *L'Arche* communities are ecumenical in membership and sometimes multi-faith. One consequence of ecumenical membership is that members are divided at the Eucharistic table as different churches have their own rules regarding the reception of the Eucharist.<sup>2</sup> In *L'Arche* communities members fully share a fellowship in foot-washing rituals that are celebrated in the *L'Arche* houses or at ecumenical and or inter-religious retreats. Vanier emphasises the relationships and communion created in the ritual action of foot-washing. He writes "at special moments in *L'Arche* and in Faith and Light<sup>3</sup>, we wash each other's feet as an expression of our love."<sup>4</sup>

This paper draws on Jean Vanier's commentary, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, to introduce a research project that gathered information about people's experiences and responses to the place of the foot-washing in the *L'Arche* community. According to Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery* is the culmination of "many years

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus Through the Gospel of John* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Thérèse Vanier, *One Bread One Body* (Ottawa: Gracewing and Novilis, 1997), 60.

<sup>3</sup> Faith and Light is a cross-denominational Christian charitable association built to help those with learning disabilities and their friends and family by meeting together for friendship, prayer, celebration and sharing.

<sup>4</sup> Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus*, 230.

of reflection, study, prayer and living in community.”<sup>5</sup> He refers to it as “meditative prose.”<sup>6</sup> Chapter 17 of *Drawn into the Mystery* is a commentary on John 13 and provides important background for an understanding of the foot-washing in the context of *L’Arche*.

In Vanier’s commentary, his reflection on John 13 is given the subtitle *Jesus and vulnerability*.<sup>7</sup> Vanier writes that Jesus’ hour has come and he will love totally and unconditionally.<sup>8</sup> In laying aside his garments Jesus is acting in accord with the “Father’s will and in the mode of his Father’s giving” (Jn 13:3-4).<sup>9</sup> Loosening the straps of the sandals, removing them and washing the feet was the work of a slave. Foot-washing was a way of welcoming one’s guests, however it was often performed by the guests themselves (the host would offer water for the purpose) or by servants at the behest of the host.<sup>10</sup> The service of foot-washing is thus linked with the idea of foot-washing as welcome and hospitality.

The prologue of John’s Gospel shows a descending God, the Word enfleshed entering humanity (Jn 1:14), and now in the foot-washing Jesus descends to his knees.<sup>11</sup> Jesus pours water into a basin and begins to wash the disciples’ feet (Jn 13:5). Vanier proposes this gesture of washing another’s feet creates and expresses a “communion of hearts.”<sup>12</sup> Jesus has personal contact with each disciple as he washes his feet individually, this being an intense moment of communion expressed through the body (Jn 13:5). Vanier continues, naming the washing of the feet as a way to follow Jesus’ example, celebrating together an intense communion with one’s brothers and sisters, and with God.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE FOOT-WASHING IN L’ARCHE

Commenting on a “domestic liturgy” in *L’Arche* Jean Vanier’s sister, Thérèse Vanier, reminds her readers that, in *L’Arche*, the deepest bonds between community members lie in their shared vulnerable common humanity.<sup>14</sup> *L’Arche* community members belonging to different Christian traditions realise that the rules of their different churches regarding Eucharist are irreconcilable.<sup>15</sup> Where community members can fully share and participate, however, is in the washing of the feet.<sup>16</sup> *L’Arche* attempts to maintain a unity through the diversity of beliefs of the many persons represented there. Christine McGrievy, the Vice Co-ordinator of the Federation of *L’Arche*, notes the evolution of discourse within *L’Arche*’s history: from Catholicism to ecumenism, to interfaith, and now possibly to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Kelly and Francis Moloney, *Experiencing God in the Gospel of John* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 275.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Mullins, *The Gospel of John* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2003), 280.

<sup>11</sup> Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, 225.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 231-233.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman God Made Them* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007), 177.

<sup>14</sup> Vanier, *One Bread, One Body*, 56-58.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 56.

pluralism.<sup>17</sup> Jean Vanier explains that, through ecumenical and inter-religious retreats, *L'Arche* is beginning to discover and live the ecumenical and inter-religious dimensions of the foot-washing as a sign of unity.<sup>18</sup>

In *L'Arche* the washing of one another's feet is celebrated infrequently in a formal liturgical way. Thérèse Vanier comments, however, that its significance "is celebrated daily in the realities and messiness of community life – a life that often contains all the components of division and disharmony that were also present at the Last Supper."<sup>19</sup> Disharmony is evident in John's Gospel where the betrayal of Jesus by Judas has an "overshadowing presence" (Jn 13:2, 11, 18).<sup>20</sup> In the messiness of the day, as Jean Vanier observes, leaders can be fearful of conflict in relationships in the community. Jesus washing the feet of Judas, sets an example, says Vanier, for leaders to be inclusive of those who disagree or are a source of conflict.<sup>21</sup>

### PETER'S REFUSAL

Peter's character, as depicted in the synoptic gospels, is impetuous (Mk 8:32).<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, in the foot-washing, there is an episode of resistance when Jesus comes to wash Peter's feet. Peter vehemently rejects this reality of service presented through the foot-washing.<sup>23</sup> Vanier suggests that Peter's refusal is linked to his understanding of the hierarchy of importance,<sup>24</sup> and reveals the great distance that exists between the gospel message and human attitudes.

We all have in our heads the model of a pyramid,  
where authority has power and is on top.  
Don't we all seek to become friends  
with the important people on top,  
not with those on the bottom? <sup>25</sup>

Vanier writes that it is easy to understand Peter's response, Peter "needs Jesus above him, not below him. Jesus gives him security."<sup>26</sup> Peter has experienced the power and authority of Jesus, so his views reflect the model of the pyramid, with those who govern and guide at the top. Yet in this action, as Vanier points out "Jesus takes the place of the one at the bottom, the last place."<sup>27</sup> Jesus responds to Peter, saying that if he will not allow his feet to be washed, "you have no share with me" (Jn 13:8). Jesus' strong words to Peter suggest that failure to participate will put Peter outside a functional relationship

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<sup>17</sup> Christine McGrievy, "Everything about life: a conversation with Christine McGrievy," in "A Community of Faith," ed. Tina Bovermann, themed issue, *Letters of L'Arche*, no. 122 (September 2007): 21.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Vanier *The Scandal of Service: Jesus Washes our Feet* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1998), 11.

<sup>19</sup> Vanier, *One Bread, One Body*, 56.

<sup>20</sup> MacRae, "Invitation to John," 382.

<sup>21</sup> Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus*, 234.

<sup>22</sup> Mark A. Matson, *John* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002) 86.

<sup>23</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 191.

<sup>24</sup> Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, 226.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 228. (The formatting here and later reflects that in the original)

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

with Jesus.<sup>28</sup> Jean Vanier suggests that Jesus wants to enter a new relationship with Peter, inviting Peter to discover that he is called to love others, just as Jesus loves him.<sup>29</sup>

Vanier interprets Jesus gesture as enacting a “totally new vision”<sup>30</sup> transforming the model of society (and Church) from a hierarchical pyramid to an inclusive body. In this gesture of the foot-washing, Vanier reflects that the example of Jesus “calls his followers to be attentive to the least in society.”<sup>31</sup> When Jesus calls us to wash one another’s feet (Jn 13:14), says Vanier, he is calling us to love, serve and forgive each other.<sup>32</sup> He proposes that “the washing of the feet is not a new ritual that we can follow or not or that we should accomplish at certain moments” rather it is an essential part of Jesus’ message of love, the revelation that in order to enter into the kingdom we need to become like little children. Vanier reflects that only through the Spirit of God can we understand and live this message of littleness and service to others.<sup>33</sup>

#### BUILDING COMMUNION IN THE CONTEXT OF L’ARCHE: JEAN AND ERIC

Jean Vanier writes how he became more aware of the importance of the gesture of the foot-washing when he met Eric, a profoundly disabled man.<sup>34</sup>

We had met him at the local psychiatric hospital.  
When he arrived he was a young lad of sixteen:  
he was blind, deaf and could not walk or speak.  
He was not toilet trained.  
I have never seen so much anguish in a young person as I saw in Eric.<sup>35</sup>

Jean was trying to listen deeply to Eric. Vanier discovered that building communion with Eric was through the communication of touch, when Eric’s body was washed with respect and love at his bath times.<sup>36</sup> Though Eric could neither see nor hear, “we were able to communicate and reveal to him that he was precious.”<sup>37</sup>

In the synoptic accounts of the Last Supper, says Vanier, when Jesus breaks bread and passes the cup, the gift of his body and blood “is a moment of intense communion through his body. To *receive* communion is to be *in* communion with Jesus.”<sup>38</sup> Vanier recalls that though John’s gospel does not include the institution of the Eucharist, the washing of the feet takes place at the same event. Vanier sees a deep link between these two realities, identifying the washing of the feet, too, as an intense moment of communion

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<sup>28</sup> Matson, *John*, 86.

<sup>29</sup> Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery*, 227.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

through the body.<sup>39</sup> Through assisting Eric at his bath time Jean has a “share” (Jn 13:6-9) in building communion with him.<sup>40</sup>

Eric’s nonconventional body is a window into the broken body of Jesus in the poor.<sup>41</sup> Jean “encountered the broken body of Jesus” through a communion with Eric that subverts the image of an able-bodied God only.<sup>42</sup> As Nancy Eiesland puts it, the risen Christ with “impaired hands, feet and side, to be touched by frightened friends alters the taboo of physical avoidance of disability”, calling Christians to identify their relationship “at the point of Christ’s physical impairment.”<sup>43</sup> “This disabled God does not engage in a battle for dominance or create a new normative power, God is in the present social-symbolic order, at the margins with people with disabilities, and instigates transformation from this de-centered position.”<sup>44</sup> Eric and Jean’s encounter is a representation of a mutuality of relationships in *L’Arche*.<sup>45</sup>

### FRIENDSHIP IN SERVICE

The account of Jean washing Eric’s feet is a poignant iconic expression of a spirituality central to *L’Arche*. Jean, then, is advocating a Johannine perspective, through a spirituality of friendship with Eric, communicated through touch. Jean Vanier addresses the friendship and relationship contained in the washing of the feet reflecting on the words John uses when Jesus “laid down his garments” and “took them up again.”<sup>46</sup> These same words “laid down” and “take up” are the words Jesus also uses in John 10:11, 15, 17, when he talks about laying down his life and taking it up again.<sup>47</sup> Sandra Schneiders further illumines Jesus’ act of service in laying down his life, symbolised in the laying down of his garments. From a Johannine perspective Jesus’ self-gift was not the master’s redemption of unworthy slaves but an act of friendship: “No longer do I call you servants you I have called friends” (Jn 15:15).<sup>48</sup> The fundamental notion of service here is one based on friendship, which Schneiders notes is the one human relationship based on equality, seeking for the good of the other where one’s own good is achieved.<sup>49</sup>

Through *L’Arche* people are brought into what might be called a world of simple relationships and simple presence.<sup>50</sup> At Eric’s bath times, Eric and Jean forged a deep friendship through non-verbal means, through each other’s attitude, eyes and gestures.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>40</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 21-22.

<sup>41</sup> Kathryn Spink, *The Miracle, The Message, The Story: Jean Vanier and L’Arche* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2006), 155.

<sup>42</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>45</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>48</sup> Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, 194.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 193-194.

<sup>50</sup> Karen E. Smith, *Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 72.

<sup>51</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 5.

Jean acknowledges that people who are fragile need the help of those who are stronger and, as *L'Arche* is discovering, people who are stronger need those who are more fragile in order to help them discover their humanity.<sup>52</sup>

Vanier believes that people so limited physically and intellectually are more gifted when it comes to “things of the heart and relationships”, they have a special openness and trust in others.<sup>53</sup> When the cup of suffering is shared in a communion recognising the cruciform presence of Jesus, both the fragile and the strong are touching on the symbolism John portrayed when Jesus laid down his garments. They are choosing a way of life together where they strive to be friends, whether that is at table or at bathing time and, in this, dying a little to themselves, so the other can have a little more life.

### CRUCIFORM EXISTENCE OF JESUS

Kelly and Moloney write that to the degree believers enter into the real meaning of Jesus' gesture, they are conformed to the self-giving, cruciform existence of the one they have accepted as Lord and teacher.<sup>54</sup> Vanier's reflections suggest that through the broken body of Eric Jean sees the cruciform existence of Jesus. Eric responds to Jean's tenderness and brings Jean home to what was broken in himself.<sup>55</sup> The communities of *L'Arche* endeavour to respect the cruciform existence of Jesus found in weakness, something that many people would see as complete folly. Vanier writes “The message of Jesus is clear: stay close to people, especially those who are lonely, weak and in need, become their friend, their brother, their sister.”<sup>56</sup> The foot-washing represents for Vanier a gesture that creates and expresses a communion of hearts.

### THE PARALITURGY OF THE FOOT-WASHING AS CELEBRATED IN TWO L'ARCHE COMMUNITIES

To illustrate a dimension of the spirituality of Jean Vanier and *L'Arche* a research project, undertaken to investigate the meaning of the foot-washing paraliturgy as it is actually celebrated in two *L'Arche* communities is now outlined. The aim of the research was to gather information about people's experiences and responses to the place of the foot-washing in the *L'Arche* community.<sup>57</sup>

The method for the collection of data was for the researcher to ask questions in a group context. The researcher met with core members, assistants, and a person holding responsibility in two communities.<sup>58</sup> The questions listed were identified as being of particular importance in both communities; they concern memory, importance and meaning:

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<sup>52</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Jean Vanier, *Our Journey Home: Rediscovering a common humanity beyond our Differences* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), x.

<sup>54</sup> Kelly and Moloney, *Experiencing God*, 276-277.

<sup>55</sup> Vanier, *Our Journey Home*, XI.

<sup>56</sup> Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus*, 238.

<sup>57</sup> This research was undertaken with an ethics clearance from the Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee, Register Number: N200708 72.

<sup>58</sup> This person holding responsibility could have been the assistant.

1. Can you remember a time in your community when you came together for the foot-washing?
2. Why do you think the foot-washing is important for your community?
3. What does it mean to have the foot-washing as part of the spiritual life at L'Arche?

Reference is given to key points in these questions in data analysis and discussion below. Each person and community was de-identified. These discussions were audio-taped. After the discussion an invitation was offered to the participants to express their thoughts on the foot-washing through their art. For the analysis of the data an "open coding" method was employed. After reflecting on "possible meanings" and scrutinizing the context carefully the researcher identified themes and patterns and then was able to place "interpretive conceptual labels on the data."<sup>59</sup> A pseudonym was given to each participant and the communities became community X and Z.

The concept of the narrative form has been referred to as "a universal form of human sense making."<sup>60</sup> Some community members conveyed their experience of the foot-washing through story. Some key points from the study of the foot-washing were selected to provide a framework for analysis and discussion.

1. Vanier's reflection on John's Gospel highlights the importance of the experience of foot-washing to *L'Arche* communities. The rules of different churches and the consequent exclusion of some people from the Eucharist means the foot-washing stands out as a sign of unity.
2. The foot-washing is associated with a blessing received from God.
3. The foot-washing in *L'Arche* can express a communion of hearts.
4. Moment of communion through the body.
5. Celebrating *together* as an important aspect of *L'Arche*.

#### FOOT-WASHING AS A SIGN OF UNITY

As we have already noted, John's gospel account of the Last Supper does not speak of the institution of the Eucharist but the washing of the feet. The importance of the foot-washing in *L'Arche* and its connection to John's Gospel was introduced by Luke, an assistant in community X.

The most important time for me is Easter ... There's always been a reading from John's Gospel, there's been an explanation of what it means, an invitation into that liturgy ... We serve each other by washing each other's feet tenderly. [Luke X: A]

Community X has welcomed the foot-washing in the community as a way of expressing service to each other. Through the paraliturgy, the community appears to be better able to understand the story of the incarnate Son of God as they let the truth of the foot-washing change their lives.

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<sup>59</sup> Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3rd. ed. (Thousand Oaks California: Sage, 2008), 160.

<sup>60</sup> Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou eds. *Doing Narrative Research* (London: Sage, 2008), 154.

Laurence, an assistant in community Z, referred to the importance of this when he said:

Jesus in foot-washing was setting an example how we should live...Put yourselves in a humbling position ... by being lower than another person and washing their feet which was regarded as a slave's job. [Laurence Z: A]

Jenny, also an assistant in Z community, took this further when she noted:

When the core members wash the feet of the assistant there is the reversal of roles...the core member is of service to the assistant. This is a very moving experience. [Jenny Z: A]

Jacob, an assistant from X community, reflected as follows:

My feet were washed gently and tenderly ... by [a core member]. It is a strong memory like a blessing and marked something for me in my own faith ... Time stood still ... it is close to me. [Jacob X: A]

Laurence, Jenny and Jacob, all assistants, each in his or her own way, illumine the importance of the paraliturgy of the foot-washing. As reported by community members the foot-washing in *L'Arche* can evoke a paradigmatic shift in expected role-functioning and a moment of stillness experienced as blessing.

The *practice* of the foot-washing in *L'Arche* is an inclusive celebration. Beth, an assistant, explained this with reference to the significance of coming together for the celebration of this paraliturgy.

At a large gathering of *L'Arche* we are having the washing of the feet. There will be persons of different cultures, different religions and different faith beliefs. It doesn't matter it's the action that we do. [Beth Z: A]<sup>61</sup>

Jenny used this term "unity" in elaborating on the inclusive gathering that Beth had spoken of.

It becomes almost like a Eucharist: the foot-washing has a unity aspect of Eucharist even if it doesn't have other aspects of the Eucharist. [Jenny Z: A]

Persons in *L'Arche* often cannot share in the Eucharistic celebration but they can share in the foot-washing paraliturgy. Beth recalled how a visitor had been affected by the spiritual life of the community within the context of the foot-washing experience.

The washing of the feet has become so much a part of *L'Arche*. At prayer gatherings there [can be] a witness beyond the *L'Arche* community. The visitor was welcomed by a core person into the prayer space. [Beth Z: A]

After the foot-washing at the prayer gathering the visitor reflected to Beth: "I'll come here any day, this is where it is really sacred, that was so profound." [Beth X: A]

This incident relays the importance of the witness of the paraliturgy of the foot-washing in the spiritual life of *L'Arche*. Through her narrative, Beth expresses the dynamic

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<sup>61</sup> When words are underlined this indicates that the participant gave emphasis to these words.

of welcoming invitation and inclusivity that is witnessed by the action of foot washing in *L'Arche* communities.

#### IN THE FOOT-WASHING A BLESSING IS RECEIVED

The second point draws attention to Vanier's reflection that when persons wash each other's feet and serve each other in humility, a blessing is received from God. He writes:

The Greek word for "blessed" implies being "blessed by God."  
 It also implies an abundance of joy, a beatitude,  
 a participation in the joy of God.  
 If we choose to take the last place,  
 if we wash each other's feet and humbly serve one another,  
 we receive a blessing from God.  
 We are close to God and live in God presence.  
 We become like God and, our hearts overflowing with love,  
 we transmit the love of God.<sup>62</sup>

Clare, a core member, spoke about the important experience for her after the foot-washing.

After someone washes my feet Jesus is closer to me because in *L'Arche* washing each others' feet they get a blessing and that draws Jesus and God closer to me. [Clare Z: C]

Clare explained an important addition to this paraliturgy in *L'Arche*. Clare knelt while Beth placed her hands gently on her head and prayed for her. While there was limited verbal explanation, the spirituality of this ritual action was expressed silently in the group through gesture. This moment seemed a pause in time that evoked in the group a collective silent response. In a given situation the person who has had their feet washed then prays for the person who has washed their feet. It was deeply moving and challenging, illustrating a "commitment to the relational 'us,' to mutuality" through prayer in this paraliturgy. The ritual action is a celebration *with* each other.

In this way *L'Arche* as a group of people seeks to reflect Jesus who "had reached down to the depth of God, at the feet of the poorest and lowliest and lost, because it is in this place that he meets us and calls us to discipleship."<sup>63</sup>

#### THE FOOT-WASHING IN L'ARCHE CAN EXPRESS A COMMUNION OF HEARTS

The third point considers how the gesture of the foot-washing can express a "communion of hearts."<sup>64</sup> This communion of hearts in the spiritual life of *L'Arche* when the communities came together for the paraliturgy of the foot-washing is highlighted by Luke an assistant in community X.

There was a pilgrim walk of 280 people ... It had been a long, hot and emotional day ... We went into sharing groups. There was a basin, jug and towel. Without saying anything we entered into the ritual of washing each other's feet. In the silence we

<sup>62</sup> Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus*, 239.

<sup>63</sup> Eileen Glass, "Washing of the Feet", Keynote Address, *General Assembly of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities*, Kolkata, India, October 10, 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus*, 231-233.

washed each other's feet and there was a beautiful moment when a group somewhere started to sing *Ubi Caritas* ... That was a spontaneous moment. We didn't need to hear the story so much ... we knew that in our heart, we'd been pondering it that day and knew at the end of the day we would have the cool water on our feet, yeah we'd be fed in that way, body and spirit. [Luke X: A]

In this context the foot-washing was somewhat different for Luke, as in silence the persons entered the ritual. The words of the foot-washing story, known so well, became silently treasured words.

As Luke had referred to the silence in the foot-washing, Sarah, a core member, chose to be silent during the group situation. Sarah, however, expressed through art an important moment for herself in this paraliturgy. She explained her art by voluntarily showing a photograph of one of her parents washing her feet. This was crucial to better understanding Sarah's artwork. The photograph was very striking. From the photograph the parent, like Sarah appeared totally immersed in the moment and, in a deep respect for Sarah, the parent entered into the foot-washing. The moment seemed suspended in time and appeared as a memory that would be honoured by both persons.

In her drawing Sarah chose to draw her own foot. Her parent's hand extended to Sarah's foot, signifying the washing of her feet. Sarah drew herself with hands extended that seems to show her openness. Both persons are smiling and there is strong eye contact between them. The photograph and Sarah's drawing that is based on it, seemed to reflect a deep communion created between Sarah and her parent. It appears that the drawing refers directly to the photograph emphasising its importance.



## MOMENT OF COMMUNION THROUGH THE BODY

The third point reflects on the importance of the communication of touch.<sup>65</sup> This aspect was illumined by Martha, a core member from community X, when she spoke of an important memory of the foot-washing.

When someone washes my feet it feels like mother ... tender feeling. [Martha X: C]

Martha seemed to be offering an insight into the communion of mother and baby, through the experience of the foot-washing. The relationship between a mother and her child is a recurring theme throughout much of Vanier's work, the closeness communicated through touch that has its origins in the mother-child relationship.<sup>66</sup>

## CELEBRATING TOGETHER AS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF L'ARCHE

The final point addresses the importance of celebrating with each other.<sup>67</sup> This statement was supported by Jim, a core member from Z community.

I really enjoy it, it's a community thing we all do together. [Jim Z: C]

Jim's experience echoes Pat Felt's story. She spent 30 years living in institutions, and she writes about both "the hard and the good parts of living in *L'Arche*." One of the good parts for Pat is the importance of celebrating as part of the community life at *L'Arche* Syracuse.<sup>68</sup> By insisting on the inclusion of all persons in celebrations, however, *L'Arche* attempts to promote true friendships, where the other is another self, and each is of service to the other.<sup>69</sup>

Vanier writes that the central focus of *L'Arche* is "people first", this being the recognition that each person is unique and sacred.<sup>70</sup> When the least significant is excluded, there is no longer anything to celebrate, for a celebration must always be a festival *with* the poor, not for the poor.<sup>71</sup>

To summarise, there have been rich insights into the foot-washing in *L'Arche* given by the project participants. Luke reflected on the foot-washing as service, this being an entry point into how *L'Arche* communities have embraced John's Gospel as their own.<sup>72</sup> Beyond this Beth spoke of how it crosses established church and societal boundaries. This paraliturgy is ecumenical, inter-cultural and interfaith in the context of *L'Arche*. It is a unifying action. One could say that this paraliturgy can be a witness to persons beyond *L'Arche*, a counter-cultural expression, as exemplified by the visitor whose only previous experience of the foot-washing had been in the formal church setting. For Martha the foot

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>66</sup> Spink, *The Miracle, The Message, The Story*, 50-51.

<sup>67</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, rev. ed. (Homebush NSW: St. Paul's Publications, 1989), 319.

<sup>68</sup> Pat Felt with Pam Walker, "My Life in L'Arche." In *Women with Intellectual Disabilities: Finding a Place in the World*, eds. Rannveig Traustadottir and Kelley Johnson, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd., 2000), 217-224.

<sup>69</sup> Schneiders, *Written that you may Believe*, 194.

<sup>70</sup> Jean Vanier, "Each Person is ...", in "People First," ed., Tina Boverman, themed issue, *Letters of L'Arche*, no. 119, September (2006): 28.

<sup>71</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 319.

<sup>72</sup> This being in respect to the foot-washing.

washing event evoked the memory of a communion between mother and child, while for Jim the importance was of participating in the ritual *together*. This *togetherness* was reflected in the stilled moment between Beth and Clare. Sarah's artwork has the last word. Sarah has courageously told her story that seems to reflect her readiness to explore her relationship with her parent through a vulnerable moment that inevitably epitomised an intimate moment of communion.

The drawing, while a unique personal story of one woman's experience of this paraliturgy in *L'Arche*, could represent the many possible interpersonal stories to be told. The foot-washing as a central dimension of spirituality for *L'Arche* is embedded in encountering the other. To recall Vanier's words, "at special moments in *L'Arche* and in Faith and Light, we wash each other's feet as an expression of our love."<sup>73</sup> Community members, in the reality of their daily life, look to reciprocal friendships, being of service to one another, celebrating together and honouring the cruciform existence of Jesus in each other.

Vanier facilitated a day of spirituality and the washing of the feet paraliturgy for The World Council of Churches.<sup>74</sup> Vanier notes a particularly poignant moment at the 1998 WCC gathering when an Orthodox bishop knelt down and washed the feet of a female American Baptist minister. Reflecting on this event, Vanier remarks that "gestures sometimes speak louder and more lastingly than words."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus*, 230.

<sup>74</sup> The WCC is a fellowship of churches, now 300, in more than 100 countries in all continents from virtually all Christian traditions. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member church but works cooperatively with the WCC.

<sup>75</sup> No Author, "WCC Press Release: "Washing of the Feet at the World Council of Churches" in "L'Arche all over the world," ed. Bertrand Figarol, themed issue, *Letters of L'Arche*, no. 97 (1998): 7.