

Media Release by L'Arche Australia 31st January 2023

Findings from an independent Study Commission, requested by L'Arche International have been released on 30th January 2023. The Commission was tasked to further investigate findings reported in 2020, of abusive behaviour by Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche.

Background

The results of an independent Study Commission, composed of specialists from different disciplines: historian, sociologist, psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and theologian, were released in a report on 30th January 2023.

The Commission followed results of an inquiry carried out in 2019 that exposed the actions of the founder of L'Arche, Jean Vanier, and of his mentor, Thomas Philippe. Results of the Report published in 2020 detailed sexual abuse of adult women without disability, by Jean Vanier that were in total contradiction with L'Arche values, incompatible with the fundamental rules of respect and integrity of all individuals, and contrary to the foundational principles of our communities.

Following those findings, L'Arche International commissioned this report from the Study Commission with the aim of:

- understanding the history of L'Arche and learning from it,
- understanding the reasons that made possible these abuses in L'Arche
- giving back to the victims some elements of understanding about the deviations they were exposed to.

Report findings

The 900 page report was released on January 30, 2023. L'Arche Australia will need time to carefully read through all the study findings, which required two years of research, and to understand what lessons can be learned for the future.

In summary the report confirms and adds to what L'Arche International made public in 2020:

- Jean Vanier followed the theories of the Dominican priest Father Thomas Philippe, his spiritual mentor, from the early 1950's.
- This relationship to Thomas Philippe, his doctrines and the practices related to it formed a critical element of Jean Vanier's personality.
- This relationship, dating back to Jean's youth, indicates that the origins of the abusive relationships that Jean Vanier initiated with women are found in the erotic-mystical theories of Thomas Philippe.
- 25 single, married or consecrated adult **women without disabilities** have been identified as having experienced situations involving sexual acts or intimate gestures at some point in their relationship with Jean Vanier between 1952 and 2019.
- Some women presented themselves as victims of an abusive relationship, others as consenting partners in a transgressive relationship. Several of these women are now deceased. In their diversity, these relationships, sometimes concurrent, are all part of a continuum of confusion, control, and abuse.

- The Commission notes that the number of such women is likely to be higher.

The foundation of L'Arche

The report relates in detail the circumstances in which L'Arche was founded in France in 1964 and points to the existence of a sectarian core around Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier. This core formed a microsystem at the inception of L'Arche but did not spread beyond a very small circle of people in the sectarian group that formed a nucleus whose cases are studied in detail in the report. Within L'Arche there was no proliferation of these abuses stemming from this sectarian core.

The report details the community dynamics that developed in L'Arche were dissociated from those of this nucleus group, because from the outset many people joined L'Arche and contributed to its development without any knowledge of the existence of this group and without any participation in it. Furthermore, since its inception L'Arche has been affiliated with national medical and social services, and subjected to regulatory frameworks and external controls. These guided L'Arche in a direction incompatible with the deployment of the sectarian aberrations.

The findings from this study support L'Arche in distinguishing between the time of the foundation in France – where the reality was profoundly different from the common narrative - and the founding experience of L'Arche communities across the world, which is constantly under renewal in these communities.

People with Disabilities

There is no indication either in the Commission's work, or in the interviews with people with disabilities led by a psychologist, that Jean Vanier initiated abusive relationships with any of them. No indication that people with disabilities may have been exposed to such abuse was found in any of the independent investigations.

What L'Arche personnel knew

The Study Commission did not identify any persons, members or officials of L'Arche (apart from those associated to the nucleus group), who were sufficiently informed to be accused of deliberately covering up these facts. However, the report notes that several people knew that Jean Vanier had intimate relationships with certain women, but without knowledge or understanding of the context of these relationships and without any idea of their supposedly spiritual justification.

Reparation

As a sign of recognition of its responsibility for the abuses committed by Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier, L'Arche International has joined the "Commission Reconnaissance et Réparation" (CRR) set up in France by the Catholic Church. This commission has been authorised to receive requests for reparation for abuses committed by clerics or by lay people. This strategy allows those who desire

to, who were victims of Thomas Philippe or Jean Vanier in France or abroad, to engage in a restorative process of justice when civil justice is not possible.

Safeguarding

L'Arche International committed in 2020, to undertake a thorough federation-wide evaluation and redesign of safeguarding measures for people with and without disabilities. This was undertaken with the establishment of a reference framework, finalized and validated in 2022 across the Federation. A full audit will be held worldwide in 2023. In Australia, L'Arche Communities follow Safeguarding policies, procedures and practices that are compliant with the Practice Standards set by the NDIS Commission, and independently audited on a two-yearly basis.

Once again, L'Arche Australia wishes to be clear in condemning without reservation, the actions of the founder of L'Arche, Jean Vanier, and of his mentor Thomas Philippe. They are in total contradiction with L'Arche values, incompatible with the fundamental rules of respect and integrity of all individuals, and contrary to the foundational principles of our communities.

L'Arche renews its apologies offered in 2020 and sincerely asks for forgiveness for the suffering that these situations caused. We reiterate our gratitude to those who, a few years ago, broke the silence about abusive behaviour of Thomas Philippe, and later about Jean Vanier. This helped others to free themselves from an intolerable burden.

The future:

L'Arche communities and members have been learning how to integrate these realities in the telling of their stories since 2020. Though the report describes an origin stained by the existence of this sectarian core, it also emphasizes that L'Arche was not fundamentally defined by this origin. This is an essential acknowledgement.

What justifies L'Arche is not its founder, but the life of its members, with and without disabilities, at the service of a more human society. The task of re-reading our past, will help us remain faithful to this commitment.

The Study Commission report can be accessed here <https://commissiondetude-jeanvanier.org/commissiondetudeindependante2023-empriseetabus/index.php/en/home-english/>

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