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# Questions about the governance of the *Federation of l'Arche* after the publication of the report on Jean Vanier

Benoît PIGÉ © 20 février 2023

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On January 30, 2023, the independent Commission mandated by the Federation of l'Arche on Jean Vanier (1928-2019) and his relationship with the Dominican Thomas Philippe (1905-1993) issued its report<sup>2</sup>. The reactions of the major media outlets converge in condemning Jean Vanier, but for the most part they limit themselves to repeating certain words and themes that were presented in the press release. The central point that seems to be emphasized is the phenomenon of a cult. Jean Vanier is said to have created or participated in a "secret society" which, according to Stephan Posner (the current leader of l'Arche International), did not last beyond his death. This "mystical sect" is said to have originated in the theology of a rogue Dominican (Thomas Philippe), who based his theology on Mary's incest with Jesus (interview with Stephan Posner by Philippine de Saint-Pierre on KTO: 5'50<sup>3</sup>; report p.778-779 written by Gwennola Rimbaut)<sup>4</sup>.

The phenomena of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church have come to light on a massive scale in recent years, both in the United States<sup>5</sup> and in Europe, particularly in France<sup>6</sup>. However, in the unleashing of one revelation after another, it is inevitable that accusations sometimes slip in that merit further examination. The issue of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church involves some very complex phenomena, including the victim's feelings (which after being concealed for decades, are now recognized), the nature of the acts committed (ranging from rape to masturbation, sometimes involving caressing or kissing), and the context of the abuse (e.g., in France, the society of the 1960's was not the same as the society of the 2000's).

Regarding the Jean Vanier affair, the main elements highlighted by the media have been: an independent Commission made up of experts, facts that seem to be incomprehensible, and a mystical sect. The subject appears to have been covered in its entirety, and all the more so as it is based on a so-called "900-page" report. However, a reading of the report, as well as the statements made by the International Leader of the Federation of L'Arche (Stephen Posner), show that the principal focus is on understanding what led to the "deviations" of Jean Vanier, rather than on what might possibly be the subsequent propagation of abusive practices and behaviors in the l'Arche communities.

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<sup>1</sup> This document is the English translation of the French document: <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04063806/document> : Benoît Pigé. Questions sur la gouvernance de l'Arche après la publication du rapport sur Jean Vanier. 2023. halshs-04063806

<sup>2</sup><https://commissiondetude-jeanvanier.org/commissiondetudeindependante2023-empriseetabus/index.php/en/home-english/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4YDcDQrryk>

<sup>4</sup> *Translator's note*: All such "facts" cited in this article, concerning Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier, are based upon the reports issued by l'Arche International, and interviews with Stephen Posner et al. As will be seen later, especially in section 2.2, the author will examine and question the demonstrability of many of these facts.

<sup>5</sup> To see especially The Grand Jury Report of The State of Pennsylvania : *40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury* (2018), report 1, Interim – Redacted, in the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

<sup>6</sup> Reference may be made to the proceedings of the colloquium held in Strasbourg. April 4-5, 2019: Aulenbacher C. and Pigé B. (2020), *Violence dans l'Église, violence par l'Église, violence sous les yeux de l'Église*, Lit Verlag.

The purpose of this article is, through a critical reading of the Commission's report on Jean Vanier, to examine possible questions of governance that concern the l'Arche communities and its International Federation.

## 1 The objectives of the Independent Commission

According to Stephan Posner (the International Leader of the Federation of l'Arche), the establishment of the independent Commission had three main aims (5'50 interview Radio Notre Dame)<sup>7</sup>:

- *To understand Jean Vanier's trajectory*<sup>8</sup>
- *To understand the context of the founding of l'Arche*
- *To study the institutional dynamics within l'Arche, and in particular the nature of the relationship between l'Arche as an organization and Jean Vanier as its founder*

### 1.1 Understanding Jean Vanier's trajectory

It is really only this first point that is developed in depth by the report. It begins with the fact that between 1946 and 1952, Dominican Thomas Philippe set up and ran a center called *l'Eau Vive* [translated into English, "The Living Water"]. He was surrounded by a group of women<sup>9</sup>. The report (chapters 1 and 2) hypothesizes that this Dominican had sexual relations with many other women, and that Jean Vanier simply continued these practices. In September of 1950, Jean Vanier arrived at *l'Eau Vive* and became the spiritual son of Thomas Philippe - and later his successor when the latter had to cease his functions following the canonical inquiry of 1951-1956. Jean Vanier himself recognized this relationship of spiritual sonship to Thomas Philippe and acknowledged his close ties with the women who surrounded Thomas Philippe during the *l'Eau Vive* period.

The central question is therefore: did Jean Vanier's membership in the small group of Thomas Philippe's followers have consequences in terms of abuse? This is the initial presupposition, strongly affirmed by the content of the press release issued by the Federation of l'Arche on January 30, 2023, and reprinted by *Le Monde* and *AFP (Agence France-Presse)*:

*"Twenty-five adult women, single, married or consecrated, but not disabled, were thus identified as having experienced, at some point in their relationship with Jean Vanier, a situation involving a sexual act or an intimate gesture between 1952 and 2019. Some presented themselves as victims of an abusive relationship, others as consenting partners in a transgressive relationship. Many of these women are now deceased."*

No list of the twenty-five abused women is provided in the report (nor any information that would enable us to precisely identify the characteristics of each sexual abuse, such as age of the victim, period of abuse, nature of the abuse). We note here the importance of the period covered - 1952 to 2019 - but also the vagueness of the notion of abuse, which is defined in the report as *"having experienced a situation of spiritual accompaniment involving a sexual act or an intimate gesture (such as kissing on the mouth or caresses to the body)"* (p.508<sup>10</sup>).

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAVIGWb1Zy4>

<sup>8</sup> (*Translator's note*: the French word here is "*trajectoire*", which can be translated as "trajectory" or "path", presumably referring to that of his life and work as the founder of l'Arche.)

<sup>9</sup> According to the l'Arche report, Thomas Philippe had a child with one of them, a child that was supposedly aborted in 1947.

<sup>10</sup> References of pages in this document refer to the pages of the English report of l'Arche.

Moreover, the number of twenty-five women said to have been abused includes those who were consenting to these acts. It is the authors of the report and the international leader of l'Arche who describe certain women mentioned in letters as victims of sexual abuse and others of transgressive relationships<sup>11</sup> on the part of Jean Vanier: “*When we talk about victims, you mentioned these twenty-five women, and you could have specified that some of them do indeed present themselves as victims and others rather as consenting partners in a so-called transgressive relationship; but I'd rather address all these women without distinction, since the report clearly underlines that all these relationships in all their diversity do indeed form part of a continuum of confusion, control and abuse (...) to all these women [I would] acknowledge this very painful experience, whatever the way in which they situate themselves in relation to it. And thus I would say 'sorry'*” (Stephan Posner in his interview on RCF: 1'50)<sup>12</sup>.

The complex nature of this notion of abuse seems to be confirmed by the fact that *only one person has filed a complaint with the “Commission Reconnaissance et Réparations”*<sup>13</sup> (Stephan Posner in his interview on Radio Notre Dame 12')<sup>14</sup>, and no one had filed a criminal complaint for sexual abuse during Jean Vanier's lifetime. The report clearly states that Jean Vanier did not rape anyone. Our interviews and consultations of numerous archives have never been able to demonstrate the existence of any physical violence on the part of Jean Vanier. If there was any sexual abuse, it was consensual.

Some of the report's assertions are very strong indeed: “*J. Vanier continued the sexual behavior of the “tout petits” [= “very little ones”] group of which he had become an active participant. According to currently available testimonies, this sexual behavior only concerned adult women. He seduced them during spiritual guidance sessions, indulging in oral and manual sex without penetration*” (p.652 of the report). Unfortunately, no data is provided to substantiate these assertions.

Finally, various accusations of sexual abuse are made against Marie-Dominique Philippe<sup>15</sup>, Thomas Philippe, Gilbert Adam<sup>16</sup> and Jean Vanier, without it being known by name who is making these accusations<sup>17</sup> (except for those presented by Rome in 1956). You can read the passages on p.586-590 and form your own opinion on the selected extracts presented to you (facts are asserted without precise justification, and we move from one period to another without transition: 1957 to the early 1990's as if the characters were unchanging, while the authors of the accusations remain anonymous); take for example the anonymous testimony #104 of Céline and Joseph<sup>18</sup>, dated December 1, 2021. You have to read and reread this testimony (p.588) to try to understand the alleged facts: in the early 1990s, Joseph's wife Céline was sexually abused by Thomas Philippe at *La Ferme*<sup>19</sup> (the latter was over 85 years old at the time, born in 1905 and deceased in 1993). Joseph complained to Marie-Dominique Philippe and then to Jean Vanier, both of whom allegedly covered up Thomas Philippe's wrongdoing.

<sup>11</sup> The notion of transgression refers to norms. What are the norms that allowed the authors of the report to consider a relationship to be transgressive or not when it concerns a layman?

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCtxHqC-9ZI>

<sup>13</sup> In English: the « Recognition and Reparation Commission » <https://www.reconnaissancereparation.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAVIGWb1Zy4>

<sup>15</sup> Yet not directly related to the subject of the report

<sup>16</sup> Although Father Gilbert Adam is denounced quite violently in the report, from the judicial point of view he has been implicated only once and the case was dismissed: <http://arche-oise-news.e-monsite.com/blog/evenements/plainte-pour-agression-sexuelle-contre-le-petre-de-la-communaute-de-trosly-breuil.html>

<sup>17</sup> See, in particular, interview 53 with Elodie: fragments scattered in chapter 16.

<sup>18</sup> It is assumed that these are not the real names.

<sup>19</sup> *La Ferme* (=“The Farm”) was - and continues to be in some sense - a center of prayer and hospitality, founded by Thomas Philippe, at the heart of the l'Arche community in Trosly-Breuil, France. [*translator's note.*]

Let's assume that a married woman has been sexually abused by an 85 year-old man. What is the nature of this abuse, and what weight should be given to vague, incoherent testimony with no possible challenge from the accused (who are dead), given thirty years after the fact, anonymously, without knowing who received or recorded this testimony? The same content is repeated with testimony #53 (Elodie, anonymous, interview of May 4, 2021; she had supposedly had an interview on March 31, 2021 under n°49), which is woven together with Pauline's written testimony (anonymous) given in 2014 (p.546). And so we move from one victim to another, from one abuser to another, without any transition, as if everything were of the same order.

Finally, the only accuser whose testimony against Jean Vanier is presented at some length is Judy Farquharson (p.713-716). We learn that she was 22 years old, an Anglican who converted to Catholicism, but we don't know the period involved or even the nature of the sexual abuse. The salient points are: *“The relationship became more physical during her second internship at l’Arche. One day, he offered her a sari: ‘My mother made a sari for you.’ This made her feel ‘special’, chosen”* (p.713). Nothing else is indicated about the nature of the sexual abuse (*“Strangely, he told her to visit him at 10:00pm and made her do similar things”*, p.714. Similar to what? The report doesn't say anything in this regard).

What is described to us (by Nicole Jeammet, psychoanalyst) are Judy's thoughts on what she would have experienced mixed with the memory of mystical remarks Jean Vanier would have made to her. Bearing in mind that this story was told after 2016 (the date of the first denunciation against Jean Vanier) and that the report against Thomas Philippe dates from 2015, this anonymous testimony should necessarily cause us to take a step back to consider it more closely. Especially as Nicole Jeammet not only transcribes some of Judy's words, but also puts herself in her shoes to understand the nature of the abuse:

*“That is where she met J. Vanier, the ‘holy man’ who motivated her with his explanations about love. She was incapable of defending herself when, as her spiritual guide, he ‘chose’ her (how incredibly fortunate she was!), using affectionate-erotic gestures which he justified with spiritual arguments based on Jesus and Mary. She was trapped at every level”* (p.753). What are these affectionate-erotic gestures, did they actually take place, and if so, when? One can only wonder about this instrumentalization of prosecution witnesses to justify a thesis assumed *a priori* to be correct.

The thesis of sexual abuse committed by Jean Vanier is therefore not based on the 2023 report, but on the previous 2020 report: In June 2019, L'Arche International entrusted an investigation to GCPS, *“a UK-based organization whose mission is to help institutions to improve their safeguarding standards”*<sup>20</sup>. GCPS is a consulting firm<sup>21</sup> founded by Paul Nolan<sup>22</sup>. At the time, four people were listed on the firm's staff, including the founder, as confirmed by the l’Arche report: *“Director Paul Nolan, and Senior Associate Ester Dross, who conducted this work”*<sup>23</sup>. What we have here, then, is not a major auditing firm with tried and tested, standardized procedures, but a consulting firm that survives on the assignments it receives from various organizations to detect personal abuse. Nothing is available on the Internet about this firm's turnover or the auditing standards it uses. In addition, the management of l’Arche International asked Antoine Mourges<sup>24</sup> (a

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.larche.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Chronology-EN\\_01.2023.pdf](https://www.larche.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Chronology-EN_01.2023.pdf), p.6

<sup>21</sup> <https://gcps.consulting/> Retrieved 2020.

<sup>22</sup> There is very little information available on the Internet about this person.

<sup>23</sup> Summary Report l’Arche International, p.3:

[https://www.larche.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/10181/2539004/Inquiry-Summary\\_Report-Final-2020\\_02\\_22-EN.pdf](https://www.larche.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/10181/2539004/Inquiry-Summary_Report-Final-2020_02_22-EN.pdf), p.3.



PhD student) to write a report on the relationship between Jean Vanier and Father Thomas Philippe. This report formed the basis of the Commission's work on the 2023 report.

The accusations made against Jean Vanier are therefore based on two sources: facts collected by GCPS and an interpretation provided by a student of contemporary history. The conclusion of the facts is worth reproducing:

*“Any conclusions of an administrative review of this kind are based on a ‘balance of probabilities’ and not ‘beyond any doubt’ standard of proof. Considering the available evidence, the inquiry team reached determinations based on whether events and allegations presented to it are “more likely than not” to have occurred. The inquiry did not seek to establish whether or not any of the alleged incidents or events might represent possible criminal breaches and took no view on this.”*<sup>25</sup>

In ordinary language, this means that the investigators have no certainty about what they are asserting. But what are the alleged facts: that between 1970 and 2005, Jean Vanier engaged in "sexual behavior" with women, without it being known whether these were actually sexual relations? *“This finding is also supported by documentary and testimonial evidence that establishes Jean Vanier knew about and also displayed the same sexually inappropriate behavior demonstrated by Father Thomas Philippe”*<sup>26</sup>. However, the assumption that "it is now established" is based on the interpretations of a student of history, with no evidence to support these interpretations.

The purpose of the 2023 report was therefore to transform a student's suppositions into certainty. In fact, it took the members of the Commission nine hundred pages to give the appearance of proof to a thesis that remains highly debatable. It is curious that Antoine Mourges did not choose this subject for his thesis (which is still in progress), even though he seems to have had all the necessary information<sup>27</sup>.

## **1.2 Understanding the context of the founding of l'Arche**

For the authors of the report, the background for the founding of l'Arche in 1966 was the continuation of the "mystical sect" initially created with *l'Eau Vive*. The Dominican Thomas Philippe is said to have succeeded in recreating a cultic network around himself in Trosly, including Jean Vanier and the women who accompanied him between 1946 and 1952. The introduction to Part 2 by the Commission's two historians is rather curious, since it is an exegesis of a passage from Genesis (9:21-25) used to justify their reading of the creation of l'Arche. In addition, a complementary figure appears here, the Dominican Marie-Dominique Philippe (brother of Thomas Philippe). Since the latter had been recognized as guilty of sexual abuse within the Community of Saint John, of which he was the founder, and Thomas Philippe had himself been condemned by a canonical inquiry in 1956, it seems natural to the two historians that this guilt should extend to the whole family (brothers, sister and uncle) and to a spiritual son (Jean Vanier), who appear to have been sexual perverts and psychically ill:

*“It is legitimate in their case to use the word ‘sect’ not to describe the whole of l'Eau Vive or the whole of l'Arche, but to apply it to the nucleus of men and women who secretly preserve a continuity and share specific traits (a special theology, a deviation within Catholicism, wayward practices, privileged and private revelations supposedly revealing a new divine mystery, sexual*

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Mourges is the author of a first-year master's thesis (not accessible on the Internet) which is cited in the L'Arche International letter of 24 March 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Summary Report L'Arche International, p.4.

<sup>26</sup> Summary Report L'Arche International, p.5.

<sup>27</sup> Did his research supervisor consider that the content of the 1<sup>st</sup> year master's thesis was insufficient?

practices). Historically speaking, the use of the word 'sect' is attested in the victims' testimonies and taken back again in the analyses of the Holy Office. A woman who was a victim thus writes to Paul Philippe of the Holy Office, in February 1956: 'These are not new facts that I want to signal, but what I rather want to say is that the founding seems to me to have had the very structure of a sect.' " (p.199-200).

If *l'Eau Vive* is considered as a sect, gradually dissolved from 1952 onwards, then, for the authors of the report, it is obvious that l'Arche has simply reproduced the conditions of this sect. Here we have a two-fold assertion: that *l'Eau Vive* was a sect and the conclusion that, in finding the same actors ten years later, their purpose was necessarily to re-form a sect. By extracting and reinterpreting Jean Vanier's writings, the authors believe they have made their point.

However, there is a major element missing from this demonstration, and that is the fruits of this so-called cultic community work. The report acknowledges that all those involved in what they describe as a cult have invested their time, energy, and the financial resources at their disposal. In other words, no personal enrichment, but a single presumption of sexual abuse (which deserves to be seriously re-examined with witnesses coming forward). The report's entire presentation seems to indicate that the fruits of l'Arche happened despite the sexual abuse committed by members of the sect.

Knowing that Jean Vanier did indeed have a very tactile relationship with others (on most of the videos available for viewing, he can be seen taking people's hands in his<sup>28</sup>), it is surprising that only one person lodged a complaint three years before his death and another at the time of his death. On the other hand, there are numerous testimonials from people who felt saved or healed by Jean Vanier. Curiously, none of these testimonies appear [in the report] since those who might profess them are considered to be under Jean Vanier's influence.

The real line of questioning should be: how could two mystical-sexual perverts, surrounded by perverted women, create an institution that has had such an international influence for the benefit of so many people? This is the only question that merits in-depth study, which, unfortunately, has not been pursued, since the authors of the report have been compliant with the thesis suggested to them by the 2020 GCPS report.

### **1.3 Studying institutional dynamics within l'Arche**

In the Radio Notre Dame interview, Stephan Posner's answer to the journalist's question about the possible existence of a small group running l'Arche today is very evasive (6'30). To the question: "What makes it possible to say that there are safeguards in place today" (7'30), Stephan Posner refers to the work of a sociologist. This sociologist is Claire Vincent-Mory, who holds a doctorate in sociology and is a post-doctoral fellow at *Sciences Po* [a public University based in Paris]. In other words, a young scholar is being asked to pass judgment on the institutional workings of l'Arche. However, the chapters written by Claire Vincent-Mory do not deal with the institutional functioning of l'Arche, but with her personal interpretation of the relationship between Jean Vanier, Thomas Philippe, and Gilbert Adam.

The study of l'Arche's institutional dynamics is totally absent from the report. We know nothing about the governance of l'Arche, whether it be the choice of leaders, the methodologies used to supervise activities, the management of finances, and so on. Not only does the report say nothing about this, but the l'Arche website contains virtually no information at all, apart from brief biographies of the two directors and the three members of a kind of supervisory board.

<sup>28</sup> It also refers to our cultural practices. It is enough to live for a while in Africa to realize the difference in approach in our emotional relationships. Inversely, in Japan, emotional gestures are more distanced than in France.

## 2 Questions raised by the publication of the report on Jean Vanier

Apparently, in 2020, the ground is trembling beneath the feet of the international head of l'Arche as he reads the report submitted by the consulting firm he commissioned to list all the sexual abuses committed by Jean Vanier:

*“Stephan Posner, standing while the ground crumbles”* (La Croix, August 3, 2020).

*“The image [lit., “statue”] of Jean Vanier was already shattering like a broken pot. This was in January, a month before the public announcement of the results of the investigation into the founder of l'Arche. There were seven of them, all responsible in various capacities for the worldwide community, and on that day Stephan Posner, their international coordinator, had invited them to this unusual gesture, inspired by Jewish tradition”* (L'Arche, September 29, 2020)<sup>29</sup>.

### 2.1 A slightly different story from that presented by the media

However, the alleged sexual abuse was already known to l'Arche officials as early as 2015. In fact, in a letter dated March 24, 2015, the international leaders of l'Arche noted<sup>30</sup>:

*“In 1956, long before l'Arche was founded, Père Thomas Philippe was the subject of a canonical sanction. At the end of the Holy Office trial, very rigorous sanctions were imposed on him over the space of several years: he was forbidden to teach, to exercise his ministry in any way, and to administer the sacraments in public. We do not know the cause for his condemnation because the archives from the trial have not yet been made accessible. However, a few publications from the last decade that we have researched and consulted, lead us to suppose that this condemnation is related to inappropriate behavior by Père Thomas during spiritual accompaniment; behavior which would have led to several women pressing charges against him.*

*Then in June 2014, we received some distressing testimonies. (...) In June 2014, two of these testimonies were sent to the Catholic Church and were subsequently forwarded to us by Mgr. Pierre d'Ornellas, Archbishop of Rennes and Accompanying Bishop for l'Arche International. An agreement was reached with Mgr. Pierre d'Ornellas that he would open up a canonical inquiry (i.e. in compliance with the law of the Catholic Church), in order to hear those concerned and to clarify the facts.*

*The inquiry, which began in December 2014, has just been finalized by a written report, which we were able to read. Out of respect for those involved, this report remains confidential; below is the full summary written by Mgr d'Ornellas:*

*‘At the request of the Church and l'Arche, Father Paul-Dominique Marcovits, a Dominican, set up a hearing process for the 14 witnesses who were reporting deeds committed by Père Thomas Philippe, a Dominican, who died on 4th February 1993. Some of those witnesses were the victims themselves, others were those that victims had chosen to confide in.*

*This is what emerges from these consistent and frank testimonies : that Père Thomas Philippe was the perpetrator of abusive sexual behavior towards adult women; he explained that through this behavior he sought to seek and communicate a mystical experience ; there is however a serious contradiction between these acts and the religious vows which he had taken and the discipline and morals taught by the Church; these acts attest to the fact that he had a psychological and spiritual hold over these women whom he asked to remain silent as, according to him, these acts corresponded to “special graces” that nobody could understand.*

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.archeparis.org/actu/2020/9/29/stephan-posner-tenir-debout-quand-le-sol-se-drobe>

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.larche.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2015\\_03\\_20\\_Letter\\_Pere\\_Thomas-PAF-EGS-EN1.pdf](https://www.larche.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2015_03_20_Letter_Pere_Thomas-PAF-EGS-EN1.pdf)



*Notwithstanding the good that Père Thomas was able to do, for which many are grateful, these acts and their justification are proof of a distorted conscience that claimed many known, and doubtless many unknown, victims for whom justice must be done.*

*In all of the testimonies received, nothing was heard that would call l'Arche or its mission into question; quite the contrary.'* “

To sum up, in 2014 a canonical inquiry was opened [long] after the death of Thomas Philippe, based on testimonies of sexual abuse that seemed credible to the investigator, Fr. Marcovits<sup>31</sup>. However, according to the 2023 report, there was complicity between Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier. How is it that the 14 people who testified to sexual abuse against the Dominican Thomas Philippe (deceased) did not also lodge a complaint against Jean Vanier (still alive at the time), and that the first complaint against Jean Vanier appeared after this report had been submitted (in May 2016<sup>32</sup>), even though Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier are permanently intertwined in the testimonies mentioned by the report?

The 900-page report does not provide any new information, but rather constitutes a narrative (or “storytelling”, to use an Anglo-Saxon term that accurately reflects the phenomenon). The aim is to give meaning to a story, to make it understandable. But meaning is linked to presuppositions and experiences. There is no such thing as a meaning independent of the observer. The observer and the story which he or she tells are closely intertwined. In the case of Jean Vanier's story, it's an almost univocal account (as if the six members of the Commission shared such deeply held convictions that no controversy could arise, even though most of the authors are academics). Because the person is presumed guilty, all of his or her writings are re-examined in the light of this guilt, for signs of perversity. The greatness of Western human justice is precisely in its capacity to avoid sinking into these forms of determinism, from which this report is far from avoiding.

Let's take, for example, the hypothesis that Jean Vanier's writings really do reflect his vision of sexuality (which is at odds with the presupposition of the report, p.35: “*it is a great confusion that covers his vocabulary, his relationships, his theology, his way of writing, his way of seducing and entering into a relationship*”). The reference could then be his 1984 book *Man and Woman He Made Them*<sup>33</sup>. If we reread the 2023 report in the light of this book, the storytelling appears rather different. Admittedly, the book says nothing about possible sexual abuse on the part of its author, but the existence of a so-called hidden theology disappears.

In his 1984 book, Jean Vanier deals with all aspects of sexuality, whether it concerns disabled people, assistants or himself. He clearly underlines the difficulties with which many assistants present themselves in l'Arche homes. On p.121-122 of his book, for example, his account of his encounter with a young assistant could well apply to the case of Judy Farquharson (presented as fundamental in the 2023 report: her first name is mentioned 22 times, see in particular the dedication of the report and the section written by Nicole Jeammet). We can see that the situation which was presented as an instance of major sexual abuse would oppose two testimonies, that of the assistant and that of Jean Vanier (one was experiencing strong family conflicts, as mentioned in the report p.713-716, and the other is deceased and can no longer defend himself).

Jean Vanier also mentions cases of masturbation, homosexuality and sexual violence in his book. It would be interesting to know how these problems are now managed at the international level of l'Arche (nothing is indicated in the report on this point) now that the two founders of l'Arche (Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier) are deceased and accused *a posteriori* of sexual abuse. In his 1984 book, Jean Vanier mentioned the questions raised by his celibacy and the answers he

<sup>31</sup> We find in this story Dominicans who investigate other Dominicans. A characteristic of this report on l'Arche is that it relies on Dominican investigations to implicate a layman.

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.larche.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Chronology-EN\\_01.2023.pdf](https://www.larche.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Chronology-EN_01.2023.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Vanier J. (1984), *Homme et femme il les fit*, Fleurus.

gave to them. We'd like to see such transparency from the leaders of l'Arche: what is their marital status, how do they manage their sexual and emotional relationships, have they managed to eradicate all traces of sexuality within themselves? These were fundamental questions for Jean Vanier, and the 2023 report underlines their relevance.

## 2.2 *The methodology of research and presentation*

Identifying the origin of assertions [in this report] is a difficult task, as many quotations have anonymous sources with a reference to an interview number (cf. p.887-891). This is particularly the case with Brigitte<sup>34</sup>, who appears in #2 (interview of October 22, 2020), #56 (interview of May 7, 2021) and #116 (interview of June 13, 2022), and who is quoted 59 times in the document. In fact, this lady provided a scanned transcribed version of the letters<sup>35</sup> sent to her by Jean Vanier. The members of the Commission drew from these letters the elements which they felt corroborated their thesis.

The long 900-page report is therefore not an investigation in the factual sense. It is rather a psychologizing interpretation of the writings and actions of Jean Vanier, mixed with the writings and actions of other parties, notably Thomas Philippe, but also sometimes Gilbert Adam and Marie-Dominique Philippe, and various people identified by code names by the authors of the report (interview x). Thus, facts acknowledged by their authors, accusations or recollections by concerned parties who remain anonymous, and interpretations presented as psychologically self-evident are mixed together.

Three phenomena call into question the justice of this judgment:

- The absence of any standard adversarial process: the judgment took place in the absence of the accused (or of the two main accused), since the investigation was only really opened after their deaths, with a staggered process: a first one after the death of Thomas Philippe, a second after the death of Jean Vanier, and a third to try and make sense of what appears to be an incoherent life's work (a work bearing extraordinary fruit carried out by two perverse men). What's more, the accused had no lawyer to put forward a different interpretation of the facts that were revealed.

- The concealment of prosecution witnesses: most of the prosecution witnesses are anonymous, and their comments are selected by the authors of the report (imagine a trial where the prosecution witnesses remain unknown to the defense lawyers). It is therefore not possible to introduce any nuance into their statements, since the report does not provide all the interviews conducted (even though, given its scope - 900 pages - one might have imagined that substantial appendices would have been provided). We don't know who conducted each interview, or how each interview took place: *"In most cases, the communication was done in person: physical meeting, dialogue via zoom or by telephone. In other cases, the communication – and then the interview – took place in writing, sometimes using an anonymous mailbox created especially for this contact. In a few cases, the members of the Commission had to go through a trusted third party – identified through access to some of the documents from previous investigations. Then, the level of confidentiality was set by each person. Each was able to choose the member(s) of the Commission with whom she wished to discuss, to choose whether or not the interview(s) could be shared with all the members of the Commission, whether or not her name could be shared confidentially with the*

<sup>34</sup> Provided that there are not several anonymous women named Brigitte.

<sup>35</sup> It is not known whether all these letters are exhaustive or whether or not they have been modified, and Brigitte's letters to Jean Vanier are never mentioned. The accusation is based on a married woman who says she was not a victim, who provides a self-transcribed version of the letters she received and whose letters (which she presumably wrote) are never quoted.

members of the Commission, etc. For example, one woman chose to communicate with only one member of the Commission, confidentially; the other members of the Commission only had access to her pseudonym and to a report of the interview that she had validated” (p.863). The precedents of famous cases<sup>36</sup> demonstrate that it is always necessary to go back to the original documents to ensure the veracity of the data. In the present case, data traceability is clearly lacking.

- The choice of the "experts" who make up the so-called independent commission: Antoine Mourges, a doctoral student presented as a historian (see his biography p.906), is one of them, but nothing is said about how the experts were chosen, nor about their working conditions (remuneration, conflicts of interest, etc.). In his interview on Radio Notre Dame<sup>37</sup>, historian Florian Michel explains that the selection of experts was based on Antoine Mourges' ten-year research into *l'Eau Vive*, and then on the choice of competent experts (Florian Michel is a specialist in Jacques Maritain, and there are numerous references to Maritain throughout the report, notably p.199-200). It should be noted that, in his interview, Florian Michel speaks of *l'Eau Vive* not as a "sect" but as a "small university". The term "sect" is based on an investigation carried out by the Dominican Paul Philippe (no relation to Thomas Philippe) on behalf of the Holy Office (formerly the Inquisition, of which he was secretary from 1967 to 1973): For Florian Michel (11' et seq.), “*Father Paul Philippe, who truly appears to us as one of the rays of light, there aren't many in our history, but ... he owes his promotion within the Holy Office to his stubbornness, .... He was promoted to Cardinal and it was thanks to him that for 25 years in Rome the position was relatively clear regarding Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier, and it was he in particular who blocked Jean Vanier's request for ordination.*”

If we assume that everything in Dominican Paul Philippe's canonical judgment is correct (even though only the members of the Commission are aware of this judgment), then the report holds up from the point of view of the story it tells (of people who give the appearance of functioning like a secret society: see in particular p.212-214). If, on the other hand, we hypothesize that Dominican Paul Philippe's<sup>38</sup> zeal for the truth may have been influenced by the prospect of climbing the hierarchical ladder more quickly, then everything falls apart, including the supposedly Machiavellian use of codes by the members of the sect. Indeed, being subject to inquisitorial control, it was only natural that they should adopt code names. Antoine Mourges' translation of these codes raises the same questions as Paul Philippe's canonical judgment. What possible bias might these different parties have in the search for the truth?<sup>39</sup>

Florian Michel's interview on Radio Notre Dame is fascinating, as it explains many obscure aspects of the report, and in particular the relationship between l'Arche and the Catholic Church. Indeed, given the obstructions posed by the Holy Office, the founders of l'Arche chose to develop outside any religious affiliation, even though both founders have publicly expressed their Christian faith on numerous occasions. This is the weakness of l'Arche: the absence of a real governance structure. The leaders of l'Arche International are accountable to no one. In the case of Jean Vanier and the Dominican Thomas Philippe, this was due to the experiences they had undergone over two decades.

<sup>36</sup> For example, the false data of the article published in the Lancet to definitively discredit Professor Didier Raoult in May 2020: <https://www.lesechos.fr/weekend/business-story/le-lancet-gate-les-dures-lecons-dun-derapage-1216450>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xn1tQUZaxEE>

<sup>38</sup> Who therefore made his career in the Holy Office, the body that succeeded the Inquisition and which had a very important role under Pius XII. This role the Holy Office defended throughout the Second Vatican Council by opposing with all its might the outcome of this Council.

<sup>39</sup> It is clear that the report is questioned by various parties at the time of its release: Conference of Antoine Mourges in 2020 (<https://vimeo.com/543168058>, 26') But the bias of the authors of the 2023 report is such that these opponents are still described as unable to recognize the truth of the facts. Conversely, other statements are taken at face value (34').

The urgent task now arising from this report is to put in place a form of governance capable of managing the 160 communities of l'Arche and the financial flows that necessarily exist between them. Indeed, the economic dimension is fundamental, and clearly highlights the deceptive nature of the report. As the journalist reminds us in this interview with Florian Michel (16'), a cult involves financial stakes and the appropriation of financial resources by the cult's leaders. However, as Florian Michel points out, here it is the opposite: the leaders of the sect are devoting their fortune to the development of l'Arche, without receiving any particular benefits for themselves (anyone who visited Jean Vanier has seen that his life was not marked by the pursuit of personal enrichment<sup>40</sup>).

Thus we have a judgment handed down by a jury of people chosen (by whom?) on the basis of anonymous testimonies, which do not formulate any criminally reprehensible facts, but only words or writings without any way of knowing whether they were actually said, or even (for some sources) without any guarantee of their veracity. The report found no evidence of rape, or even sexual violence. The facts do not concern minors or disabled people. They are re-readings made decades later of relationships of a romantic nature (the veracity of which has not even been cross-checked).

The writings as a whole are marked by a rather surprising moralism: “*Basically, beyond the moral question of adultery, it could be said that Jean and Brigitte shared a beautiful relationship and that, thanks to her, Jean was able to glimpse what it meant to accept to receive. At the same time, the legitimacy of this kind of three-way relationship must be questioned*” (p.720, written by Nicole Jeammet, psychoanalyst<sup>41</sup>).

The only case mentioned explicitly by name, which was significant at the time but has now become commonplace, is the alleged abortion that took place in September 1947 following purported sexual relations between the Dominican Thomas Philippe and Anne de Rosambo: “*What we know of the rest of her life's journey suggests that T. Philippe had a decisive part in it, for she leaves the monastery only to move into the estate next door to where l'Eau Vive is established, probably shortly before the abortion mentioned earlier. Her life from now on is definitely tied with that of the Dominican*” (p.245). It's hard to speak of sexual abuse when the woman who slept with the Dominican decides to devote her life to him.

The report, almost in its entirety, consists of a sort of mishmash of facts, characters, periods, testimonies and writings aimed at justifying a thesis which, on reading the report, appears quite evanescent<sup>42</sup>. All that can be said is that Jean Vanier had a conception of the tactile gesture that might have exceeded the limits of propriety and morality. What emerges from this reading is the question: why all the media hype?

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<sup>40</sup> His room in Trosly showed no outward signs of wealth, and he himself never displayed a preference for lavish spending. Nor has there been any evidence of recourse to prostitution.

<sup>41</sup> Contrary to what this sentence suggests, there was no cohabitation of two men with a woman but rather a woman suffering from an unhappy marriage and seeking emotional comfort from a man - already quite old - without really knowing how far these emotional relationships developed.

<sup>42</sup> The same conclusion could already be made about the 2020 report. We have the impressions that the two main players (Antony Mourges and Stephan Posner) needed these revelations, that the weakness of the arguments of the 2020 report is covered by the constitution of a Commission (that has proved incapable of introducing a minimum of contradictory and scientific rigor into a seemingly obvious narrative).



### 3 Governance issues

These are situated at two levels: that of l'Arche and that of sexual abuse and its justification. As far as l'Arche is concerned, the question that remains open is that of current governance and the mechanisms put in place to prevent and resolve any abuses. As far as sexual abuse is concerned, this raises societal issues, as well as the need to supervise young men and women working with vulnerable people.

#### 3.1 L'Arche's international governance

The first question is who commissioned this so-called independent report. One name stands out, that of Stephan Posner, international leader of the Federation of l'Arche (167 communities in 38 countries<sup>43</sup>). To whom is he accountable?<sup>44</sup>

According to the l'Arche website<sup>45</sup>, the leadership is provided by Stephan Posner, assisted by Stacy Cates-Carney (an American living in the USA). No information is provided on the method of appointment, the term of office or even the remuneration of these two individuals. This management team is complemented by a supervisory board *responsible for the financial and legal supervision of l'Arche International under French law*. It is difficult to know precisely what the mission of this supervisory board is, especially as the three members of this board are a retired lawyer living in Dublin, a professor of religion in Belgium and a retired engineer from the automotive industry. Nothing is said about how they are appointed, how often they meet, or their links with the two directors.

Stacy Cates-Carney has a degree in English Literature (1985). After working for the Jesuits, she was director of a community of l'Arche in the USA until 2015, and has been heavily involved in developing partnerships and fundraising<sup>46</sup>. While the 2020 report is presented jointly by her and Stephan Posner, this is no longer the case for the 2023 report, where she seems to have disappeared.

Stephan Posner, born in 1963, ran a small wholesale business until 2007<sup>47</sup>. A search on the internet (apart from the reference to his company) yields only results linked to l'Arche.

The question remains: to whom is Stephan Posner accountable? In a video interview on May 29, 2012, when asked "How does one become General Manager of l'Arche France?", Stephan Posner did not answer, but cited his history as an associate member of the l'Arche community for 28 years. It was therefore by being present on the premises and developing a network of contacts that he was able to build his career within l'Arche<sup>48</sup>.

And this is the main criticism that can be leveled at Jean Vanier. His distrust of institutions, generated by the history of *l'Eau Vive* and the opposition of the Holy Office to his ordination, led him to prioritize human ties and neglect organizational issues. The photos available on the Internet show a kind of complicity between an old man of almost 90 and the man who became international leader of l'Arche. But Jean Vanier didn't conceive of any governance structure for this federation of

<sup>43</sup> The Testimony of the Day - Stephan POSNER - 06/02/2023 on Radio Notre Dame

<sup>44</sup> The management and governance page is very short, there is no information on the notion of members or an assembly, and no mention of economic or financial aspects.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.larche.org/fr/larche/direction-gouvernance/> (16/02/23)

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/in/stacycatescarney> (16/02/23)

<sup>47</sup> <https://dirigeant.societe.com/dirigeant/Stephan.POSNER.59673020.html>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vj5aeIsuJfk>



local communities of l'Arche, because it didn't fit in with his vision of the world (or perhaps simply with his "charism"<sup>49</sup>).

If there was a theological error, it was this belief in an incarnation that would only be human and not organizational. To live in society, human beings need rules. In the modern world, organizations need to be regulated, both by the rules of international law and by internal rules. From this point of view, the situation of the International Federation of l'Arche is unclear. And this is Jean Vanier's great fault, for which he is now paying posthumously.

Nevertheless, the work has survived the founders, and makes a major contribution to the integration of disabled people into society. This is what distinguishes churches and religious communities from sects. The questions that now need to be addressed are: how can we ensure the long-term future of l'Arche, how can we set up a balanced governance structure, and how can we define and represent the stakeholders?

These questions are all the more pressing as it is not possible for an organization covering 160 communities and some 30 countries not to experience sexual, sectarian or financial aberrations. Indeed, the history of l'Arche is similar to that of religious communities. We know that one of the major concerns of religious communities has been to combine both the autonomy of local communities and the management of these communities. In this sense, the Catholic Church has played a major role in managing unavoidable deviations (even if this management has sometimes occurred with delay and under pressure from external actors). In the case of l'Arche, based on the information available on the Internet, no such management exists. Everything rests with the international managers of l'Arche, who themselves do not seem to be accountable to any governance structure.

The question that might be asked is whether the successive reports on Thomas Philippe and then Jean Vanier are intended to clear the current directors of any responsibility for scandals that are now kept secret. We can hope not, but this presupposes that the International Federation of l'Arche undergoes an independent audit of its procedures and governance. The question is: to whom to refer, given that l'Arche is not a religious association and that the International Federation of l'Arche is largely extra-territorial. These are complex issues, which are also raised by the extent of corruption and abuse, not only in states and private companies, but also in international non-profit organizations.

### **3.2 Issues of the management of sexuality raised by the report**

L'Arche's 2023 report is therefore not entirely unhelpful, highlighting the need for procedures to limit the risk of sexual abuse, particularly in communities where this risk is very high.

As Jean Vanier noted in his 1984 book<sup>50</sup> (p.75): "*In a small brochure published in Washington State (...), it says: 'we estimate that each year in Washington State, there are no less than 30,000 mentally or physically handicapped people who are victims of sexual exploitation'*" (p.75). A little further on, he quotes a report in the CTNERHI<sup>51</sup> newsletter, which states: "*The picture of the sexuality and affectivity of disabled people in institutions would be incomplete if we failed to*

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<sup>49</sup> The accusation of sexual abuse against Jean Vanier succeeded what might be called a form of idolatry in which Jean Vanier served as an icon for an entire Catholic milieu. Jean Vanier was a man touched by the grace of the « little ones », the so-called disabled people about whom he has never ceased to proclaim their humanity and their right to a respected life. However, Jean Vanier and Thomas Philippe never demonstrated the qualities of managing complex organizations.

<sup>50</sup> Already cited.

<sup>51</sup> CTNERHI = *Centre technique national d'études et de recherches sur les handicaps et les inadaptations*. ("National Technical Center of Study and Research on Handicaps and Non-adaptations")

*mention the use of disabled people to satisfy the sexual desires and impulses of care staff. This use can take two forms: - a traditional form, i.e. clandestine, brutal, and violently denied, but often little punished inside institutions and never revealed outside of them. (...) - a 'modern' one in 'avant-garde' institutions, using the ideology of total permissiveness, even claiming to 'heal through love'. It is practiced almost openly, trivialized and accompanied not by violence but by seduction, the latter coming as much from adults as from the disabled themselves. It may seem less barbaric than the former, but it is just as reprehensible: every time the staff, claiming to be therapeutic, emphasize the satisfaction of their own impulses and desires, or substitute them for those of the disabled person, every time they use the disabled person as an object, they are committing 'genuine institutional violence' (p.109)."*

This reference to a so-called "modern" use of sexuality is corroborated by recommendations provided by official bodies. Thus, in a May-June 2017 French bulletin<sup>52</sup> entitled "Love and Sexual Life & Major Deficiencies", published by the CREAI<sup>53</sup>, Anne Dusart states:

*"The more difficult it is for the person to imagine where a solicitation might lead, the less can consent be reduced to a binary opposition between a yes and a no. We need to enter into a process of assessing the person's capacity to consent to sexual activity, putting into words for the person what is happening, explaining what can happen, sounding out the person's reactions, proposing a progression of gestures and words (a light caress before a firm caress, lying side by side with clothes on before stripping off or getting into bed, etc.), offering to stick around to put an end to the situation if it goes beyond what the person feels ready to accept (and often to discover...)" (p.12).*

*"Without help, the majority of people in FAM's<sup>54</sup> and MAS's<sup>55</sup> will have little or no access to sexual pleasure, and probably no possibility of living a satisfying love and sex life. In addition to the frustration and suffering this can generate for those concerned, it usually manifests itself in behavioral disorders that disrupt community life and the work of professionals. There is little research on this subject, but many professionals testify that when satisfactory solutions are found, these disorders are alleviated, agitation and tension diminish, and everyone's quality of life is improved" (p.17).*

*"For some, masturbation must be taught, especially to autistic children" (p.18).* We do not reproduce the rest of the paragraph explaining how to perform masturbation.

It is therefore rather regrettable that the 900-page report accuses Jean Vanier of sexual abuse (without specifying what kind), even though sexual acts (qualified as abuse by the report of the independent Commission of L'Arche) take place daily, and with the encouragement of training organizations, in institutions for the disabled. It is therefore necessary to reflect on the notions of sexual abuse and consent for minors or disabled people, and not on consensual sexual acts perpetrated between ordinary adults<sup>56</sup>.

Finally, we need to look at the mechanisms put in place to manage sexuality in places where special attention to those in great need is developing. This is obviously the case in institutions for

<sup>52</sup> <https://vas-handicap.fr/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2017.05-5-article-vas-a.-dusart-15p.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> « Regional Centres for Studies, Actions and Information, for people in vulnerable situations », intervening in support of the public authorities to train professionals: <https://ancreai.org/>

<sup>54</sup> FAM = "foyer d'accueil médicalisé" ("Medical Hospitality Home")

<sup>55</sup> MAS = "maison d'accueil spécialisée" ("Specialized Hospitality Home")

<sup>56</sup> It is quite curious to see the media impact of accusations that are ultimately very moralistic, in a context where adultery in France was exhibited at the highest level by French president François Hollande when in office, and where sexual education of minors aims to encourage them to develop their sexual activities early and without taboos.

the disabled, but it's also the case in all places where groups of people with very different backgrounds and histories come together. Prisons come to mind, of course, but the issue also extends to places where migrants are received, some of whom have had traumatic sexual experiences before arriving in France. The reception of these migrants is carried out in part by young people eager to give their time and energy for a better world. The risk of abuse and deviant behavior is not negligible, since between the idealized image of a young adult in their 20's welcoming others and the challenges of integrating migrants into society, there are many incentives for behavior that will appear abusive in retrospect. Once again, the challenge is to provide governance mechanisms, not to prohibit the involvement of young people (especially young women), but to limit any possible excesses.

It is therefore up to the leaders of the organizations concerned to assume the responsibilities that go with the exercise of their roles, and to be accountable for their actions and for the procedures which they have put in place.

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