



# ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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## Substance and Shadow

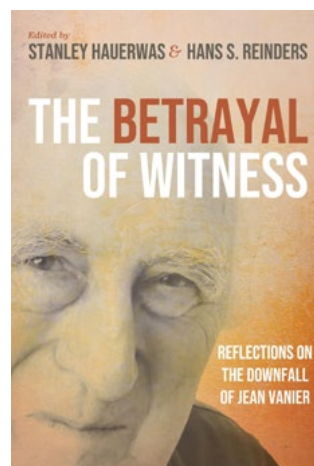
**A Book Review of *Betrayal of Witness:  
Reflections on the Downfall of Jean Vanier*  
(Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024)**

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Jean Vanier (1928-2019) was a Canadian Catholic theologian and philosopher. The son of renowned Canadian military officer and Governor-General Georges Vanier, the younger Vanier founded the *L'Arche* communities, from the French word for “ark,” in 1964. The first *L'Arche* community at Trosly-Breuil, France, was an experiment in life together with two people with developmental disabilities, in order to provide those two men with lived experiences that contrasted sharply with the institutional norms for vulnerable people in the 1960s. From France, the *L'Arche* movement grew to encompass dozens of houses in 37 countries where “core members” – people with developmental disabilities – live together with “assistants” who help them with tasks of daily life, such as feeding, dressing, bathing, and socialization. Vanier also founded another Catholic organization called Faith and Light; the two organizations held a joint meeting in 2008.

In February 2020, following months of

investigation after Vanier’s death, *L'Arche* International published a report entitled *Control and Abuse*, where it asserted that Vanier had sexually abused six able-bodied women, under the guise of “spiritual direction,” between 1970 and 2005. The report, cited below, indicates a substantive link between Vanier and his “spiritual father,” Thomas Philippe, a Catholic priest placed under censure by the wider church in 1956. According to the Church’s initial proceedings, Philippe used “false mysticism,” including non-consensual sexual practices, to exert control over women. The *L'Arche* report observed startling and sobering differences between the Vanier who wrote gentle and pastoral texts about the belonging of people with disabilities and the Vanier who exerted stringent control over his image inside and outside *L'Arche*.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> *L'Arche* International, “Control and Abuse: Investigation on Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier,” <https://commissiondetude-jeanvanier.org/commissiondetudeindependante2023-empriseetabus/index.php/en/home-english/>.

I am a former avid reader of Vanier affected by his heinous acts. In myself, I'm a person with spastic cerebral palsy from Canada's East Coast, and a theologian of disability. I never met Vanier, and spent only moments in L'Arche Daybreak and other Torontonion L'Arche communities between 2012 and 2018. I remember that I first encountered Vanier's written work through Henri Nouwen's *Wounded Healer* in early 2007. I read that text after I had tried to discern whether or not God had called me to ministry (spoiler alert: He had not). Nouwen pointed me to Vanier, his mentor. As I read some of Vanier's books to grapple theologically with my experiences of disability, his total convictions about mutual belonging and identity moved me. I vividly remember being struck by *Becoming Human's* emphasis on disabled people's need for trust. Those claims helped me to clarify a sacramental ecclesiology of disability: I used Vanier's assertions, like, "Weakness carries within it a secret power [that] can open up hearts," to formulate a sacramental ecclesiology of disability.<sup>2</sup> I used his words about belonging to prove that people with disabilities can use baptism and Communion to cement our active witness in open communities of faith.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, like all of Vanier's former friends and allies, I was distressed and disoriented by the violent and shocking February 2020 revelations of Vanier's sexual abuse. I read of the abuse first in a colleague's Facebook post, and then turned to the report on Vanier's abuses cited above. At that moment, I was unable to face the crisis of faith it fostered. I did not have a fulsome theological source for reflections on human belonging as compassionate as Vanier – and honestly, I still don't – and I have not read any of Vanier's work since then, except to quote *Becoming Human* in the prior paragraph.

All the authors in this volume have articulated firm stances against Vanier's predatory sexual activities, and are wrestling with the substance and shadow of his legacy. The next few pages will delineate three themes. First, Jason Greig's profound examination of right remembrance can help us to re-situate Vanier as part of the theological community.<sup>4</sup> Second, Patrick McKearney observes poignantly that people with disabilities are the true moral actors in L'Arche.<sup>5</sup> Third and finally, Vanier's hermeneutic, especially his use of Scripture, permeates the text, and Benjamin Wall's evaluation of Vanier's interpretation of John 4 helps us to examine the



wider stories that Vanier told himself about his work.<sup>6</sup> These themes of right remembrance, empathic moral activity, and renewed focus on our interpretation of Vanier's tropes may help us to address, and redress, his terrible proclivities and to reread his work with compassion.

## Greig on Rightly Remembering Vanier

The concept of right remembrance of Vanier's life and actions occurs in multiple places throughout this volume.<sup>7</sup> Jason Greig, a university chaplain in Hamilton, Ontario, uses his work on Mennonite theology and his sustained presence in multiple Canadian L'Arche communities to argue that Vanier's former friends and allies should remember him rightly. According to Greig, right remembering entails a scripturally grounded form of reconciliation where the offender is recalled in their entirety.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Miroslav Volf's experiences of interrogation in the 1980s, Greig clarifies that right remembrance of immoral acts means remembering for restoration, within the context of the "Christian story." He urges his readers not to remember Vanier in order to make him a victim, but to care for the wounded relationships left in his wake.<sup>9</sup>

This scriptural reconciliation requires seeing the whole of a person. Thus, fittingly, in his "Excursus" describing Jesus' practice of eating with "sinners," Greig talks about that reconciliatory impulse. He describes sinners as people

2 Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 40.

3 Michael A. Walker, *Embodying Community: a Transformative and Sacramental Ecclesiology of Disability* (dissertation, Toronto: University of Toronto, 2018), <https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/items/6cd7f021-928d-46d8-9482-e74d794630d3>.

4 Jason Greig, "Sitting at the Table With a Sinner: Christian Witness and Truthfully Remembering Jean Vanier," in *Betrayal of Witness: Reflections on the Downfall of Jean Vanier*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Hans S. Reinders (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024), 1-16.

5 Patrick McKearney, "Disabling Virtue," in *Betrayal of Witness*, 89-103.

6 Benjamin S. Wall, "Hidden in Plain View," in *Betrayal of Witness*, 120-36.

7 For the phenomenon of memory (and its lapses) in this volume, see, e.g., Keith Dow, "Against Living Saints," in *Betrayal of Witness*, 18-36, especially pages 18-22 on recognizing saints; Pia Matthews, "Putting Aside Charisma for Charism," in *Betrayal of Witness*, 70-88, especially 75-78; and Hans Reinders, "A Mixture of Light and Darkness," in *Betrayal of Witness*, 104-119, esp. 107-13.

8 Greig, "Sitting at the Table With a Sinner," 2.

9 Greig, "Sitting at the Table With a Sinner," 7-10.

outside the Hebrew covenant, often those who commit considerable immoral acts, such as “tax collectors” or “tax farmers.” Greig suggests that his readers learn to see Vanier as such a sinner – someone who has done serious wrong, and someone who still has the possibility of ultimate repentance, as was true of those in Jesus’ orbit. Greig’s pastoral impulses feel right to this reader!

I appreciate Greig’s proposal because it can reinforce a signal aspect of ecclesiologies of disability, a realistic portrait of ecclesial belonging. Greig’s contention calls to mind Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh’s explorations of remembrance: based on his study of torture in 1980s Chile, Cavanaugh observes that the Eucharist helps Christians to “remember” each other by binding up the torn social fabric of the community of faith.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, drawing on her travels in Chiapas, Mexico, United Church of Christ minister Christine Smith argues that Holy Communion ties up believers’ social tapestries by making those who are not currently present at the meal present to the gathering.<sup>11</sup> Greig’s words on right remembrance add to these cohesive illustrations that, when people with and without disabilities come to the Lord’s Table in Trosly, Ottawa, or anywhere, we come as our full selves. The C/ommunion of the saints can help believers of diverse abilities to grapple with Vanier’s legacy by reminding us that, when we do each other wrong, we can face our shame, own up to what we have done, and learn to mitigate our pain.

## Re-centring People with Intellectual Disabilities with McKearney

Patrick McKearney, a social anthropologist currently based in Amsterdam, contends in his brief essay on the future of L’Arche in terms of ethics that L’Arche’s vision of the good life is shaped by its residents with intellectual disabilities. In contrast to the prevailing (ableist) ethical paradigm that centres the virtues and activities of people without disabilities, McKearney asserts that “the people with intellectual disabilities [in L’Arche] are the main moral actors.”<sup>12</sup> McKearney recalls Vanier’s usual argument that one can only have concrete, caring relationships with others when one lets go of power and status – an assertion made all the more tragic by Vanier’s not living into it. McKearney decries an ethical model that emphasizes the actions and talents of non-disabled folks, and in its place illustrates the opposite paradigm – a microcosm of a just and faithful society in L’Arche where people of different abilities value each other’s gifts.

10 William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 238, 264-67.

11 Christine Smith, “Preaching: Preaching: Hospitality, De-Centering, Re-membering, and Right Relations,” in *Purposes of Preaching*, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis: Chalice, 1994), 106.

12 McKearney, “Disabling Virtue,” 90.

McKearney uses two crucial examples to highlight the gifts brought to British L’Arche communities by people with intellectual disabilities. First, he writes of Maundy Thursday in one community, where assistants and core members eat and talk together, saying to each other, “I need you. I can’t do it on my own. And you might need me.”<sup>13</sup> Second, McKearney narrates several stories of L’Arche assistants who have been touched by core members’ continual remembrance and affection. One assistant named Rayna particularly asserts, “You can’t hide your personality from people with learning disabilities. You need to open yourself.”<sup>14</sup> In this community, at least, the ones who are usually last – people with cognitive disabilities – are placed first (cf. Matt 20:16). McKearney ends by asking whether L’Arche can benefit from its current historical moment by centering the ethical and social perspectives of its core members, the people with disabilities.<sup>15</sup>

With all my heart, I affirm McKearney’s contention that L’Arche can use its emphasis on the gifts of people with disabilities to reorient itself in an individualistic, ableist society predicated on one-way charity. Able-bodied folks are not superior to people with developmental disabilities in any significant way. We’re just different, and – when we display affection for each other in the ways McKearney describes – people of diverse abilities can enrich our life together, in ethical and social terms.

13 McKearney, “Disabling Virtue,” 96.

14 McKearney, “Disabling Virtue,” 97.

15 McKearney, “Disabling Virtue,” 103.



Alphonse Legros, *Studies of Hands*

## Wall's Clarifying the Hidden Things in Vanier's Analysis of John 4

Lastly, Benjamin Wall, currently Assistant Professor of Religion, Ethics, and Philosophy at Greensboro College in North Carolina, asserts in a pointed and erudite essay that Vanier's scriptural hermeneutic is distorted by his acts of sexual abuse. Wall points out that Vanier uses Isaiah's and Ezekiel's prophetic calls for vulnerability to advocate for concrete relationships across difference in our ableist society. Even so, Vanier is not self-aware enough to realize that he wields vertical power over his friends and colleagues in L'Arche – power that historically allowed him to “[pursue] and name as good” abusive acts of control, acts that Hebrew and Christian religious traditions necessarily define as evil.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Wall helps his readers to see that Vanier's exegesis of John 4 is incomplete precisely in its parochial and patriarchal perspective. While Vanier rightly focuses on Jesus' vision of God in the text, he misunderstands the Samaritan woman's role. Vanier claims that the woman is “humiliated and despised” because of her promiscuity, but Wall asserts that Vanier's point is incorrect. The woman is certainly an outsider to the Jewish covenant, but is not eroticized in the text in the ways that Vanier implies in his reading; she is neither weak nor passive, but mobilizes her community to listen to and follow Jesus in dynamic ways.<sup>17</sup> Significantly, Wall contends that Vanier re-reads, and

16 Wall, “Hidden in Plain View,” 124-27.

17 Wall, “Hidden in Plain View,” 127-29.



Sebastiano Ricci, *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*

misunderstands, his own encounters with Eric and other L'Arche core members in the same way as he does John 4.<sup>18</sup> In ways that he cannot see, Vanier controls the narratives of Eric, Claudia, and the other people with disabilities whose stories he tells. Vanier's insensitivity to his power and privilege may make him an unreliable narrator.

I thought that Wall's argument was cogent, though overly erudite. His point is highly significant, but could have been made more simply. That said, his argument echoes McKearney's: Vanier centres his own bias, and neither the needs nor the narratives of the core members of L'Arche, when he tells their stories. Thus, there are many aspects of Vanier's discourse that need to be revisited, and perhaps revised, in order to incorporate those very necessary paradigms. As a student of the Eucharist, I especially resonated strongly with Wall's call to redefine Vanier's concepts of “sacrament and liberation.” Clear visions like Wall's will certainly help L'Arche to address its theological and social needs.

### A Shadowy Conclusion

In summary, *Betrayal of Witness* is a thorough and compassionate examination of the ways in which Vanier, L'Arche, and the shadow of Vanier's egregious abuses have all affected members of the theological community who are entwined with disability. Greig asks that we, the members of that community, inquire into the nature of remembrance and (if possible) forgiveness. Meanwhile, McKearney asserts that L'Arche's core members, not Vanier and his audience without disabilities, are the primary ethical actors in our theological drama. Lastly, Wall testifies to significant critical lacunae in Vanier's biblical interpretation – gaps that speak to his capacities, and ours too, to do evil things. All of these assertions allow us to see Vanier more clearly, and to contextualize his abuses. At present, I'm unprepared to forgive Vanier for his sins, but I can now remember them more fully. In that light, I will both gratefully assist others as we witness to L'Arche's continued impact on our ableist society that so often sees disability as a tragedy or an object of pity, and certainly continue to advocate for our ecclesial inclusion.

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18 Wall, “Hidden in Plain View,” 132-33.