# Day for Life 2006

# Mentally disabled teach carers compassion

**JEAN VANIER spoke slowly and gently as he explained the need for love in the world, at a recent conference for priests in Chicago, America.**

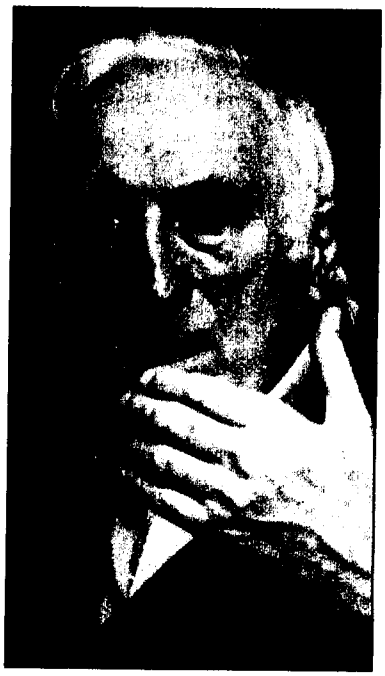
Vanier, who founded the L'Arche community of homes where mentally disabled adults live with nondisabled associates, came to Chicago from his home in France to accept the Blessed are the Peacemakers Award last month.

Vanier, who is 77, started L'Arche by inviting two mentally disabled men to share his home in France in 1964; there are now 126 L'Arche communities in 31 countries.

In his lifetime, he said, he has noticed that people who have mental disabilities often have great faith, but they never speak of 'Christ' or 'the Lord.'

"They always talk about Jesus," Vanier said. "It's a personal relationship."

In L'Arche communities, the disabled residents are seen as the 'core members,' and treated as individuals, with respect and love, and nondisabled and disabled residents alike learn to live together.



Vision: L'Arche community founder Jean Vanier

"Our danger is to see what is broken in a person, what is negative, and not to see the person," said Vanier, a Canadian by birth. "It's not just a question of believing in God, but of believing in human beings, believing in ourselves, and seeing people as God sees them."

"Generosity is something that is good," Vanier said. "When we have more wealth, resources and time, we want to help those in need, and that's good.

"But behind generosity is a notion of power. Generosity must flow into an encounter. We must meet people. It's not a question of simply donating money or giving someone homeless a room – it's about listening to their stories and trying to empathise."

He said that people can sometimes be "frightened of listening to stories" of others because it can "shake up our certitudes and shake up questions of values."

But taking the time to listen can also help the listener.

"It means we have to lose an identity of power and listen as a child of God," he said.

"That is the only real identity that remains no matter what. When my situation has changed, my capabilities have changed, my life has changed, but my identity as a child of God has not changed.".

Believing in and valuing the disabled residents of L'Arche has helped workers become more compassionate people.

"Community means having a common goal, and we live together, so we are affectionately bonded to one another.

What is obvious about our people is that they are crying out for relationship and not for success."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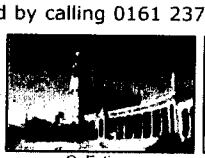
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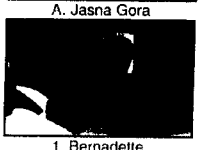
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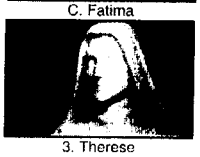
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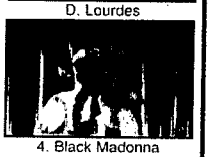
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