

commitment in L'Arche. We celebrate ten years, twenty years, thirty years in L'Arche. We really spend a lot of our time celebrating. And when we celebrate, we don't just give gifts. We say to one another, "You are a gift. You're a gift to the community." Around the table we can see the relationship between prayer, food and celebration. It's the place of our covenant. We are bonded together.

In my community there are about sixty assistants who have been in L'Arche more than twenty-five years. Some are married. Some are not married. There are lots of children. We know we are there for each other. Then we have all these volunteers who come and go over the years. They are super as well. We are open to each other. We laugh together. In our community there are beautiful relationships between people with disabilities. They care for each other too.

All of this takes time. For Janine, who had all that anger in her, it took years to become peaceful. What we are living is fragile. In a document he wrote about a year before he died, John Paul II said:

There is no doubt that in revealing the fundamental frailty of the human condition, the disabled person becomes an expression of the tragedy of pain. In this world of ours that approves hedonism and is charmed by ephemeral and deceptive beauty, the difficulties of the disabled are often perceived as a shame or a provocation and their problem as burdens to be removed or resolved

as quickly as possible. Disabled people are instead living icons of the crucified Son. They reveal the mysterious beauty of the One who emptied himself for our sake and made himself obedient unto death. They show us over and above all appearances that the ultimate foundation of human existence is Jesus Christ. It is said justifiably so that disabled people are humanity's privileged witnesses. They can teach everyone about the love that saves us; they can become heralds of a new world, no longer dominated by force, violence, and aggression, but by love, solidarity, and acceptance—a new world transfigured by the light of Christ, the Son of God, who became incarnate, who was crucified, and rose for us.¹

In our communities things can be going badly, and a visitor will come and say, “Oh, what peace you have in this place.” Everybody sort of smiles. Somewhere it is true that there is peace. But it is so fragile. It is all a gift. Not all of it comes from our efforts. In time we learn to see and receive the gift of our life together and the peace that is there. And somehow, in the process, we are transformed.

The brothers of Taizé recently organized a pilgrimage in Bangladesh for people with disabilities, along with their families and friends, who were all from very different religious backgrounds. Afterward one of them wrote:

These days of pilgrimage of interreligious trust for the handicapped were an occasion for solidarity, for

numerous discoveries, and for many a profound change of heart. The prayer and the celebration of the presence of God in the lives of handicapped people have made these days of communion a feast of hope. We discover more and more that those who are rejected by society because of their weakness and their apparent uselessness are in fact a presence of God. If we welcome them, they lead us progressively out of the world of competition and the need to do great things towards a world of communion of hearts, a life that is simple and joyful where we do small things with love. The challenge today in our country urges us on to show that the service of our weak and vulnerable brothers and sisters means opening a way of peace and unity; welcoming each other in the rich diversity of religions and cultures, serving the poor together, preparing a future of peace.

I have become very influenced by Etty Hillesum, who was assassinated at Auschwitz in 1943. At one point, when she was waiting with ten thousand Jews to be carted off, she said to God, “One thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that you cannot help us, that we must help you to help ourselves. . . . We must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last.”² How can God come into this world if our hearts are not open to receive him so that God can be present in this world? It’s somewhat similar to the

words of the Apocalypse, where the Lord says, “I stand at the door and knock. The person who hears me and opens the door, I will enter and eat with that person, and that person will eat with me” (Revelation 3:20). We have to hear Jesus knocking at the door and then open the door and let him come in to be our friend. To become a friend of Jesus is to become a friend of the excluded. As we learn to be a friend of the excluded, we enter into this amazing relationship that is friendship with God.

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