

THE NEW Gnostics / 2

Vanier, the serial abuser who passed himself off as 'the Bridegroom'

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"Raymond came with me to Trosly. He will tell you about the plans for *L'Arche* because that is the name of the work... Noah's Ark that takes in all the little animals to save them and floats (but you must not tell the Holy Office!) on *'Eau vive!'*" This excerpt from a letter

from J. Vanier to his parents (2 June 1964) clearly explains the link between Fr Thomas Philippe's 'creature' and Vanier's. A link that had to be kept strictly hidden not only through silence, but also through what was to be the great cover-up that allowed Fr Thomas to re-emerge and Vanier to take flight: service to the mentally ill. Just as *l'Eau Vive* [the Living Water] was founded under the cover of spreading Thomist philosophy and theology. It goes without saying that many people of great charity collaborated with *L'Arche* out of love for those most suffering. But the fact remains that *L'Arche* was founded with the express purpose of repeating the ailing experience of *l'Eau Vive*.

Despite the sanctions imposed on Fr Thomas and the prohibition to have any further contact with the members of *l'Eau Vive*, he continued with various subterfuges to meet with them, to carry out mystical-sexual practices and even to make new followers. This was until July 1963, when Fr Thomas was able to return to France and, thanks to his apparent 'good conduct', be released from sanctions.

But there is more to this reference to Noah's Ark. In J. Vanier's letters, and in some testimonies about him and Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe, the reference to Noah's nakedness, covered up by Shem and Japheth, and revealed by Ham, emerges again and again. In their reading of the biblical episode, Ham is cursed for speaking out, while the other two brothers were blessed for keeping silent. Furthermore, in 1990, when confronted with the complaints that an elderly member of *L'Arche* addressed to Fr Marie-Dominique, who was angry about the abuse his wife had suffered from Fr Thomas, the Dominican replied: "You are not inside Fr Thomas' conscience". Then he spoke to me of Shem and Japheth, who had covered Noah's nakedness, walking backwards so as not to see his nakedness".

This is a total misrepresentation of the Scriptures, which will lead the various initiates to make 'not judging' their uniform; a misrepresentation that, however, further strengthens the silence among the initiates of what the Dominican Fr Paul Philippe, created cardinal in 1973 and the first accuser of the Philippe brothers, defined in a report to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1977 as a "mystical sect": "At *L'Eau Vive*, the secrets of the 'mystical sect' are imposed on the initiates under oath, even with regard to confessors. *Ex Scriptura* arguments were crucial to convince victims that God can ask privileged souls to go against the commandments; as he asked Abraham to kill his son, or the prophet Hosea to unite with the prostitute Gomer. The central idea remained that of being allowed, by the mystical grace experienced in 1937 by Fr Thomas, to live sexuality beyond the commandments or, as Fr M. Dominique put it, to live the grace of 'positive virginity'.

But J. Vanier and M. Dominique did not just defend Fr Thomas: they imitated him. The epicentre of the practice of this sexual mysticism was the Carmel of Nogent-sur-Marne, which had already been "initiated" by Fr Thomas, and where Vanier had also entered into erotic relationships with some nuns. The correspondence shows how J. Vanier had become for some of them Christ himself and the Bridegroom, to whom they could give all of themselves or with whom they could become one. These practices became routine in the community of Trosly-Breuil, the mother cell of *L'Arche*, the place of residence of J. Vanier and Fr Thomas, and the point of reference for all the members of the association. Fr Thomas, from being a chaplain, became the exclusive spiritual director for the members of *L'Arche*, and succeeded, with Vanier's help, in convincing the bishop of Beauvais to ordain two priests as additional spiritual assistants. The Commission received a complaint from two women who had had sexual relations with one of them, Gilbert Adam, as part of a 'spiritual accompaniment'.

The Study Commission was made aware of twenty-five women who, from 1952 to 2019, had relationships with J. Vanier involving the sexual dimension; in some cases, the women presented themselves as victims, in others, a 'consent' to the transgressive relationship emerged. The Commission assumes that there would in fact be further cases. With regard to Fr Thomas, 23 persons (including a few men) emerged, of whom a small number overlap with the 33 already identified by the Holy Office in connection with the events that led to the sanctions in 1956. In this case, too, it is suspected that the number is actually underestimated.

The recruitment of these victims took place quite naturally, with the involuntary complicity of the unsuspecting members of *L'Arche*, who favoured in every way personal

meetings with Fr Thomas and Vanier, given their reputation for holiness and their unquestionable charisma, meetings from which a "spiritual accompaniment" was then born. The commission is not aware that Fr Marie-Dominique had intimate relationships with women in the context of the Ark. But a woman's confession reveals even more the complicity between the two Dominican brothers.

Michèle-France Pesneau, a former Carmelite nun, had been abused by Fr Marie-Dominique in the 1970s and was directed by him to continue her sexual practice with his brother. Fr Thomas would have relations with this woman, who had moved to Trosly-Breuil, for fifteen years, several times a month. "He would ask me to wait for him in the chapel. He would tell me: 'Come, let's go and pray together'. That was the coded message, 'pray together'," she tells *FranceInfo*. But this expression was not simply a way of covering something else; it was instead, in the eyes of Fr Thomas and J. Vanier, the substance of what they were doing.

These intimate relationships were, in their view, modes of mystical prayer, or even 'chaste sexuality', because they never reached full intercourse (probably to avoid the mishap that happened to Fr Thomas in 1947): this was the way to convince women to overcome their inner resistance. Likewise the blasphemous idea, central to the false mysticism of the Philippe brothers and J. Vanier, of reliving the grace of carnal intercourse practised 'chastely' by the Redeemer and his Most Holy Mother, in order to heal human nature also in its sexual dimension and to anticipate the life of Heaven.

It is also worth noting the continual repetition of a fundamental pattern: the victims were actually chosen ones, called to enter into communion with the "mystical grace" that Fr Thomas had received in 1938, and which was only communicated to special people. This is the tenor of a letter from J. Vanier to J. Farquharson: "You have been chosen, it is an extraordinary thing, it is secret". Or to another woman: "My little sister Brigitte, I am so touched by your two letters. So moved by the words of the chaplain [Fr Thomas, ed]... Then by the word that Jesus gives you. That Jesus invites you to an insane confidence. He has chosen you. He calls you to these graces of love that the world does not want to receive".

A long chain of abuse, the generation of new abusers, the spread of a false, blasphemous mysticism. And still missing is the whole chain linked to Father Marie-Dominique and the Communauté Saint-Jean, the subject of the next article. A chain that should have been broken from the start. But it was not. The superior of the Dominicans of France, Fr Nicolas Tixier, with great honesty and firmness admits (see [here](#)): "It is the story of an institution's inability to control aggressor friars; it is the inability of an

institution to discipline abusive situations".

2. To be continued