

Jean Vanier, author who shaped theology of disability, dies at age 90

Through the L'Arche network of communities and his books, he lifted up the brokenness of people with and without developmental disabilities—and their potential for transformation.

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Jean Vanier. Photo courtesy of the Templeton Prize, John Morrison.

Jean Vanier, author and founder of the L'Arche network of communities, where those with and without developmental disabilities live together, died May 7 at age 90 in Paris. He had thyroid cancer.

Among other awards, Vanier won the 2015 Templeton Prize honoring those who have made "exceptional contributions" to affirming the spiritual dimension of life.

Often called the most prestigious award in the world of religion, the Templeton Prize is valued at \$1.7 million.

“He has given us a magnificent vision of who Jesus is, and he is not only saying it, he’s living it,” Pope Francis said of Vanier on that occasion.

Vanier was born in Switzerland to a family of diplomats and humanitarians who fled France before the Nazi occupation. He grew up in Canada in a well-to-do family; his father was the governor general, the British monarch’s representative in Canada. Vanier trained for a career as a naval officer with the British and Canadian navies but then resigned his commission and went to France, where he earned a doctorate in philosophy in 1962 from the Catholic University of Paris.

In 1964, he decided to follow his mentor, a Dominican priest named Thomas Philippe, who had become a chaplain at a small institution for people with disabilities.

“The cry of people with disabilities was a very simple cry: Do you love me? That’s what they were asking,” Vanier wrote. “And that awoke something deep within me because that was also my fundamental cry.”

Vanier authored more than 30 books, in which he lifted up the brokenness of both the disabled and the abled and described the transformation that can happen through relationships of mutuality. In addition to L’Arche, he founded another ecumenical and interfaith network called Faith and Light, which consists of small groups that meet regularly to support and celebrate people with developmental disabilities.

“I’m not interested in doing a good job,” he wrote. “I’m interested in an ecclesial vision for community and in living in a gospel-based community with people with disabilities.” —Religion News Service