Community and Growth

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Welcome

Giving space

To welcome is one of the signs of true human and Christian maturity. It is not only to open one's door and one's home to someone. It is to give space to someone in one's heart, space for that person to be and to grow; space where the person knows that he or she is accepted just as they are, with their wounds and their gifts. That implies the existence of a quiet and peaceful place in the heart where people can find a resting place. If the heart is not peaceful, it cannot welcome.

To welcome is to be open to reality as it is, with the least possible filtering. I have discovered that I have many filters within my own self where I select and modify the reality I want to welcome: the reality of the world, of people, of God and of the Word of God. I select what pleases me, boosts my ego and gives me a sense of worth. I reject that which causes inner pain or disturbance or a feeling of helplessness; that which may bring up guilt feelings or anger or a broken sexuality. We all have filters created from our early childhood, protecting our vulnerable hearts and minds. To grow is to let go of these filters and to welcome the reality that is given, no longer through preconceived ideas, theories, prejudgements or prejudices or through our wounded emotions, but just as it is. Thus, we are *in truth* and no longer in a world of illusions.

But to be able to welcome means that our inner person and freedom have been strengthened; we are no longer a person living in fear and insecurity, unclear about who we are and what is our mission. It takes time for this inner person to grow. It takes many

painful meetings, many times when we have been wrong and have asked for forgiveness, much grace from God and much love from loving friends. To become humble and open, we have to live through many humiliations.

It is not surprising that Jesus comes under the guise of a stranger: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.' The stranger is a person who is different, from another culture or another faith; the stranger disturbs because he or she cannot enter into our patterns of thought or our ways of doing things. To welcome is to make the stranger feel at home, at ease, and that means not exercising any judgement or any preconceived ideas, but rather giving space *to be*. Once we have made the effort of welcoming and accepting the disturbance, we discover a friend; we live a moment of communion, a new peace; a presence of God is given. The stranger is frequently prophetic; he or she breaks down our barriers and our fears, or else makes us conscious that they are there and may even strengthen them.

It is always a risk to welcome anyone and particularly the stranger. It is always disturbing. But didn't Jesus come precisely to disturb our routines, comforts, and apathy? We need constant challenge if we are not to become dependent on security and comfort, if we are to continue to progress from the slavery of sin and egoism towards the promised land of liberation.

Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we aren't afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to share. If a community is closing its doors, that is a sign that hearts are closing as well.

But before we welcome people, we have to exist as a community. When a community starts, it is frequently more closed, so that its members can get to know each other and a unity be created. The same is true in marriage; if a newly married husband and wife are constantly inviting friends in, they will have no time to forge their own unity.

There is a time for everything – a time to build community and

a time to open its doors to others. The second period doesn't necessarily follow the first: they are bound up in each other. A community will always need times of intimacy, just as it will always need times of openness. If it has only one or the other, it will die, or at least suffer periods of setback. A community which is constantly welcoming people will soon become dispersed; it will end up like a railway station where people just run into each other and part. A community which is closed can become stifling and suffer from dissension and envy, and may cease to be alive.

A loving community is attractive, and a community which is attractive is by definition welcoming. Life brings new life. There is an extraordinary *gratuité* in the power of procreation: the way a living being gives birth to other living beings is marvellous, and this is true for the living body which is community.

Love can never be static. A human heart is either progressing or regressing. If it is not becoming more open, it is closing and withering spiritually. A community which refuses to welcome – whether through fear, weariness, insecurity, a desire to cling to comfort, or just because it is fed up with visitors – is dying spiritually.

But there is a time for everything: a time to be and a time to welcome.

Sometimes when people knock at my door, I ask them in and we talk, but I make it clear to them in a thousand small ways that I am busy, that I have other things to do. The door of my office is open, but the door of my heart is closed. I still have a lot to learn and a long way to go. When we welcome people, we open the door of our heart to them and give them space within it. And if we have other things to do which really can't wait, we should say so – but open our heart all the same.

To welcome is not just something that happens as people cross the threshold. It is an attitude; it is the constant openness of the heart; it is saying to people every morning and at every moment, 'come in'; it is giving them space; it is listening to them attentively.

To welcome means listening a great deal to people and then discerning the truth with them. A community cannot accept as a resident every single person that knocks at the door. In order to welcome there must be a peaceful space in the hearts of those welcoming and a peaceful space in the community for the person to find a place of rest and growth. If that peaceful space is lacking, then it is better not to welcome.

At the same time, the people welcomed must try to accept the community as it is, with the space that is offered, be willing to abide by the spirit, traditions and rules of the community, and desire also to grow and to evolve. If the newcomer only wants to change the community and get everything they can out of it, without any modification on their part, there can be no true welcome.

That is why there must be a double discernment when deciding whether to welcome a new member into the community. Can we in the community give that person the peaceful space and the elements they need to be at ease and to grow? And then will they, so far as we can know them after dialogue and prayer, really benefit from the community as it is, and truly adapt to its minimal expectations? Or does the person have expectations that cannot be fulfilled?

A community needs wise people to discern peacefully and prayerfully. Of course, this careful discernment is only for new members and, at most, those who want to stay a while in the community; it is not necessary for casual visitors.

A community must not fall into the trap of thinking it can be the saviour of all. It must not feel guilty if, after discernment, it says 'no' to someone. But there is a way of saying 'no', with compassion; there is a way of taking time, listening, explaining why the person cannot stay and offering suggestions where he or she could go. It is such a wounding experience to be turned away. We must always remember that.

When I started l'Arche, I welcomed Raphael and Philippe, who are both mentally handicapped. Several months later, I welcomed Gabriel, a tramp without work. He stayed a few months, but his

presence quickly became incompatible with community life. He terrorised Raphael – perhaps because he was jealous of him. If he hadn't left, Raphael would have been in real danger. When we have welcomed people who are weak and without inner stability and have made a commitment to them, we cannot then welcome people who seriously threaten their growth. We have no right to accept someone who refuses to accept others or community life with all that it implies.

Each community has its own weakness, its limitations which are also its wealth. It is important to recognise these limitations; we have to know what our norms of welcome are, who can be accepted within them and who the community can truly help. We can certainly hope that, with time, the community will deepen and so be able to welcome more and more difficult people. But strangely enough, that doesn't always happen. When l'Arche started, we welcomed some people who were very difficult, unstable, and violent. With time, they have become more peaceful and found a certain inner harmony. So now it would be unwise to welcome others who could reawaken all their anguish and darkness. We have to respect the rhythm of fragile people who are still finding their own peace and inner healing.

Openness and welcome sometimes challenge us to go beyond our fears and prejudices to the depth of compassion and understanding. At the same time we must respond from our own deepest search for truth. I, for example, am deeply moved by the pain and immense suffering of those who are homosexual. I desire to enter into the sense of misery and guilt that some homosexuals experience. I can sympathise with their anger – though at times it frightens me – at the injustice of being denounced or labeled 'abnormal' by society and church. The causes of homosexuality are not clearly known. For some it is more evidently related to early experiences in a kind of suffering that can be healed. For others it seems less readily accessible to healing, and some even suggest that it is genetic and part of the natural order. Whatever the cause or origin, it is rarely, if ever, a matter of choice. I sometimes wonder how I would have coped with the pain of being different because

of an attraction to men rather than to women. People who have experienced a profound psychological hurt often have a quality of sensitivity and spirituality that can be a gift and a grace.

At the same time we should be attentive to those attitudes – particularly with regard to genital sexuality, whether with a person of the same or other sex – which can be destructive to truth and community. Community implies open relationships and not possessive ones. It is built on relationships that give life to others rather than on ones that turn in upon themselves. It requires relationships which do not undermine others in their search for wholeness.

Who welcomes?

Leaders who take responsibility alone, for welcoming people without living with them every day, may be imposing their own ideal of welcome on to those who do live with them; that is not always just. It is the whole community - or a few designated members – which should decide who is to be welcomed, because it is the community which has to live with the difficulties as well as the joys this brings.

In l'Arche communities, especially those which have been going for some time, more and more handicapped people are reaching a certain maturity. They have been in the community for a long time, often for longer than the assistants,and sometimes longer than the person in charge. It is important to consult these handicapped people before we welcome someone in distress.

Some people who appear to be very welcoming are, in fact, seeking to calm their own anguish. They need to meet people and to have a certain power over them. They need to have others dependent on them. They lack the necessary objectivity to really understand a person's weakness and discern whether he or she can grow.

One of the marvellous things about community is that it enables

us to welcome and help people in a way we couldn't as individuals. When we pool our strength and share the work and responsibility, we can welcome many more people, even those in deep distress, and perhaps help them find self-confidence and inner healing. But that implies that there is not just one person welcoming but a group of people who have a real gift for welcome and who discern together. Each of us is different and each has his/her ups and downs; each one of us welcomes others in a different way, with larger or smaller filters, or none at all. While I can welcome and understand certain people very well, another will welcome other people better than I. And we all have to beware of our likes and dislikes and our preconceived ideas.

Members of a community should pray for this gift of welcome. For it is truly a gift. Our hearts must be opened to welcome. This gift is love, and love for the different and the unexpected. And this love comes from the Father. We must ask for this love and expect it to be given. Genuine welcome is an energy of peace felt and appreciated.

And of course we can only welcome someone as a gift of God if we have come to the awareness that we too are loved by God just as we are; that we too are a gift for the community.

It is easy to welcome when one feels lonely and does not have much to do. But it can be painful to be welcoming when one has had a busy day with meetings, or is surrounded by people, or when one is tired. It is terribly difficult to tell one's story or the story of the community for the hundredth time. It is then that our welcome is truly from the Holy Spirit. One has to be centred in him in order to welcome in this way. We then become truly instruments of God.

Some people are called to announce the good news by travelling far and wide, meeting and telling people about community and love and the gift of God. This is good and necessary.

We are also 'missionaries' – that is, people who are sent – when we welcome someone at our table, when we show them that they

are loved and appreciated, when we tell them with love how we have been called by Jesus to live, when we make them feel at home. At that moment we are also truly announcing the good news.

Welcome: true and false

The welcome a community offers visitors is an extension of the welcome its members offer each other. If our heart is open to our brothers and sisters, it will also be open to others. But if we are withdrawn from other members of the community, we are likely to close ourselves off from visitors. We may of course – and this does happen – be delighted to use visitors as an excuse to flee from the community. We can get bored with each other's company and so become aggressive; visitors then become a distraction. That can be valuable and even lead to better welcoming of each other. But it is not true welcome. It is sometimes easier to welcome a visitor than to welcome someone with whom we live all the time. It is rather the same as husbands and wives who are always away from home, caught up in a whole variety of good works. They would do better to spend more time at home, being a bit more welcoming to each other.

Can we truly welcome strangers as they are, if we have not welcomed the community as it is and the members as they are? If we are angry with the community and its members, we risk using strangers to compensate for our anguish. That is not welcome.

A divided community has no business to welcome people. It would only do them harm. We should put some order into our own house before we invite others into it.

I'm sometimes worried about the way l'Arche welcomes people who come as assistants. Do we welcome them because we need them to do a specific job, or do we welcome them for themselves,

because Jesus has sent them? 'I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.'

Of course people have to be able to find their place, and that implies finding a role and a function. They have to be able to use their gifts, too. But we are sometimes in danger of no longer seeing them as people, because we need them to fill a particular job. It is hard to find the balance between using people for the community and leaving them too much space, without a useful role.

Welcoming Providence

The longer we live in community, the more we realise how central the role of Providence is to us. A community can only stay alive when new people arrive and commit themselves to it. What explanation is there for the fact that one person is touched by the community and another isn't? We realise very quickly that people are drawn by something greater than the community itself – a call and gift of God.

And each new person who joins the community brings his or her own qualities, gifts, and failings which will, with time, modify the way the community develops and grows. The people we welcome today will commit themselves tomorrow and carry the community the day after that. Welcome is vital for a community. It is a question of life and death and the first welcome is very often the important one. People can flee because it has put them off. Others stay because of a smile or an initial act of kindness. People should not be made to feel that they are upsetting things when they arrive. They should be able to feel that we are happy to share with them. We have to know how to respond sympathetically to a letter or a phone call, how to add a personal note of *gratuité*. If we really welcome each new person as a gift of God, and as his messenger, we would be more loving and more open.

Welcoming the vulnerable

I am discovering more and more how many people are deeply lonely. They bring certain emotional problems with them into community, together with what may look like a 'bad character' which is often the result of suffering and lack of understanding during childhood. It is good that these people can come into a community, which can be a place of support, opening and growth for them. But clearly they are going to suffer there and make others suffer too. Perhaps they need a community whose life is structured, where the sharing is not too threatening, where there are not too many meetings or demanding situations which could make them explode. They need space to be alone and work that brings inner security. It would be sad if communities accepted only perfectly balanced, flexible, open and available people. Those with difficulties also have the right to the possibility of community life. But we need communities with different structures, to welcome people with different needs.

When a community welcomes people who have been on the margins of society, things usually go quite well to begin with. Then, for many reasons, these people start to become marginal to the community as well. They provoke crises which can be very painful for the community and cause it considerable confusion, because it feels so powerless. The community is then caught in a trap from which it may be hard to escape. But if the crises bring it to a sense of its own poverty, they can also be a grace. There is something prophetic in people who seem marginal and difficult; they force the community to become alert, because what they are demanding is authenticity. Too many communities are founded on dreams and fine words; there is so much talk about love, truth, and peace. Marginal people are demanding. Their cries are cries of truth because they sense the emptiness of many of our words; they can see the gap between what we say and how we live. If the community reacts by showing them the door, this can create a terrible uproar, and then it is easy to label them unbearable, sick, lazy, and good for nothing. It has to devalue them as far as it can, because they have shown up its hypocrisy.

Yes, we have to discern wisely when we welcome. It is so much

better to refuse someone at the outset because the community is conscious of its limitations, than to welcome him or her naively and then ask them to leave.

Marginal people in community have very particular needs. They are wounded and lack self-confidence; they are often despairing. They can be buffeted by terrible anguish, which drives them to attack others or themselves in ways that even they cannot understand. They often lack inner stability, and so are deeply confused. They can move quickly from a state where they have no desires at all to a state where they are faced with a complete anarchy of competing desires. A terrible struggle is going on in them between darkness and light, life and death. They have nothing to look to for guidance, neither people nor laws. And it is the realisation of their loneliness and their poverty that makes them despair.

If they are to refind hope, marginal people have to feel loved and accepted. It is not simply through being welcomed that they will rediscover their own value and capacities for positive action. They need people who will listen to them, with all their wounds and needs, and sense what they really want. This demands time and patience, because they are afraid of revealing themselves and won't open up to just anyone. They need to sense that they are not being judged, but are really understood. They need someone who can listen to them, a stable reference person who can guide and support them and bring them security, who can encourage and help them to discover their abilities and take on responsibilities. Because of their very deep confusion, marginal people have to learn to trust that reference person, that father- or mother-figure who unites tenderness, goodness, and firmness.

A community which welcomes marginal people has to make clear to them when they arrive exactly what it expects of them. They have to accept its rules, even if these are very flexible and, in a sense, have been made for marginal people! They have to sense that the community will not let them do exactly as they like, but will demand this minimal conformity. If they refuse this, that is their way of saying that they do not want to stay.

Their reference person is an intermediary between them and the

law or the rules. This person has to explain the reasons for these rules, and has to know how to be firm as well as how to encourage and forgive.

Above all, these reference persons must not set themselves up against the community. Generous people sometimes want to be saviours and show the community that it is neither open nor evangelical. They exploit marginal people to show up the community's failings. People who act as reference persons must do so in the name of the community and reflect its wishes. Their task is to help the marginal people progress from this single, individual relationship with them to the demands of relationships with others in the community. This will be gradual; marginal people will have crises of jealousy; they will test the community to see how far it really accepts them. But eventually, through these crises, they will begin to feel part of the community and at home.

So if a community is to welcome marginal people, it must be able to offer them reference persons who are solid, welcoming, understanding and firm. If it cannot do this, if it doesn't have the people who can accept the occasional blows and crises, it would do better not to welcome marginal people at all. If it is to welcome them, it has to be very deeply united and solidly structured. If this unity is not there, marginal people may well accentuate the tensions and disharmony.

Marginal people live in darkness, without motivation or hope. They are forced to compensate for their anguish – which may even prevent them from sleeping or eating – in drugs, alcohol, or 'madness'. It takes time for hope to be reborn and for their anguish to be transformed into peace. The rebirth can be very painful for them and for those around them. Sometimes they have to test the community to see if it is really concerned about them. Sometimes they have to unload their personal anguish on to the community, and this anguish can spread like wildfire if it finds inflammable material – just as it can be put out if it runs into people who can accept it. Marginal people are the product of the injustices and violence of their past. Their attitudes are the reflection of these rejections. If they are very sensitive and vulnerable, their wounds

will be deep and be revealed in a confusion, lack of self-confidence, and sense of guilt; they may even feel guilty for being alive at all.

Only another person can bring the light which will chase away this darkness. And the struggle with darkness can be a terrible one for marginal people. They are always ambivalent; they vacillate between love of light and a desire to remain in chaos and tragedy. Their ambivalence spills over on to the community, and especially on to the one who has become their reference person - whom they both love and hate. In their insecurity, they want both to become attached to these people and to reject them.

The liberation of marginal people from their darkness may involve a long struggle. The reference person and the community have to know how to accept the violence into themselves, so that they can transform it into tenderness and gradually liberate the marginal people from their anguish. The role of a community of reconciliation is to break the cycle of violence and so lead people to peace.

Many marginal people are in anguish because they have not experienced a true relationship with their own mother. This leaves them wounded: they are seeking a relationship of unconditional acceptance. Deep inside, they are crying out for this privileged love. Because they have never had it, they haven't lived through the normal frustrations of a child whose mother later gives more attention to a new baby. Because they haven't lived through these first jealousies, they haven't integrated them. That is why the thirst of marginal people is insatiable: they want to possess their reference person totally – they refuse to accept that anyone else has any claims. And that is why people who want to help them should never be alone. It is dangerous when a child monopolises its mother's attention, as can happen if she is on her own or emotionally estranged from her husband. The mother and child become emotionally dependent on each other, each possesses the other. Their relationship is no longer liberating. This dangerous sort of relationship can grow in our communities when an assistant concentrates on a particular child with a handicap to the exclusion of all other relationships.

This is why the reference persons are a part of the community. And the children with a handicap or marginal people must clearly understand that they can never possess these people, whose strength comes from their link with the community.

In some of our l'Arche communities a person with a handicap has become quite violent and anti-social, after many years in the community. We have to learn to interpret these different forms of behaviour. Sometimes the person is saying through their action: 'I don't want to stay here! I want to go somewhere else!' We have to listen and understand the message of violence; we have to enter into dialogue with the person.

Sometimes a community feels guilty when it is not able to keep the person. They feel they have failed. But there is no community that can save everybody. Sometimes a professional person can help the community make the right decision and ask the person to leave.

Sometimes, however, violence springs up because of the inadequacies of the assistants who are not attentive enough to the needs of the people. Sometimes it is because assistants are not permanent enough and people are angry because someone has left. Violence must be listened to attentively, the causes understood and, if possible, remedied.

Bruno Bettelheim wrote a book called *Love is Not Enough.*[1] He is right – even if he is a bit too analytical in his approach. Here is an important message for anyone who tries to help people in anguish and distress, people who are marginal, or living in darkness and confusion. We have to know how to accept crises, violence and depression. We have to understand what people are trying to say through all the regression and confusion. We have to be able to decode the messages that are sent through bizarre behaviour and to respond authentically to these cries for help. We have to understand certain laws of human nature and how human beings grow

1 The Free Press, New York, 1950.

through work and relationships. We have to know how to lead people towards inner healing. We have especially to know how to enter into authentic relationships.

This doesn't mean that we have to become psychiatrists, nor go through analysis. But it does mean being sensitive to the deep needs of other people, being experienced, and knowing when we need the professional help of doctors, psychiatrists and different therapists. There is no conflict between faith and psychiatry; there is only conflict between people who deny the value of one or the other. That isn't to say, though, that it is easy to sort out what has to do with the priest and spirituality, and what has to do with the psychiatrist; the two areas often overlap.

At l'Arche, we are beginning to discover our own therapy, which is very different from that offered by hospitals or from other therapies based entirely on drugs or analysis. Our therapy is based on authentic relationships lived in community, work and a true spiritual life. All these bring people hope, self-acceptance, and motivation. Through this, people discover gradually that they are part of a family and a community, and this brings them security and peace. But some people, before they can find that inner harmony necessary for community life, need professional help.

A Christian community which welcomes people who are on the margins of society and in distress needs professional help from psychologists, psychiatrists, and others. But above all, it needs to deepen its own therapy. And professional people have to recognise this therapy and work with it.

A Christian community is based fundamentally on relationships which are authentic, loving and faithful, and on forgiveness, and the signs of that forgiveness. The role of the priest can be essential in leading people towards inner healing. Through confession, and the secret he keeps, he can help people discover the forgiveness of Jesus; this can be central in bringing those in distress to inner healing by lifting the yoke of guilt. The discovery through faith and the love of the community that Jesus loves us all, and especially those in distress, can help people discover their own value as children of God. The way in which a community welcomes the

death of a brother can help others overcome their own fear of death. The Eucharist and communal prayer can help us discover that we are all brothers and sisters in Jesus and that, in the end, there is no difference between those who are well and those who are sick or disabled. We are all handicapped before God, prisoners of our own egoism. But Jesus has come to heal us, save us and set us free by the gift of his Spirit. That is the good news he brings to the poor: we are not alone in our sadness, darkness and loneliness, in our fears and emotional and sexual problems. He loves us and is with us: 'Do not be afraid, I am with you.'

When we welcome people who are deeply wounded, we have to be fully aware of the seriousness of what we are doing. This welcome implies that we accept them as they are, imposing no ideal on them; that we understand what they are seeking in relationships, and that we are ready to 'believe all things, hope all things, endure all things' (1 Cor. 13:7). But at the same time they too must understand the limitations of the community.

Sometimes, even when our welcome has been authentic enough, we find that we cannot keep people, because they are damaging themselves and others. We then have to learn how to be true and firm, and at the same time tender and compassionate. If people have to leave, we should try to find them a place which will help them in ways we could not.

Marginal people at the heart of the community

Many communities carry one or two marginal people at their heart - people who, having lived in the community for some time, seem to withdraw into a kind of mental illness. They become bitter, depressed, and sullen. It seems impossible to reach them; they reject even the most sensitive approaches. Often when these people were younger, they had the strength to hide their difficulties. But now, unconscious forces are exploding in them. They are ambivalent: they want to leave the community and at the same

time they know that there is nowhere else for them to go. Because they reject all relationships, they feel useless and unloved. They are carrying a terrible cross of loneliness.

Sometimes the community should help these people to find a place which will offer them what they need; sometimes it should find them professional help if they themselves want this. But above all, it should welcome them as a gift of God. These people who become marginal to their community are often harder to help than those who come from the margins of society outside. But although they are disturbing, they also help the community to be constantly alert to ways of becoming more loving, better at listening, and at finding the small things which bring peace. We have to help these marginal people not to feel guilty, and not to withdraw completely into their illness.

The community or its leaders may be partly responsible for this situation. Perhaps they asked too much of these people when they were younger and didn't take enough care of them then; perhaps they didn't confront them when the first signs of their difficulties appeared. If notice had been taken of them earlier, if they hadn't been left alone, there would perhaps have been less suffering later.

Some people hide their difficulties behind a mask of efficiency. Their 'job' in the community becomes their 'thing' and they let no one interfere or give advice; there is no dialogue about their work, no accountability. When we sense this, we have to be careful. Our tendency might be to enable them to go on doing this by emphasising their function. But a time will come when they will no longer be able to hide their difficulties: they will sense too great a gap between their function and their fragility. Then they may become either deeply depressed or violently aggressive. It is sometimes better to listen to their cries earlier, when there is still time to help them.

In such situations it is better to provoke a crisis earlier on, by not letting them close up on their work. This might be very painful but it is sometimes better than pretending that there is no problem and letting things slide. The most important thing is that we are always truthful and always tell people how we feel towards them.

Welcome and service

A community has to be careful that it is not welcoming people because this salves its conscience or gives it a sense of 'saving' others. It should welcome people because it wants to serve them and to help them find their freedom.

Many welcoming communities want to be Christian communities – which means communities of prayer. A Christian community has to know its own aims and who it is going to welcome. Is it going to give priority to people who are disabled or in distress, or without families, offering them a new family in which they can find greater peace and security and so, perhaps, learn to rejoin society in a really integrated way? Or is it going to give priority to creating a community of prayer, welcoming people who are either Christian already or who will, it hopes, become so?

At l'Arche, we have decided to welcome people because they are in need, whether they are Christian or not. Our aim is to do all we can to help them grow in human and spiritual terms, according to their own rhythm and their own gifts, through the security of relationships. This means that not all our members are necessarily Christian; they do not all join in our prayers. And yet, we are all members of the same family.

The important thing is to know exactly what we want and then to be vulnerable enough to show that we really care for people. This can be terribly disturbing, because we have no firm framework or rules. It is always easier and more comfortable to welcome only the people who come to prayer and Mass! But the danger then is that they feel they will only be able to stay if they pretend to share our faith. It seems preferable to let them discover their own way and the person of Jesus Christ gradually, so that they can decide freely. This way is certainly slower, but because it respects individuals in their own deepest choices and growth, the results will be deeper too. Of course there is always the danger of indifference. But we have to pray that the Spirit will keep us alert to that.

The need for community

There are so many people who live alone, crushed by their loneliness. It is obvious that too much solitude can drive people off the rails, to depression or alcoholism. More and more people seem to have lost their balance because their family life has been unhappy. There are so many who are lost, taking drugs, turning to delinquency or just hiding themselves in a world of rock music, films and distractions; there are so many who are looking for a sense of belonging and a meaning to their lives. In years to come, we are going to need many small communities which will welcome lost and lonely people, offering them a new form of family and a sense of belonging.

In the past, Christians who wanted to follow Jesus opened hospitals and schools. Now that there are so many of these, Christians must commit themselves to the new communities of welcome, to live with people who have no other family, and to show them that they are loved and can grow to greater freedom and that they, in turn, can love and give life to others.

People coming into a community for the first time are usually open, available and often have a child's grace. They have left the responsibilities and the landmarks they had in society and have entered a new world. It is like a new birth. This time of childhood, of naivety, openness and availability will last for varying amounts of time. Sooner or later, people begin to become responsible. The risk for people who leave one community to go into another is that they will arrive as adults and not as children. They will come to offer service. They already know what to do. I really wonder whether anyone can commit themselves in a community if they do not first live a period of childhood there.