The Troubled Inheritance of Jean Vanier: Locating the Fatal Theological Mistakes

Brian Brock
School of Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

Abstract
Jean Vanier’s life and teaching bore good fruit, but what is good was wrapped up from the very beginning with manipulative and abusive behaviors justified in theological language. For those of us who do not have access to the voices of the victims themselves, it is important to at least analyze the long-public writings of Fr. Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier. Until now these were all that was available to those interested in the theology of L’Arche, and in them their erotico-mystical theology was hidden in plain sight. A close reading of these texts points to a deformed eschatology as the fatal theological doctrine Vanier inherited from Philippe. More precisely, eschatological concepts were deployed in order to declare traditionally prohibited sexual activities as licit, in being conceived as taking place beyond the mundane domain of everyday morality. A nuptial union taking place outside the ethics of normal Christian life brought affectionate union with God down into the contingency of everyday ethics in a manner that circumvented well-known church teachings about sexual ethics.

Keywords
Jean Vanier, L’Arche, sexual abuse, over realized eschatology, Thomas Philippe, L’Eau vive, spiritual guidance, community and growth

Introduction
The history of Jean Vanier’s witness will be long in the sorting. His life and teaching bore good fruit in the most obvious of ways, including the institution called L’Arche.

1. The term ‘troubled inheritance’ was coined by Sarah Shin, who, along with Julie Land and another graduate student chaired a 2021 Theological Ethics Research Seminar in Aberdeen

Corresponding author:
Brian Brock, Professor of Moral and Practical Theology, School of Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History, University of Aberdeen, King’s College, Aberdeen AB24 3UB, UK.
Email: b.brock@abdn.ac.uk
Very often the ethos of its founder and vision-caster are detectable in the truth and beauty visible in these homes. It has only recently become clear how deeply paradoxical it is that what is good was wrapped up from the very beginning with manipulative and abusive behaviors justified in theological language. For those of us that have been directly and indirectly influenced by the witness of L’Arche and Vanier and prompted by the voices of those traumatized by abuse and betrayal, now is the time for forensic and repentant examination of the intertwining of Vanier’s actions and theology. We must not evade our implication or ignore the continuing influence of ideas or practices which may still open the door to abuses of power. For those of us who do not have access to the voices of the victims themselves, it is important to at least analyze the long-public writings of Fr. Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier. Until now these were all that was available to those interested in the theology of L’Arche, and in them their erotico-mystical theology was hidden in plain sight.

I will suggest that a close reading of these texts points to a deformed theology as the fatal theological doctrine Vanier inherited from Fr. Philippe. More precisely, eschatological concepts were deployed in order to declare traditionally prohibited sexual activities as being licit in taking place beyond the mundane domain of everyday morality. Many Christians through the centuries have sought union with God, but Vanier and Philippe presented this union in an unorthodox manner—as an exception to rather than a transformation of the ethical boundaries protecting vulnerable human beings in a fallen eon. A nuptial union taking place outside of and beyond the ethics of normal Christian life brought affectionate union with God down into the time and contingency of everyday ethics in a manner that justified circumventing well-known church teachings about sexual ethics. The basic outlines of this heterodox theology were developed at the precursor community to L’Arche, L’Eau vive, where a psychology of regression therapy was welded together in a particularly potent manner with a Marian theology of a ‘womb of love’ and a countercultural politics that remains ethically attractive to this day.

To answer the question ‘What is theologically problematic about Vanier’s theology?’ I will begin by summarizing the ideas that coalesce in the community of L’Eau vive and them move to sketch the main lines of Fr. Philippe’s theology of spiritual direction. I will then outline what has long been known about Vanier’s relationship to L’Eau vive and Fr. Philippe and the traces of Philippe’s theology and practice in Vanier’s main writings, which wrestled with the inconsistencies in the lives of Karl Barth, John Howard Yoder, and Jean Vanier. This article elaborates my own contribution to that seminar and is deeply shaped by the painful lessons learned as we collaboratively digested and analyzed this troubled theological history in much the same way as did the authors of this exemplary volume of responses to Yoder’s abuses: Elizabeth Soto Albrecht and Darryl W. Stephens (eds.), Liberating the Politics of Jesus: Renewing Peace Theology through the Wisdom of Women (London: T&T Clark, 2020). A similarly collaborative approach was pursued by the authors of Daniel J. Fleming, James F. Keenan, SJ, and Hans Zollner, SJ (eds.), Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023), https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.72042. See also Hans Reinders and Stanley Hauerwas (eds.), Examining the Legacy of Jean Vanier (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023). Thanks for critical feedback on earlier drafts of this article from Chris Asprey, Bishop Hugh Gilbert, Julie Land, and Robert Heimburger.
focusing on *Community and Growth* and *Man and Woman God Made Them*. These texts display rather obvious links between Vanier’s publicly taught theology and the mystical Thomism and practice of spiritual direction inherited from Fr. Philippe. Since both men intentionally configured their language to court orthodox readings of their theological surface, it is understandable that few picked up the clues that something more was afoot. Part of the sorting of Vanier’s witness will mean those of us who have looked to him for inspiration will need to engage in repentant self-examination about which aspects of his writings and theological language ought to have caught our attention earlier.

A host of troubling questions were raised with the appearance in 2020 of the L’Arche investigative report, followed by the much more comprehensive L’Arche International Study Commission’s report of 2023. Recognizing that the women and men affected will be working through the aftereffect of this theology for the rest of their lives, I will concentrate in this article on the theological deformations that allowed this to happen. First, the article highlights the seriousness of the initial ecclesial sanctions against Fr. Philippe by the Vatican authorities of which Vanier was well aware. Vanier nevertheless continued to publicly associate himself with Fr. Philippe’s theology and practice while actively helping him circumvent ecclesiastical censure. Second, Vanier’s own practice perpetuated a theology of personal mediation of the divine whose language and theological rationale was both strikingly similar to Fr. Philippe’s and was presented as a healing therapy enacted through sexualized acts. Because this ‘therapy’ was offered by powerful—presumed saintly—figures at the center of the community to people in psychologically vulnerable states, it was ripe for abuse. What the Vatican had condemned were both the sexual practices and the mystical theology that justified it. Finally, once Vanier had been confronted by evidence from women who had been abused, he began to renarrate his story to distance Fr. Philippe from L’Arche, claiming that his own practice bore no connection to Fr. Philippe’s ‘sexual perversion’. These are the threads I will pull in what follows.

**L’Eau vive: Channeling the Counterculture**

The intellectual constellation that gave L’Eau vive its shape was based on the alchemy between two charismatic figures, the psychiatrist John W. Thompson and the

---


5. Vanier wrote several letters of apology to L’Arche, in May 2015, and when pressed for more by L’Arche authorities for more details, on October 2016. Both were available online in 2022, but have been subsequently removed from the L’Arche website.
A shared agreement on the centrality of love and embodied presence in the relief of the anxieties and existential loneliness of sufferers drew them together. Thompson radically repudiated the medicalized and materialist views of psychiatric ill health dominant at the time, believing that he had hard evidence that there were more healing ways to treat mental illness, through ‘a mystic, transcendent love that fused the physiological, psychological, and emotional’. Influenced by the anti-psychiatric movement as well as the new erotic openness unleashed in the sexual revolution, they crafted a community that powerfully channeled the countercultural moment. The time had come to form an alternative life-giving political community which held out a deeper renewal of human life than what was seen as the market-driven ephemerality of the ascendent Christianity Billy Graham was felt to represent. This new vision of an intellectually robust Roman Catholic piety had more to offer to the modern world than the ideologies of capitalism and socialism. It also had something more to offer than the more overtly politicized worker-priest movement. The primarily ethical cast of the worker-priests was polemically contrasted with the healing and sanctification on offer at L’Eau vive, whose strength was drawn from the ‘living water’ held out by Mary. As the first tensions of the Cold War began to emerge in Europe, L’Eau vive was self-consciously presented as a revolutionary cell in which the elites of the next generation could be formed in ideals that would offer a richly Roman Catholic alternative to the culture war just emerging between Eastern and Western ideologies. The utopian promise of this alternative society migrated, essentially unchanged, to birth L’Arche.

---

6. Paul J. Weindling, *John W. Thompson: Psychiatrist in the Shadow of the Holocaust* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010), pp. 203–241; C&A, p. 780. Thomas Philippe’s older brother Marie-Dominique Philippe was also implicated in the heterodox practices that both appear to have practiced and was also censured by Vatican authorities. Since M.-D. Philippe was only indirectly connected to L’Arche, I will not discuss him in this article, and all references to ‘Philippe’ refer to Thomas. See C&A, ch. 9.
12. Weindling, *John W. Thompson*, p. 216. Philippe had this insight during his time in an asylum. Time in mental hospitals ‘brought him closer to the poor, the sick, and the weak, in accordance with the Gospel. He had discovered that it was possible to establish a non-intellectual type of relationship with them that could free them. He understood them better because he shared their condition with their feelings of rejection and humiliation because he was considered insane, despite not considering himself as such. Tempted to stay at the hospital in Clermont de l’Oise, he wrote: ‘I thought to myself, “there are worker-priests, why not patient-priests”’. Excerpt from Xavier Le Pinchon’s 2016 report, *Report on the Place of Father Thomas Philippe in the L’Arche Foundation*, cited in C&A, p. 659.
The barbarous violence unleashed by Western modernity in the Second World War had made it plain to everyone that such alternatives were sorely needed. L’Eau vive underlined itself as one such alternative in being intentionally founded on the day the Nazi concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen was liberated, 15 April 1945. It was called L’Eau vive, ‘The water of life’, to underline its aim to be the antithesis to a death camp—a community of healing powers designed to foster belonging rather than the annihilating atomizing force of individuals. ‘The victims of trauma—social, sexual, or racial outcasts—needed spiritual therapy to heal the wounds of persecution’, Paul Weindling observes. ‘The political ethos on which L’Eau vive was founded was unbureaucratic, open, participatory, and consensual. Above all, it was conceived as noncoercive. Reaching out to Jews and psychotics marked a symbolic effort to heal the wounds of anti-Semitism and of the Nazi killing of mental patients’.14 In this community (above all rivals) a therapy for both the individual and the community is available through the power of love to unify the powerful and the outcast.15

Revolutionary peace-politics was in the air, as was a manifest hunger for alternatives to the institutionalized violence that had produced the hell of the Second World War as well as the rising tide of fear that dominated Cold War politics. Anti-psychiatry and the sexual revolution were two such alternatives. In this context Philippe’s theological erudition and Thompson’s radical psychology converged in the formation of a new community conceived as the breeding ground for a new cultural elite who could resist a world being partitioned between Godless communism and the inhuman atomizing force of Western consumerism. Within five years the community was inundated with intellectually and spiritually hungry youth seeking a more life-giving experience of church and theology, of family, and of sexuality. They stayed year-round and numbered in the hundreds.16

The wide welcome of those called deviant by mainstream society transparently proved the unifying power of the distinctive spirituality practiced in this community.17 The sweeping influence of the sexual revolution that was in its infancy in the late 1950s and early 1960s powerfully influenced the founders of L’Eau vive, most obviously in their distrust of the violent suppression of sexual desires previously considered out of place or deviant. While remaining firmly Roman Catholic, L’Eau vive was an experiment in affirming the criticisms of the time of the ancient Western-Christian quest to eradicate or forcibly control desire. In order to reverse the damage to individual psyches being caused by the repressive violence experienced in modern patriarchal nuclear families, social forms had to be found that were more welcoming of mutually edifying and consensual sexual practice as well as affirming the goodness and fluidity of sexual desire.18

16. Weindling, *John W. Thompson*, pp. 204–209. This success was also supported by a deep well of moneyed and influential backers. C&I, pp. 73–75.
18. A comment from the African American feminist bell hooks illustrates how widely shared these moral sensibilities were on both sides of the Atlantic. ‘The primary contradiction in Western cultural thought is the belief that the superior should control the inferior …
Anti-psychiatry fit with this quest to heal the wounded erotic psyche as part of its wider aim to turn psychiatric practice away from what were seen as the dominating and manipulative approaches of mainstream psychiatry. Following the pioneering anti-psychiatric tradition of R.D. Laing, 19 Thompson saw modern society as gripped by a spiritual crisis so severe it generates psychiatric illnesses.20 Laing was one of many at the time who believed violence in society was rooted in the experience of violence inflicted on the child at a very young age through deformed material love.21 Regression theory worked on the hypothesis that the psychological wounds received in infancy could be reversed by techniques that could take people back to and behind the site of the primal. To experience a primal loving union untarnished by the violence of modern society could heal the wounds it had caused. Revisiting the dynamics of the maternal bond could displace the wounds of violence with love, companionship, equality, and listening.22

Sexist discrimination, exploitation, and oppression have created the war between the sexes. Traditionally the battleground has been the home … Feminist moment can end the war between the sexes. It can transform relationships so that the alienation, competition, and dehumanization that characterize human interaction can be replaced with feelings of intimacy, mutuality, and camaraderie.’ bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, 2nd edn (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 35–36. Sentiments like this 1973 official statement from an international conference of secular humanists were almost universally held among a wide swath of critics of nineteenth-century notions of romantic love and family life: ‘[We see marriage] as an imperialistic norm creating two populations: the married and the unmarried. The latter as a residual category are stigmatized as outcasts. We, on the contrary, affirm singlehood as an achieved status, rather than an involuntary or ascribed one, and a situation which might hold greater potential for autonomy than marriage, which could be viewed with some plausibility as an intrinsically unsatisfactory relationship.’ Quoted in David Allyn, Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution. An Unfettered History (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 259. Brackets original.

19. Weindling, John W. Thompson, pp. 296, 301.
22. Boyle, Ronald Laing, pp. 32–33. For Fr. Philippe’s explicit appropriation of regression theory into Marian theology, see Thomas Philippe, Mystical Rose: Mary, Paradigm of the Religious Life, trans. Edward D. O’Connor (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 1995), ch. 1. In a lecture given at La Ferme in Trosly in 1987 (later translated and published as a pamphlet and available for purchase there until the scandal became public), Philippe explains, ‘In each of us the heart is the first organ to be formed in our mother’s womb, and it is what brings about the inter-personal unity between the infant and its mother. After birth it is the heart, and the spirit of love, which should preside over the entire development of one’s life … A baby is not primarily a being which lives by instance, like a little lamb for example. The newborn lamb sniffs the milk given to it before drinking it. The offspring of man and woman is naturally trusting, and readily imbibes everything given to it. Such trust can come only from love.’ Thomas Philippe, OP, You are Precious in My Eyes (Trosly: La Ferme de Trosly, 1988), pp. 19–20.
The doors opened by regression theory explain why Marian theology became key in describing the community as an alternative and life-giving family. It was here that Fr. Phillipe crafted some of the more distinctive language for life-giving community later popularized by Vanier. Philippe drew language of the flames of faith, of the quest for living water, and of the healing heart of Mary from St. John of the Cross. Fr. Philippe’s core innovation was to harness a handful of concepts from Thomistic metaphysics to unite psychological regression theory with the Marian revival occurring at this time among lay Catholics in continental Europe who sought a space of contact with the divine not governed by ecclesial authorities. Philippe developed some unorthodox practices of spiritual direction that channeled these forces. Soon official complaints from nuns involved in the community surfaced Fr. Philippe’s practices of spiritual direction, which we can now see were central to the healing therapy the L’Eau vive community held out to disaffected youth. These complaints led to the Vatican severing the community from the Dominican order in 1952 at the same time that Fr. Philippe was forcibly sent away for psychiatric evaluation by his superiors. Jean Vanier had only left the Navy to join L’Eau vive two years before, in 1950, but in Fr. Philippe’s enforced absence the 27-year-old Vanier assumed the leadership of the community, until he too was ordered by the Vatican in 1956 to leave L’Eau vive. Both Philippe and Vanier were warned against reforming the community anywhere else. This prohibition was notable only for being heeded in the breach, as the key figures of L’Eau vive dispersed to form other healing communities. The most famous was L’Arche.

23. In the introduction to his primer on spiritual contemplation, Philippe explains, ‘I have repeatedly insisted on analysing more carefully the relations between the liturgy and the interior life, between mystical and theological knowledge, between the contemplative life and simply human life on one hand and the religious life on the other. For the same reason, following St. John of the Cross, I have dwelt at some length on the detachments required for union with God and have tried to explain what is that depth of living water which nourishes contemplative life … What seems to us very complicated, perhaps very subtle, in the works of men and their minute analyses, is accomplished with extraordinary simplicity and sometimes astonishing rapidity by the Mother of Fair Love.’ Thomas Philippe, *The Fire of Contemplation: A Guide for Interior Souls*, trans. and ed. Verda Clare Doran (New York: Alba House, 1981), p. viii.


26. The chronology of the events that led to Vanier’s precipitous rise to authority at L’Eau vive and his initiation into Philippe’s secret sexual practices during this period have only now become public. *C&A*, pp. 88–92, 112–20.


The Theology of Fr. Philippe

Fr. Philippe’s practice of spiritual direction is not hidden in his writings. The famous Harvard theologian Henri Nouwen described it in the preface to Philippe’s most well-known book, *The Contemplative Life*. Nouwen notes the powerful draw he felt to Philippe’s fame, and that he had come for spiritual direction at a time of acute psychological vulnerability. Philippe did not disappoint. Nouwen called it, ‘the most tangible manifestation of God’s compassion I had ever experienced’.²⁹ Nouwen’s account makes it easy to imagine how ripe such practices were for abuse,³⁰ and to glimpse the persona on which Vanier modeled himself in the physicality of Philippe’s hands and touch and the mannered gentleness of his speech.³¹

Nor was Philippe reticent in describing the theology behind these practices. He locates his own vocation in the contemplative tradition, which seeks a supernatural intimacy with God.³² He directly links priestly mediating and sacramental authority with the confessional.³³ The physical ministrations of the priest are thus explicitly linked to the necessarily physical ingestion of the sacraments, underlining that this linkage is important in order

---

³⁰. Nouwen’s narrative was the most explicit account of Philippe’s practice of spiritual direction available until 2023. ‘It seemed that the fire of God’s spirit, the healing warmth of God’s love, the softening touch of God’s hands, were there for me. As I let my agony and anguish become visible to him, he became my father, my mother, my brother, my sister, my lover, my God. While being with him I knew what true consolation was. I sensed that none of my pain was alien to him, and none of my tears unfamiliar to him … He made me sit very close to him, and after a period of a few words, he invited me to pray with him. He put his head against my shoulder and entered into a deep silence … After fifteen minutes of silence, he looked up at me and asked, “Are you feeling any better?” I said “Yes”, not because my anguish was gone, but because somehow Pere Thomas had through himself connected my anguish with the anguish of Jesus, and made me aware that I would be able to live through it. When I left him, he said, “if you wake up in the middle of the night and your anguish over-whelms you, think of me”. He did not say, “Think of God” or “Think of Jesus”. He said “Think of me”. He said it with such gentleness and compassion, so free from any self-preoccupation or self-importance, that I realized that he offered himself as the safe way to the healing presence of Jesus.’ Nouwen, in Philippe, *The Contemplative Life*, pp. viii–ix. Recently emerging letters from Vanier describe his own experience of guidance by Philippe in uncannily similar terms. *C&A*, pp. 81, 86. That this form of tactile direction was abused is now documented in detail in *C&A*, pp. 249–53, 541–54, 556–58.
³¹. Central figures at L’Arche were in turn drawn to model their own tone and gestures on those of Vanier. *C&A*, pp. 442–86, 530.
³². ‘The contemplative, [in contrast to lay and ordinary ordained priests], seeks the most direct contact with God. True, every fervent Christian maintains a certain abiding presence of God. The good servant, to remain continually faithful to his Master, must remain close to God, actual recourse to him must always be possible. The contemplative aims higher; he seeks a presence that is more and more intimate and actual. He wants to live, in the full force of the word, *in the sight of God*.’ Philippe, *The Fire of Contemplation*, p. 50, emphasis original.
³³. ‘In the confessional the priest represents our Lord. He has power of the Mystical Body and enters into the inner secrets of the heart. Strictly speaking, confession is limited to sin; but,
that recipients know God’s love in an individual and personal way. Philippe contrasts his own form of spiritual direction with the common understanding of it as a tutelage in how to faithfully navigate the active life in order to develop prudence. His direction is something more, a work of healing and centering of the spiritual life to make the human being ‘docile to the grace of God’.35

The pivotal theological move comes when Philippe draws on eschatology to locate this activity outside of time and so everyday morality: ‘Direction in this sense is situated above time, on the level of eternal life … Although it occurs in time, its value is outside time’.36 The priest is positioned as a neutral instrument for the eternal God to enter time in the most bodily way.37 But if this touch is to be healing, the one receiving this ministration must ‘have the attitude of a child or of a bride letting herself be loved by God: hence, a certain passivity’.38 A nuptial theology of intimacy with God is here being deployed to position the one under spiritual guidance as affectively passive and docile by necessity, on the grounds that affective knowledge is far more effective in integrating fragmented inner worlds than merely intellectual knowledge.39

given the very structure of this sacrament, it naturally tends to go beyond this limit.’ Philippe, *The Contemplative Life*, p. 83.

34. *C&A*, pp. 572–73.


36. Philippe, *The Contemplative Life*, p. 84. Put theologically: ‘As St. John of the Cross says, the spiritual person is plunged more and more into the darkness of the present moment; the purifications of God, purifications he effects in the memory and imagination, keep such a person in the present moment, in its poverty and nakedness, for it is only there that he can be brought into the presence of God and commune with eternity’. Philippe, *The Fire of Contemplation*, p. 47, emphasis original. Newly emerging testimony from one of his directees makes the implications drawn from this eschatology explicit. ‘We thought we were confirmed in grace. We could no longer sin in the domain of purity thanks to a special choice of the Most Holy Virgin, who had revealed the secret of her own life and of her intimacy with Our Lord to us. With the Fr [Philippe] and among us we were already living what we shall live in the heavenly city: carnal union will be central in the heavenly city, in place of the cross. We did believe in the end of the world.’ *C&A*, p. 251. Vanier’s version of this claim appears in *C&A*, p. 805.

37. ‘Mystery is the eternal, appearing in time; the point of emergence of the invisible into our visible world. It is God who, by his illuminating and salvific action, comes to man under the veil of appearances. The instrument acts really, physically on its effect; it is a true cause and not a simple occasion or a necessary condition. The causal influx passes through it; and yet, the effect is not assimilated in any way to the instrument, but only to the principal cause. The pure instrument which can intervene as such only in the supernatural order is totally disinterested; there is no trace of domination in it—it is in no way master, it is made to serve … In the sacraments, the Church, through her priests and her faithful, acts in the name and in the place of Christ … The action of the Saviour passes through the lips and heart of the minister.’ Philippe, *The Fire of Contemplation*, pp. 16–17; emphasis original.


This dense and uncharacteristically open presentation of his theology of spiritual direction seems to evoke in Philippe a need to address the vulnerability of the one being counselled, who he thinks should trust they are safe because it is a priest to whom they are submitting their conscience. The one who might need judgment for mishandling their power is ensconced as the arbiter of malfeasance. Philippe later counsels his readers that they should expect their need for such direction to become stronger. Combined with Philippe’s insistence on the ever-growing necessity of spiritual direction, we can see the doors closing behind the disciple who has ‘a voluntaristic or willful attitude’ and ‘closes himself in order to drive ahead’ instead of embracing the weakness or littleness necessary to know this supernatural intimacy with God.

Those who embrace this intimacy, however, now face the problem of what they can relate of this unorthodox practice of spiritual direction to others. Philippe offers five reasons why this ‘utterly private and personal’ activity cannot and should not be described to anyone else. First, God’s graces to each individual are highly personal, and harder to speak about than sins. Second, if we cannot speak clearly about these graces, we begin to stammer and speak inarticulately, making it counterproductive and embarrassing to attempt. Third, speaking about the graces given can provoke possessiveness and competitive rivalries. Fourth, it is dangerous, because it constitutes an attempt to capture and appropriate the power of grace, ‘to speak about our interior life to anyone who has not the mission to deal with it, or even to speak about it to ourselves’. Finally, Philippe suggests that speaking about these graces to the priest through whom they have been received relieves the one who confesses of any wrongly appropriative relation to them.

At the pinnacle of this treatment of contemplative spiritual direction Fr. Philippe reveals the theological foundations of his account in Marian theology as celebrated in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Combining the mystical unity of ineffable silence of St. John of the Cross and Bernard of Clairvaux’s nuptial theology, Philippe presents Mary as being sanctified more plenteously than any other creature, receiving every grace that would ever be given to any

---

40. ‘The gifts of the Holy Spirit … by their basic structure, require that we be more and more children confronting a mystery we do not understand; that we learn more and more the littleness of the Gospel, the littleness of love. But then what safeguard have we against illusion? What protection is there for someone who surrenders himself to the Holy Spirit in such littleness? Here the Church intervenes in the person of its priest. We can put ourselves under obedience to a priest, who has been entrusted with power of the inner forum of conscience. Through his ministry our interior life will thus be submitted to the church.’ Philippe, The Contemplative Life, p. 84.

41. ‘Spiritual direction, in this essential function, grows all the more necessary as contemplative life deepens.’ Philippe, The Contemplative Life, p. 84.


43. ‘It is well known that any child changes its mother a great deal by the life that it brings. But Jesus was capable of “transubstantiating” Mary in a real way, so to speak, by a divine influence upon … The most powerful unity is that which is realized in silence before finding expression through words. Already in the case of friendship, one knows that it is secure when there is no longer need to speak in order to be united. The same holds even more for unions brought about in God. Grace establishes a unity which lies far beyond words, in what we are calling a love-consciousness.’ Philippe, You are Precious in My Eyes, p. 31, emphasis original.
other saint. This heightening of the grace given to Mary locates Mary as closely as possible to the inner life of the Godhead and is articulated in the register of desire. Mary’s sinlessness manifests in appropriately configured longing to be with God, her longing perfectly meeting God’s desire for creatures.\(^44\) The perfect intimacy of God and the human being is accomplished in the womb of Mary. The loving touch of God is as intimately present to Mary as the wriggling in her womb, and the blessedness of the creature is present to God as a fully welcoming envelopment in tactile and even erotically full love.\(^45\) Because Mary never ‘fell’ into egoism she was always selflessly present for others, and the believer who comes into contact with her surrenders to the purity of the Godhead, touching the pure maternal love inaccessible in our fallen, violent world.\(^46\) While it would be too materialistic to say that we have to go to Mary to touch the intimacy of the Father’s redemptive touch through the Son, this is nevertheless very close to what Philippe imagines. ‘Mary is truly the mother of our contemplation; the deeper we bury ourselves in her, the more intimate our union with Jesus.’\(^47\) The Christian is to imitate the humility of the fetal Jesus in the womb, ‘hiding our contemplative prayer in the heart and bosom of Mary’.\(^48\)

\(^{44}\) For Vanier’s version of this claim see C&A, p. 810.

\(^{45}\) ‘In the state of original justice, these two images, of the infant and of the spouses, were probably meant to complete each other. They would have been like two natural sacraments, inspiring and culminating in the community life of brotherhood and friendship … While Jesus was being carried in Mary’s womb, the two of them were united in love more totally than Adam and Eve would ever have been. They were in the fullest truth “one flesh”. The Divine Spouse came forth from Mary’s womb, not to put an end to this image of the Blessed Trinity, but to perfect and confirm it … The love relationship between Jesus and Mary cannot be dismissed as merely “accidental”. Their very substance, their persons qua human, are in a love relationship with each other by reason of a union of love that encompasses and permeates their being. May we not go so far as to say that Jesus and Mary fulfilled in an imminent way the intention of the Father in creating human beings as man and woman? … In Mary … the King of Kings realizes all the potential of matter as a capacity for love. She is his masterpiece, a masterpiece of love. She is a beloved daughter for the Father and a spotless bride for himself. She is not sanctified as a member of the community, but as a person in her own right, as his bride.’ Philippe, Mystical Rose, pp. 134–35. In private letters Philippe speculated even further: ‘Did young Jesus, as he grew in love and age, not have increasingly bold gestures of love for Mary … that prepared his mother for a new gift with increasingly intimate and free gestures … divinely and imperceptibly accustoming her to becoming his spouse.’ C&A, p. 663. For Vanier’s version of this claim, see C&A, p. 811.

\(^{46}\) ‘All her life Mary remained an infant before her God, happy to look to him for everything and let herself be carried in his arms like a baby, relying on him in blind trust and total self-surrender … Never for an instant did she withdraw from the loving passivity demanded by the union of love.’ ‘Mary had no desires of her own; her desires were the work of the Holy Spirit in her.’ Philippe, Mystical Rose, pp. 33, 74.

\(^{47}\) The Christology behind this claim runs: ‘We must abide in Christ de jure, for his fullness of grace was absolute and infinite. We must abide likewise in Mary de facto, for her fullness of grace was infinite, not in itself, but by comparison with ours. Our life of prayer will never surpass Mary’s, for we have no grace of intimacy with our Lord, however deep or varied, that she has not already known.’ Philippe, The Contemplative Life, p. 108.

The crux of this manifesto for his practice of spiritual direction is Philippe’s clear and explicit allusion to the importance of remaining close to Jesus’ love for his church, the bride of Christ. The overtly womb-centered maternal image converges with imagery of the marital union of Christ with the church to underline the importance of abandoning our resistance to intimacy with God. Jesus loves the church as a man loves his wife. The mystical reading of traditional tropes of divine union and the nuptial mystery have now become fully literal readings, ones that transcend every traditional distinction in Christian sexual ethics and instrumentalize sacramental practice.

It would be a mistake to dismiss this theology as so quirky or perverse as to have had little influence. Few people knew Philippe as well as the translator Philippe’s works into English, Edward Dennis O’Connor. O’Connor was Professor of Theology at Notre Dame and editor of the most widely read textbook on the theology of the Immaculate Conception, in which he publicly lauded Philippe as the epitome of modern Marian theology and practice.

Vanier’s Not-so-secret Relationship with Fr. Philippe

By 2006 Kathryn Spink had shown English readers the intimacy of Vanier’s relation to Fr. Philippe and the admiration of the younger man for the older. When Vanier entered the world of L’Eau vive it was a vibrant and prayerful community in which most of the labor of keeping the place running fell to a circle of permanent members, mainly women with great reverence for the priesthood. Soon after his arrival in the community Vanier became a regular for spiritual direction by Fr. Philippe, and in these sessions of direction he ‘opened his heart’ to the man who became to him ‘a presence of God’, often late at night. In April of 1952 Philippe was summoned to Rome by church authorities, and Vanier later told Spink that he didn’t know why. Philippe was denounced for being ‘too mystical’ there, he said. The actual issue at stake in...

---

49. ‘We must let [Jesus] do as he pleases … seeing how important Mary is, we have the right to ask our Lord … to lead us into that intimacy with Mary which he himself had, and to let us experience a little of the trust he had in her.’ Philippe, The Contemplative Life, p. 110.
51. ‘Jesus, through his hidden life, through his sacrifice, is still much too free to already give us, right down here, joys from heaven, where the distinction between sexes, in its complimentary function towards the purposes of nature, has no more raison d’être … It only serves for the divine frolics of love.’ Thomas Philippe to Jean Vanier, 1960, in C&A, p. 265. The risk of pregnancy was belatedly recognized as the practical limitation of this doctrine. C&A, pp. 107–108, 566. On instrumentalization of the sacrament, see C&A, pp. 552–54.
54. Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story, p. 36.
55. Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story, p. 39.
the Vatican censure was the role of the body of the priest in the transmission of absolution and sacramental grace, the final verdict, though sealed, being that his practice was not allowable. By 1956 Vanier’s own continuation of these practices had led to him, too, being denounced as having a ‘false’ spirituality. Vanier received strict and direct instruction from the Vatican authorities not to be involved in any successor L’Eau vive communities.56

Vanier’s guarded descriptions of Philippe’s theology and his experience of spiritual direction do not contravene Philippe’s rationale for secrecy, and Vanier continued to clandestinely meet with Philippe when he was under ecclesial sanction as well as continuing, almost to the end of his life, to wholly affirm Philippe’s theology, which ‘remained very important to him’.57 This allegiance was not shaken even by a personal admonition from Pope John XXIII that Vanier break ties with Philippe.58

In fact, Vanier defied not only the Pope but explicit Vatican sanction in reassembling the clandestine inner circle of L’Eau vive initiates. In the swirl of issues raised by the sexual revolution, institutional reorganization of church enforcement agencies as well as the illness of some enforcement officials, the Vatican seems to have lost interest in Philippe, which afforded him sufficient anonymity to move without official notice to Trosly.59 This inner circle was the seed of the community that would later be given the name ‘L’Arche’.60 While on its surface the name points to Noah’s ark, it was originally intended to indicate a diverse community vivified by immersion in the living waters of Mary’s womb. L’Arche was seen as literally floating in these living waters and may also have been seen as providing gracious cover—as for the drunken Noah—for the embarrassing public ‘mystical drunkenness’ of Philippe.61 Vanier often presented Mary as the mother of this new community who offers healing and an alternative family to those maimed and rejected by their own families, and at least insinuating that Jean was its father.62 Fr. Philippe makes himself available any time for ‘counselling’ to members of this new community, because, ‘for the Holy Spirit to operate, there needs to be personal contact’.63 The successor community to L’Eau vive was now complete. Where L’Eau vive had been seeking to form a cultural elite, L’Arche would become a training ground and hospital in which a new ‘elite of the heart’ would be formed to shape a new generation.64

The picture of the relation of L’Eau vive to L’Arche and Vanier to a censured Fr. Philippe depicted in Spink’s largely laudatory 2006 biography of L’Arche has been filled out more recently by the investigative reporting of Céline Hoyeau and

56. Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story, pp. 41–44.
57. Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story, p. 45.
58. Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story, p. 48; C&A, pp. 130–32.
62. Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story, p. 70.
63. Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story, pp. 74–75.
64. Spink, The Miracle, the Message, the Story, p. 83.
exponentially more so with the comprehensive report of 2023, *Control and Abuse*.\(^6\) Hoyeau adds that the 1952 Vatican investigation of Philippe lasted four years, culminating in the most severe sanction available short of defrocking. This trial aimed only to protect doctrinal purity, not the victims of Philippe’s abuse. Philippe steadfastly defended his claim that it was possible for there to be acts beyond everyday morality, invoking Aquinas’s authority. In his testimony and subsequent accounts of his own spiritual development Philippe located his own mystical marriage to Mary in an experience before a painting in 1938, which had a sexualized component.\(^6\) As he told one victim, ‘the parts of our body that we hide the most carefully will be the ones most glorified in heaven’. Philippe was authorized by the Vatican to return to France in 1963, despite the conclusion of his 1956 psychiatric evaluation that he was mentally competent, theologically unrepentant, and so highly likely to reoffend.\(^6\)

The earthquake that shook the Western world in the form of a range of various cultural revolts in 1968 made Philippe’s censure for doctrinal heterodoxy seem far less relevant than it had been in the 1950s. These developments suggest that the ministry of L’Arche to disabled people provided the perfect cover under which Philippe could shelter from public scrutiny. In hindsight it becomes clear how adept Fr. Philippe was in playing on his double status as a cleric standing outside any order that could discipline him. Philippe had mastered, in Hoyeau’s words, the art of ‘living on ambiguities’.

### Vanier’s Theological Debt to Philippe

The continuities between the theologies of Fr. Philippe and Vanier are not difficult to see. The most obvious signals that Vanier continued Fr. Philippe’s practice of spiritual direction are in *Man and Women God Made Them*, with the conceptual and communal backdrop of these practices set out in *Community and Growth*. *Community and Growth* is Vanier’s blueprint for the theology and practice of life at L’Arche, his most comprehensive and elaborated account of how life in community ought to be lived.\(^6\) It opens with the dedication, ‘To Father Philippe, with whom I made my first steps in community’. From the opening pages Vanier draws on the distinction between everyday human morality and the mystical union that is the engine of Philippe’s theology.\(^6\)

---

6. ‘If people in community live only on the level of the human, rational, legalistic and active aspects and symbols of their faith—which give cohesion, security and unity—there is a serious risk of their closing in on themselves and gradually dying. If, however, their religious faith opens up, on the one hand to the mystical—that is, to an experience of the love of God present in the community and in the heart of each person—and, on the other hand, to what
Vanier, for instance, explains that the role of leaders in community is to teach the mind, while the role of spiritual guides is to teach the heart. Vanier assumes that spiritual direction is needed by everyone, especially youth, because, ‘if they are to take a first step in inner growth, they need someone who is firm and loving to whom they can be obedient’. Vanier underlines the importance of this practice for maturation in the testimonial voice: ‘for me having a spiritual guide who is also a priest-confessor was and is very helpful. All the sharing is in some ways made sacred through the sacrament where the priest is just an instrument of Jesus’ forgiving power.’ What goes on in spiritual guidance is both crucial and necessarily secret, even from one’s parents. It is theologically telling that Vanier invokes the doctrine of the keys and hints that it is precisely here that we find the origins of Jesus’ own persecution—as if tacitly explaining the accusations about Fr. Philippe as related to his having forgiven sins rather than the way he understood the practicalities of conveying this forgiveness.

Spiritual guides help people to ‘see themselves’ and to ‘see how Jesus is working in and through them’. Vanier explains that this means that guides ‘know the secrets of their hearts’ in ‘times of anguish’. For the good of the community and its well-functioning Vanier advocates a strong practical division of responsibilities between priests and community leaders, evidencing awareness of the danger of leaders equating their authority with that of God. Reading these pages in hindsight, it is difficult not to wonder if Vanier is trying to suppress a fear that in inviting young people to join L’Arche, he is systematically opening them to abuse. One hint that this might be the case is the obvious contradiction between his own teaching and his practice. As the leader of the community he should never have taken on a confessor-spiritual guide role, precisely for the reasons that he here warns against—in addition to his lack of ordination barring him from being a sacramental mediator.

unifies all human beings, especially the poor, the vulnerable and the oppressed, they will then continue to grow in openness.’ Vanier, Community and Growth, pp. 6–7.

70. Vanier, Community and Growth, p. 241.
72. Vanier, Community and Growth, p. 240.
73. ‘If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.’ Jn 20:22.
75. Vanier, Community and Growth, pp. 242–43.
76. Vanier, Community and Growth, pp. 244–45.
77. The subsection ‘The Specific Role of the Priest or Ordained Minister’, in Community and Growth, seems almost biographical, as Vanier explains why a layperson can be a spiritual guide (as Vanier is) and also what qualifies an institutionally liminal priest (such as Philippe), to serve as an authoritative spiritual guide: ‘The priest is not holier than others; he is the chosen minister and servant of the Lord Jesus. The holiest person, the most loving one is the one who welcomes the body of Christ with the greatest desire and love. And this may be a very weak and broken person.’ Vanier, Community and Growth, p. 248. A few lines later the explanation of the status of Philippe seems almost undeniable: ‘When the priest or minister has no power, other than that which comes from his ordination, he has enormous freedom to be truly present throughout the community, and in all aspects of community life, on equal terms with everyone. He is a stranger to nobody and there is no situation beyond his touch— which must always be that of Jesus.’ On the implications of Vanier’s failed attempts to be ordained, see C&A, pp. 145–46, 522, 630.
The stage is now prepared to introduce the regression therapy of direction as it had been developed in L’Eau vive by Fr. Philippe. People trapped in their anguish need releasing. If they cannot submit to the authority of spiritual direction, or if their anguish is too deep for this mystical therapy, they may need psychological care. And if neither of these works, they may finally be declared unable to ‘live harmoniously in community’. In Man and Women God Made Them Vanier positions singleness as characterized by suffering from a lack of intimacy and links sexual activity with the subjective feeling of being loved and accepted in the inner being. Every human being longs for intimacy, which can only be achieved when sexual/genital expression is integrally weaved into a true and trusting community. The key theological move deploys the nuptial theology of the Song of Songs as developed by St. John of the Cross. True knowledge is not intellectual but affective and unitive. Reasonable laws and morality are necessary to govern a society of sinners, but, ‘Jesus came not to establish reasonable laws which must be obeyed in order that human beings and society function well, but rather to light the fire of the Holy Spirit, to communicate a passion of love which is reflected also in inner light and an outpouring of service’.

Vanier has translated Philippe’s two-plane theology for a broader audience while retaining his account of spiritual growth and spiritual direction. Vanier also carries forward the theological justifications of the spiritual guiding practices developed in L’Eau vive. These practices aim to meet the human need for intimacy, and help people beyond the shortsighted (nineteenth-century bourgeoisie) understandings of the place and role of eros and intimacy. If everyone can be expected to be part of the desirous attention that draws people into community, then the only question is whether one is single—not engaged in genital sexual activity and unhappy about that—or celibate: unable to live in a union of flesh. Yet, our experience shows us that when such people live not alone but in community, or in a network of friendship, strengthened and healed by a love which comes from God, it is possible for them to find fulfillment in a life of celibacy.

The most direct published explanation of the rationale and practice of Vanier’s own abuse comes in the form of an ideal scenario formulated in obviously typecast terms.

A short while ago, a young assistant in one of our L’Arche communities came to see me … This young woman is competent and deeply present to those in her home. But she herself is fragile at the level of her emotional life. She lives close to anguish, having suffered much in her childhood. She has known intimate relations with a number of men during her life. She is so afraid of being alone, and afraid of her own emptiness. She has a desperate need to be listened to and loved. Her work with and her presence to those who have a disability have nourished her...
and helped her to structure herself, but not sufficiently to bring her emotional life to maturity. At the same time, she is aware that her pursuit of men lacks authenticity and that she is using her sexuality to attract men to her in order to fill her own emptiness and to escape from loneliness. Her anguish and her call for affection impedes her growth, keeps her from finding her inner strength and from achieving true inner liberty and autonomy. She told me that she felt the need to put an end to these affectionate, but immature relationships in order to grow further.83

We should hear in the concluding statement which follows that Vanier has himself provided this more mature affection through spiritual direction, and that he takes this to be a familiar and unexceptional sequence of events. This revealing passage is followed with another one in which Vanier quite frankly admits that he too is prone to temptation in the relatively familiar—and masculine—experience of sexual temptation while alone and travelling.84

Vanier has found a way to present the frankly Marian piety of Fr. Philippe’s early theology in a more generic and apparently orthodox treatment of the love of Jesus.85 Salvation is union with the love of Jesus, which Vanier encapsulates in terms that now appear intentionally loaded toward the practices of spiritual direction.

When we discover that we are loved with an eternal love, with a love beyond all time and space, which goes even beyond death, then everything begins to change, all becomes possible, all can be accepted and loved. The healing of a person comes, above all through a personal union with Jesus who has revealed that he is the Friend and the Beloved who touches, awakens and fills the heart. It is true that the revelation of the love of God almost always comes through a relationship with someone, and in the heart of a community. But the community can never reach and touch a person in a total way; only a person can touch deeply another person. In a community there is not the covenant of one person with another as in marriage or in the parent-child relationship. The covenant of community, profound as it is, can never guarantee that a certain person will always stay physically close to another. It

83. ‘It is evident that her meeting with Jesus and her life of prayer have helped her to be freer vis-à-vis her psychological tendencies and her hunger to be loved. This young woman, product of a broken family, is quite typical of so many other young people and so many of those with disabilities.’ Vanier, Man and Woman God Made Them, p. 114. The sad story of Anne Marie Christiansen, accompanied by another priest in the community, tracks the trajectory of Vanier’s typecast narrative. C&A, pp. 533–37.

84. Vanier, Man and Woman God Made Them, p. 117.

85. There is evidence that the repositioning of Marian piety in Christological terms was an intentional redirection of attention from Philippe’s contentious teachings. In his later writings even Philippe foregrounds language of Jesus in a way earlier texts did not. ‘At what moment [did] Jesus become conscious of his divinity: at his birth, at the age of twelve, on Mount Tabor, on the Cross, at the Resurrection?’ … Devotion to the Sacred Heart helps us to understand that, with the beatific vision, the body of Jesus possessed an absolutely extraordinary and unique sensitivity to touch. Through this sensitivity he was able to have a mystical consciousness both of his Father and of his union with the world. Thus one can see that in Jesus, in this tiny embryo, the first experiential human consciousness was a mystical one, but one that was absolutely unique … He was the only human child freely and personally conscious of his life within his mother’s womb.’ Philippe, You are Precious in My Eyes, pp. 29–30.
guarantees that there will always be someone there, inspired by the same spirit. When the human heart finds Jesus and lives with him in a covenant relationship, it is more inclined to live a covenant relationship in marriage or in community.  

This passage is saturated with doubly coded language that works at the level of human social commitment and also at the level of a community in which genital activity has been systematically harnessed as affective glue for long-term communal bonding, and in which associated feelings of jealousy have been actively repudiated. The theologically crucial move is the paralleling of marriage and the ‘covenant of community’, presented as parallel social forms in which licit genital activity is understood to bind people in ties of affection.

It will have come as a great relief to all who have followed the painful unfolding of this story that the comprehensive 2023 study report, which studied the question closely, found no evidence of any people with disabilities being sexually abused at Trosly. But a passage that immediately follows the quote above in this section of Community and Growth indicates why it is difficult to categorically assert that it could never have happened. Vanier’s account of spiritual guidance explicitly indicated the need of these ‘graces’ by everyone in the community: ‘many people, even spiritual guides and priests, are unaware of the important role which they have concerning the integration of genital sexuality and the growth of love, not only for people with disabilities but for all believers; in addition, they often fail to see their role in calling others to live celibacy as a sign of the Kingdom as a personal meeting place with Jesus.’

The final question Vanier asks is how community members are to think of the relationships that will inevitably be formed through the spiritualized practices of genital intimacy, once the participants return to the world of mundane ethics and society. Vanier casts this as a matter of intentionally attending to spiritual formation and the strengthening of communal affectionate bonds. Vanier is expanding the definition

87. We now know that, on reflection, some women felt betrayed by this double coding (C&A, p. 606), and that Vanier regularly receives letters from the nuns in his inner circle who fully accept it, as displayed in the frankly marital tone of this 1969 letter from Myriam de La Trinité: ‘O my spouse! come into me, stay in me and hold me against you, interlaced the one into the other in this nuptial room where we can live, only there!’ (C&A, p. 306). As Antoine Mourges perceptively observes, ‘those letters open into a more complex pattern than the classical distinction between “male abusers” and “abused women”’. C&A, p. 293.
89. ‘Someone with disabilities who is sometimes so limited and whose heart is so full of inner pain has a greater need than others to encounter God and hear the Good News of love. There is so little possibility of choosing marriage. Such a person experiences a deep poverty. He or she is unable to fend totally for him or herself, and is in need of others, but above all, in need of Jesus. The Good News permits those who are fragile and wounded in their hearts to discover their deepest identity and vocation, and to discover their place in the community and in the Church.’ Vanier, Man and Woman God Made Them, p. 123.
of celibacy from eschewing sexual activity (more precisely, as virginity) to include sexual activity of a specific type which occurs in an extra-temporal domain of mystical contact. ‘God can unite a man and a woman in a special love which does not lead to marriage, but strengthens them in celibacy as a gift of God. In these bonds, the woman’s heart is awakened and protected by the man just as the man’s heart is awakened and protected by the woman.’\textsuperscript{91} These special relationships, which Vanier explicitly says are ‘not exclusive’, are presented as facilitating wholeness and communion with the weak and rejected.\textsuperscript{92}

Vanier is straining toward an analysis of the divinely given goodness that may nevertheless flow from what is widely considered an illicit erotic relationship.\textsuperscript{93} It is also now clearer why Vanier’s explicit redefinition of the covenant as the home of intimate sexual relations\textsuperscript{94} later provoked heated dispute in the L’Arche global communion over the advisability of having formal covenant rituals for assistants committing to stay in L’Arche for a set number of years.\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{91} Vanier, \textit{Man and Woman God Made Them}, p. 125. The language used here parallels what Philippe was saying in his Saturday lectures at Trosly, as in this one delivered in 1987: ‘The first mystical graces, graces of quiet in particular, help very much in understanding how a handicapped person, even someone who is very severely handicapped or dying, in fact possesses all that is necessary for God to sanctify him. His utter poverty can constitute the “nakedness” required for union with God as described by St. John of the Cross, in which the intelligence, memory and will are “bound” and nothing is left but this “touch of substance to substance” which constitutes the essence of mystical graces. The only human material required is the sense of touch, which is found in even the most destitute of persons. It is perhaps these persons who can best receive the gift of God because, due to their poverty, they are the most passive, and the most ready to allow themselves to be loved … I must admit that it is this which most helps to keep me from being scandalized at this great multitude of severely handicapped persons.’ Philippe, \textit{You are Precious in My Eyes}, p. 32.

\textsuperscript{92} At this point Vanier introduces the story of a disabled woman, 35 years old and paralyzed in both legs, who met a man in the hospital who had been a gangster. ‘Something deep happened between the two of them. She fell in love with him.’ Vanier continues, ‘She knew that there would never be any future in this relationship and yet it inspired her and gave her life’. The punchline of this story is revealingly worded. ‘This relationship opened her up, gave her peace and brought her closer to God. I have met men and women consecrated to God in their celibacy who lived similar, yet different situations and relationships. Their mutual love called them to give themselves more totally to others and to God. They rarely met, but their love inspired them, gave them greater strength … It is clear to me that they were living a communion of hearts that flowed from God and led them into a love which is God.’ Vanier, \textit{Man and Woman God Made Them}, p. 126.


\textsuperscript{94} Vanier, \textit{Man and Woman God Made Them}, p. 127.

Happiness, if it is in personal and community fulfillment, in the celebration of unity and our love for one another, is also in the waiting, beyond transition and death, for that gift to come: the wedding feast of Heaven, meeting Jesus face to face and heart to heart and being in total communion with his friends and lovers.96

What is now gut-churningly obvious is that Vanier believed that this eschatological ‘total communion of friends and lovers’ was sometimes achieved through his spiritual direction in rooms hidden away from the day-to-day of this fallen world. This union with God happened in a secret world, one alienated from the everyday: ‘This is not us, this is Mary and Jesus. You are chosen, you are special, this is secret.’97

The Fatal Mistakes of Vanier’s Theology

It seems indubitable that Vanier, along with his mother,98 were inheritors of a tradition of spiritual direction that certainly gave them new life at some point in their spiritual journey yet also bequeathed deformed theological practices. These deformed practices were then visited by Vanier on other people, including at L’Arche. That Vanier may have himself been groomed by a spiritual abuser highlights the importance of recognizing that deformed Christian practice can be both attractive and is likely to be handed down through the generations if not critically and honestly faced. Any theology that seeks to learn from the wisdom of the past and is not presumptuous enough to see itself as at the cutting edge of history must wrestle with the reality that there was never a theologically ‘innocent’ Vanier. Anything that was good about his witness was bound up from the very beginning with theological deformations. Christians dare not believe they can escape the deforming effects of sin on their Christian practices, because ‘nothing apart from God (not the church, not sacraments, not saints) is exempt from the damage produced by the fall’, observes Lauren Winner. ‘Identification, rather than obfuscation, of the damage characteristic of indispensable (and sometimes dominically given) Christian practices helps us to describe the practices more truthfully and helps us be on the alert for deformations.’99 Tradition is something we must actively appropriate, and this entails the self-critical and intellectual labor of looking closely at it. The outrage of being betrayed and violated by other Christians drives so many away from Christ while it forces others to become genuine theologians, meaning: Christians who explicitly acknowledge that we inherit our faith, and we cannot avoid owning it as our faith. Tradition is a horizon of discovery—of ourselves and our world.

One problematic aspect of Vanier’s theological inheritance was its intentional and theologized obscuring of the power dynamics of spiritual direction. Though Vanier admits the necessity of safeguards for the practice of spiritual accompaniment as well as his own struggles with roving desire when travelling, the theology of passivity he

received from Philippe never squarely faces the possibility that a spiritual director might desire to dominate young and vulnerable people in the context of spiritual direction.\textsuperscript{100} Without practical safeguards or self-critical assessment of his own motives in engaging in this sort of spiritual direction, his call to leave speculative reason behind merged with his powerful role as founder of the community in ways that were inevitably exploitative.\textsuperscript{101} Late in his life, as the secrecy surrounding his exploitative practices began to unravel, Vanier began to realize that the path to spiritual unity promised by Philippe had in reality ended in a cul-de-sac of isolating estrangement.\textsuperscript{102} The cries of the survivors of his abuse provoked a crisis of conscience that never seems to have reached full repentance or any real acknowledgment of the emotional havoc he had caused.\textsuperscript{103}

A myriad of theological questions raised in this article deserve further investigation, from the place of touch in Christian theology, to the problems of navigating the vagaries of eros in Christian community. What role should touch play in Christian healing? How does belonging in community heal?\textsuperscript{104} More disturbing questions are raised by the facility with which Philippe and Vanier evaded censure by the official church authorities and constructed a parallel pseudo-church alongside the official local parish. I have suggested that the fatal mistake was to systematically overweight and then materially overstate the eschatological overcoming of the penultimate status of human life after the fall. Fr. Philippe focused on Mary’s womb as an icon promising the possibility of embodying sinlessness in a sinful world, and he did so by exploiting traditional Roman Catholic doctrines of priestly mediation of grace. I suspect that Vanier liked Protestants because they preferred to ignore the characteristically Roman Catholic tint to these ideas, allowing him to hide Philippe’s Marian piety in plain sight.\textsuperscript{105} Further questions are raised about the theological appropriateness of seeking to produce elites in the spiritual realm,\textsuperscript{106} and whether it is appropriate to do so by constructing countercultural enclaves that claim to

\textsuperscript{100} The theology of hierarchical passivity espoused by Philippe and Vanier has received sustained theological criticism for some time now. See Sarah Coakley, \textit{Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender} (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), ch. 3; Linn Marie Tonstad, \textit{God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude} (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), ch. 3.


\textsuperscript{102} \textit{C&A}, pp. 717–22.

\textsuperscript{103} Sharkey, ‘A Double Life’, p. 7. It is now clear that Vanier’s dissimulation about Philippe late in his life repeated a script forged much earlier in his attempt to save L’Eau vive by distancing it from its censured founder. \textit{C&A}, p. 104.

\textsuperscript{104} Cf. \textit{C&A}, p. 77 n. 2.

\textsuperscript{105} Vanier’s most extended contact with Protestant theologians was with David Ford, A.M. Allchin and Frances Young, who met for decades with Vanier for theological study (Spink, \textit{The Miracle, the Message, the Story}, pp. 258–56). The theological careers of both Ford and Vanier culminated in commentaries on the Gospel of John. Jean Vanier, \textit{Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John} (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004); David Ford, \textit{The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021). Ford is singled out as the sole Protestant theologian cited in Vanier’s corpus by the study report authors (\textit{C&A}, p. 743, n. 2).

\textsuperscript{106} On the role played by Aristotle in Vanier’s version of this aspiration see \textit{C&A}, pp. 156–57.
carry a saving practice for a broken world. The aspiration to become spiritual elites becomes especially dangerous when the need of the individual or community sets the terms of the discussion of grace and redemption, as the theory of regression therapy seems to be embedded in the heart of the theology of Philippe and Vanier. One way to sublimate the tensions generated by the hard work of living together is to organize communal life around the euphoric or transcendent moments of the spiritual life. These were all load-bearing ideas at the founding of L’Eau vive and carried on in L’Arche.

I am not suggesting that Christianity should repudiate the desire to foster communities of radical obedience, but that in such communities special attention must be paid to how this remains obedience to Jesus and not anyone in the community. Christian ethics loses all critical force when hope is lost that Christ will disrupt a sinful status quo, and L’Arche has certainly served as such a witness. The theological problems that can attend this desire are multiple, however. It is easy, on one side, to confuse Christian ethical criticism with simple historical progress, and on the other, to project our own countercultural desires as the kingdom of heaven. This article has brought a third danger into sharp focus: of understanding the eschatological present as a space lifted out of the immanent plane of sinful activity, and where mystic gnosis can be experienced firsthand. In this sinless space things can happen that are very concrete and physical but proceed without any of the safeguards that would attend action if it was admitted that we can never escape the realm of sinful common life in a fallen world. Recent evidence makes it clear that, under the tutelage of the Philippe brothers, Vanier studied theological ethics in order to marshal arguments for his unorthodox practices.

It is clearly possible for Christian ethics and theology to open too wide a gap between the sinful world in need of repentant change and the fellowship of the ecclesia of saints. When this happens the conveyor belt which harnesses eschatological judgment and redemption to leaven common morality is broken. When this occurs special sorts of confusions and abuses can happen. A community that relies on a space beyond sin becomes one in which questions of sinless mystical practice cannot be easily asked because they are presumed to be holy in principle. It is also one prone to confuse cries of protest or critical questions with the persecution suffered by Jesus at the hands of a sin-blinded world. Such a loss of connection between the eschatological and the penultimate is not without precedent in the tradition, since from the beginning the fertility of monastic and reform movements sprung precisely

107. Jacques Ellul, To Will and to Do: An Introduction to Christian Ethics, vol. 2, trans. Jacob Marques Rollison (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), pp. 57–59; Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), ch. 4. Philippe was evidently firmly committed to what is sometimes called a realized eschatology. ‘Love is not expressed in the passing act of generation. It is no longer only at the service of the union of the bodies in one flesh for the transmission of life … Those elected thanks to their bodies form a new city, a heavenly Jerusalem … occupied at the Wedding, they are true and no longer transient brides, occurring in the night, as though hidden, but permanent and in full eternal light.’ Quoted in C&A, p. 663.

from Christian attempts to inhabit an eschatologically ordered space in a way that brought it into a sinful world that they hoped to save, not escape.109

Speaking personally, my own most pointed criticism of Vanier has to do with the way he double-coded traditional Christian language. His theological speech was simultaneously lifegiving to many hearers even as it was ultimately subverting the non-coercive substance of the gospel. His ubiquitous use of friendship language exemplifies one such problematic double-coding.110 Even more offensive, in my view, was his use of the ancient practice of foot washing as a covert apology and pedagogy for sexualized practices of spiritual direction that betrayed his own teaching about respecting vulnerability and listening to the wounded. As he asked communities and visitors to bare their feet in this rite of mutual vulnerability to touch, he often emphasized that the biblical language of the ‘uncovering of the feet’ could also refer to the genitals and so sexual intimacy.111 Foot washing, he taught, was a powerful rite offered to us by Jesus himself. We present our most vulnerable and unpresentable members to another believer because here Christ meets even the lowest among us with tender, physical touch. We know how Vanier interpreted such descriptions in the privacy in which he practiced his mystical abuse. This double coding seems to me the nadir of the theology Vanier lived along with his occasional use of it to exploit the spiritual hunger of people drawn to him and the vision of L’Arche.112 It would be a theological tragedy if Vanier’s private and distorted interpretation of foot washing was to irreversibly taint a practice that is a central Maundy Thursday rite for the many communities of L’Arche around the world. The ignorance in those many communities of Vanier’s own double coding of the rite is certainly a blessing, and to be preserved, if at all possible, and if not, taken as an opportunity to recall that Vanier has not cornered the voice of Jesus.

This, I would suggest, is the deepest theological question pressed by Vanier’s legacy: Will the teaching and example of Jesus on which Vanier’s perverted practices were based finally be obscured by the darkness of Vanier’s harnessing it to abuse those in his power? Or will the power of Christ heard in the survivors’ protests effectively resist this corruption by calling forth new understandings and practices which are true representations of the healing and renewing power of God?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

110. ‘A certain element of risk seems to belong to the very essence of love, as a witness to its trust and abandon, as well as to its disinterestedness. Of course, no merely human friendship is or ever can be purely disinterested. It is only among supernatural friendships, those formed by the Holy Spirit himself, that we find examples of perfect friendship. But even these are only feeble approximations of the unique predilection of Infinite Love for Mary, his Bride.’ Philippe, Mystical Rose, p. 138.
Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Brian Brock https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2921-0962