

Genesis of a Faith and Sharing Community at the diocese of Quebec



Marc Rioux, 1990

By Marc Rioux

Introduction

Faith and Sharing was initiated in North America at the end of the 1960s, after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), this great assembly of all hopes that wanted to open the Church to the world and its modernity, following a completely new type of spiritual retreats preached by a layman, Jean Vanier, a man of prayer and action who has the constant concern to live and relay the message of the Good News of the Lord Jesus. Jean announced a new Word whose source was the Bible and his life experience very concrete, including at "L'Arche", which he founded with Raphael and Philippe in 1964.



The Word thus proclaimed, which made Jesus completely alive, became the Word of God and of Life. Following this experience of the first retreats, many testified that they were deeply moved, converted.

"The history of a community is important, it must be said and reiterated, inscribed and repeated. We forget so quickly what God has done! It must be remembered in time and out of season that God is at the origin of everything, and that He is the one who has watched over the community with love." Jean Vanier

Genesis

1- In the beginning, in the province of Quebec, as elsewhere in North America, it was only a question of organizing and living closed retreats where Jean and others proclaimed the Word. We went from diocese to diocese and every time we invited people from other dioceses. We did not talk about the Faith and Sharing Community yet. I would say that it was not even planned because it was a question of organizing and living retreats of this very special type, but I remember that it was often said: "Faith and Sharing is a way of life, an art of living in everyday life". Jean always insisted on bringing priests, religious and lay people from all walks of life in equal number, if possible. That's what I lived, with about a hundred people both in Mont-Roland north of Montreal in 1970 and at Mont-Saint-Sacrement school in Valcartier, north of Quebec City in 1971.

As Jean had done at the end of the very first retreats, in Mont-Rolland, the first in Quebec, he asked retreatants from various dioceses to form, on their return home, a team that would pray to Jesus to discern whether He wanted a retreat in the following years.

Thus, from one year to the next, prayer teams from different dioceses who, according to Jean's wishes, obtained the consent or support of their bishop, prepared and animated at home retreats that

will be called "Faith and Sharing". Jean, refusing any cult of personality, did not want them to be called "Vanier Retreats". I remember hearing him point out the difference between the guru who is followed by his disciples and the Christian who invites to follow Jesus.

2- Subsequently, while continuing to invite people from all walks of life, all social conditions and all ages, the various teams of preparation and animation of retreats have made sure to make a privileged place for more people who are fragile, injured in life, disadvantaged or disabled.

3- Then, during a weekend spent in an Outdoor Center in February 1972, Jean suggested that we live a future retreat in the Lower Town. This wish was shared and warmly welcomed by religious and lay people already working in the underprivileged neighborhoods of Greater Quebec and by the various pastoral zone councils (St-Sauveur, St-Roch, Limoilou...) to whom the project was presented. The teams of sharing and spontaneous prayer also supported the coordination team of this first retreat in a working-class district of the city. There were both interns and commuters. For the interns, mattresses were placed on the floor of the recreation rooms of two elementary schools of Saint-Malo. In the women's room, night tables were added between each mattress. As for the commuters, they went to sleep at home or with friends. From day to day, the number of participants in this retreat increased.

As for the meals, they were organized and served by nuns and lay volunteers in the room of a convent in the Saint-Sauveur district.

4- In 1973, the retreat took place at the Hôpital Général de Québec, whose goal at the founding in 1692 was to provide care to the poor and the elderly.

In the morning, several gathered as a team of sharing the Word and spontaneous prayer, others preferred to meditate alone.

In the afternoon, Jean gave talks at the auditorium. The sick and elderly in the hospital could listen to the Word in their room or in a small hall through an intercom system. In the evening, Jean was speaking in the open air in front of the hospital, where hundreds of people were gathering, more numerous from one evening to the next.

It was towards the end of this retreat that we celebrated for the first time a "Feast of Life". More than 2,000 people from Greater Quebec and elsewhere converged on the evening to the Municipal Stadium to express, with the retreatants, their gratitude to the Lord of life by games, songs, testimonies including that of Janine Sutto, actress Quebecker, mother of Catherine Deyglun, who has trisomy 21. A Eucharistic celebration and a big fireworks ended the Feast.

It happened to me one day, thinking back to this retreat, I realized: it took a team of crazy or daring supporters of the cause of Jesus to dream this project and realize it. Inviting hundreds of people from various dioceses to listen to the Word of God in and in front of the General Hospital, at the same time as 75 others, including several



Louise Berderson and Maurice Thériault

teenagers, gathered at Maison Jésus-Ouvrier for a closed retreat that Fernand Lacroix cjm, the bishop of Edmundston, animated. Imagine, the organization, the talks, and in addition, a Feast of Life at the municipal stadium. All this by volunteers. All of this, for free, as one crowd once did, who was fed on the five barley breads and two fishes that a child had (Jn 6: 9). With "anawim" (poor according to the beatitudes), God can do a lot.

Jean Garneau of Quebec created this logo for this first Feast of Life:

At the heart of this heart, symbol of love, formed by two stylized people who meet and share, a white cross, sign of the faith of Christians to the risen Christ.



This logo, without "I believe in life", became the official emblem of the North American Faith and Sharing Community.

During this retreat, exceptionally for eight days, in various part of Greater Quebec, there were seventeen Katimavik (a small "unstructured" room, furnished and decorated very simply, even bare... a desert where flows a spring of living water...) where people could go to sit, gather with Jesus to listen to Him and stay with Him day and night.

It was during this same retreat that the project of a first L'Arche home in Quebec was initiated. This became the "L'Arche Le Printemps" in St-Malachie in the Bellechasse region.

New evangelization

It happens that we often hear an extract of the Word of God but that we do not really listen and assimilate it. One day, I listened and I, like many others, was disturbed by this Jesus who, seeing people helpless and slaughtered, was compassionate towards them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. (Mt 9:36). Did not this man Jesus, himself, first touched, and moved by what the Lord had said to Moses: "I saw, yes, I saw the misery of my people who are in Egypt, and I heard their cries under the blows of the overseers. Yes, I know his sufferings... I went down to deliver him... Now so, go! I am sending you..." Ex 3:7-10

This story of the genesis of the Faith and Sharing community in Quebec City shows us that, as a living organism, it has been able to adapt from year to year in order to live more deeply the spoken Word. It will do more afterwards. It will produce, with the inspiration of the Spirit of Jesus, fruits, to the extent that its members will feed on the Word of God and will be close to the wounded of the life, the marginalized and the impoverished... and, hearing their cry, they will understand better the Good News of Jesus who always calls to follow him and who sends... 💜



At the parish retreat of Saint-Prosper de Beauce, 2002