

Mentally Disabled Give Eucharistic Lesson

Founder of L'Arche Addresses Quebec Congress

By Jesús Colina

QUEBEC CITY, JUNE 20, 2008 (Zenit.org).- The Eucharist teaches the lesson that "Jesus loves me just as I am," said the founder of an organization that ministers to mentally handicapped people.

Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche Community, spoke Monday to the 49th International Eucharistic Congress, under way through Sunday in Quebec.

Vanier told the story of a mentally handicapped boy from Paris on the day he received his First Communion: "After Mass, which was a family celebration, the boy's uncle, who was his godfather, said to the child's mother: 'What a beautiful liturgy! How sad it is that he didn't understand anything.'

"The child heard these words and, with tears in his eyes, said to his mother: 'Don't worry, Mommy, Jesus loves me just as I am.'"

Vanier affirmed: "This child had a wisdom that his uncle was yet to attain: The Eucharist is God's gift par excellence.

"This child gives witness that a disabled person -- sometimes deeply disabled -- finds life, strength and consolation in and through Eucharistic communion. Is not this a call that the whole Church should hear?"

In L'Arche, the founder continued, "we have seen that if we pay attention to the deepest needs of disabled people, we can see their desire for Communion at the moment of the Eucharist."

Vanier expressed the hope that the International Eucharistic Congress would serve to rediscover the "gift of Jesus' friendship in his Real Presence in the Eucharist, and that we all try to live a real presence close to frail and rejected persons."

Citing St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, he recalled that "the weakest in the Church, the least presentable and those we hide, are indispensable for the Church and must be honored."

"To be a friend to the poor, therefore, is not an option, even if it's preferential; it is the very meaning of the Church," Vanier affirmed. "The poor, who cry out to engage in relationships, disturb us. If we listen to them, they awaken our hearts and intelligence so that together we can form the Church, body of Christ, source of compassion, goodness and forgiveness for all human beings."

Vanier founded the first L'Arche Community in Paris in 1964.