



THE NATIONAL BOARD FOR  
**SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN**  
IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND

# Briefing Paper

**Briefing Paper on a report Commissioned by  
the L'Arche Internationale into Control and  
Abuse by Thomas Philippe, Jean Vanier and  
L'Arche (1950-2019)**

**February 2023**





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## About the Briefing Papers

The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (National Board) was established to provide advice, services and assistance in furtherance of the development of the safeguarding of children within the Roman Catholic Church on the island of Ireland. The National Board also monitors compliance with legislation, policy and best practice and reports on these activities annually, as comprehensively set out in the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Company, Coimirce.

Article 4 (iii) of the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Company requires the National Board to: “ report and provide, upon request from the Constituents or any Constituent, support, advisory and training services to such Constituents or Constituent on policies and practices relating to safeguarding of children.”

The National Board already provides comprehensive Guidance to support the implementation of *Safeguarding Children, Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland 2016*. In addition annually we produced Guidance, Advice and Practice (GAP) papers further complements the detailed Guidance on topics of current interest to constituents.

This development of Briefing Papers is envisaged to provide information contained in detailed research papers, journal articles, and inquiry reports relevant to safeguarding that we condense into a short digest format for ease of reference.

The Briefing Papers are the National Board's critique and assessments of key points and lessons that can be learned from externally written reports.

**The views expressed are those of the National Board and should not be considered as a definitive position on the given topic.**

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## 1. Background

L'Arche is a global movement of over 150 Communities, working across 38 countries, in cultural, religious and socio-economic contexts. The first L'Arche Community was founded in France in 1964. L'Arche developed living communities for people "with and without learning disabilities" with an aim of working together "for a more human society". L'Arche began in France in Trosly-Breuil by a Canadian, Jean Vanier, in response to concerns he had about people with learning disabilities living in overcrowded institutions. Jean Vanier was a philosopher and religious leader who considered entering the priesthood. Over years Vanier groomed, manipulated and spiritually and sexually abused women within L'Arche. In January 2023 a report commissioned by L'Arche International examined the mechanisms of psychological hold and sexual abuse by Jean Vanier and Thomas Philippe, a Dominican priest and mentor of Vanier.

## 2. Remit of Inquiry

In Autumn 2020, L'Arche Internationale commissioned a survey conducted by six researchers from different disciplines: history, sociology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, theology to "shed light on the history of the founding of L'Arche and its motivations, as well as to identify the cultural and institutional dynamics within L'Arche that may have facilitated situations of abuse by Jean Vanier and Thomas Philippe. The mandate of the Commission was to establish historical facts and make intelligible a complex collective history, so that lessons could be learned in the fight against the acts of control and abuse in L'Arche.

Specifically the Commission sought to:

Explain the history of our foundation and its motivations?

- Identify what were the cultural and institutional dynamics at work within L'Arche?
- Understand if there was a systemic dimension to situations of abuse involving Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier.

L'Arche Internationale suggested that there were two major matters that the survey should address:

"The first grievance concerns his "complicity" with T. Philippe: J. Vanier is accused of having defended, against the truth, the person of T. Philippe, his reputation, his works, his mode of spiritual direction, his sexual abuses. He protected those mis-deeds, in the sense that he "covered" them; J. Vanier knew, lied on these specific points for complex reasons that we are analysing, and allowed within L'Arche the emergence of the conditions of possibility and perpetuation of abuse".

"The second grievance further damages the portrait of J. Vanier. He is accused of having reproduced the pattern of spiritual influence and sexual abuse by T. Philippe".

## 3. Process of Inquiry

The study conducted by the six researchers examined extensive documentation, including unpublished papers, testimonies, doctors' reports, memoirs, notes and from archival material from across the world as well as Jean Vanier's diaries and letters.

Four members conducted interviews (119 interviews) with 89 people; some victims or survivors of an abusive relationships, or partners of a transgressive relationship with the founder of L'Arche, with T. Philippe or with other members of L'Arche who appear to have been initiated into the group's "mystical-sexual" beliefs and practices; witnesses to the history of L'Arche, particularly in the community to which J. Vanier and T. Philippe belong (Trosly-Breuil); close friends of J. Vanier; members of L'Arche who have held positions of responsibility at different levels (community, country, zones or regions, federation).

There was in addition a practical theological survey, based on a singular material: 15 works by J. Vanier.

All of the data was analysed and a critique was published into a report with 7 parts:

1. Historical context, aimed at exploring certain biographical elements concerning J. Vanier, by examining in particular the stages of his training and by studying the human and ecclesial network into which he fits.
2. Further historical context, sought to measure the human and cultural continuities between L'Eau vive (a Religious Community where Philippe and Vanier met) and L'Arche.
3. A sociological perspective which looked at looks at the practices and representations of authority (formal and informal) in L'Arche, as exercised by J. Vanier and others.
4. An analysis of how the exercise of authority is one of the conditions for the possibility of relationships of influence and abusive acts committed by the founders.
5. An exploration of the medical track and presented a psychiatric hypotheses relating to T. Philippe and J. Vanier.
6. A psychoanalytical perspective of the itinerary of J. Vanier.
7. A critical analysis of the spirituality of J. Vanier. Without denying its interesting aspects, the study of practical theology highlights problematic points, with regard to the affiliation to the spirituality of T. Philippe, and the facts of influence and abuse committed by him.

#### 4. Findings

- It was within the community of Trosly in France that the majority of the cases of control and sexual abuse investigated by the commission took place. People accused of sexual abuse have been members and have held positions of responsibility there, victims still live nearby.
- From its foundation in 1964 until to 1979, L'Arche Community in France was characterised by Jean Vanier holding all positions of legal, functional and symbolic authority.
- In 2014, there were revelations about Thomas Philippe's sexual abuse of women and the first testimonies concerning Jean Vanier, kept him (Jean Vanier ) at the heart of the concerns of the international officials.
- Although the Commission's mandate primarily concerned abusive situations involving Jean Vanier, the exploration of the available documents has made it possible to identify twenty-three people, men and women, who were sexually abused by Thomas Philippe, a small number of whom are among the thirty-three victims identified by the Holy Office in the 1950s.
- Some acts of sexual assault or abuse took place within the framework of a relationship of control, others did not. The Commission considered that it was necessary to analyse them together, insofar as they were part of a continuum of sexual violence marked by the experience of influence, abuse of authority and more generally by the confusion of spiritual, affective and sexual spheres.
- Women tried on various occasions to report the abuse they have suffered from one or other of the founders, Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier. It was in 2014, following the receipt of testimonies from members of L'Arche denouncing abuses committed (Father) T. Philippe, that Archbishop d'Ornellas, initiated a canonical investigation to "listen to people as much as possible, in order not only to know the facts in their exactness, but also to demonstrate the Church understands their suffering and their words." The investigation concluded that the allegations were well-founded.

- The sexual abuse was not established by physical violence, but by the deployment of a moral constraint, supported by arguments resting on the theological, spiritual, emotional and psychological registers, as well as by the use of peer validation.
- The modus operandi of Vanier, within a “spiritual guidance” setting was to develop an intimacy to the point of sexual acts causing the victim to consider that they share responsibility for their humiliation. “They begin by thinking they are chosen, then realise they are not unique, used rather than loved. They understand that, despite its duration, the relationship is stereotyped and limited to brief encounters. Feelings of bitterness or anger ensue. It is possible they will suffer from their experience with Jean Vanier years later, when the loss of this apparent support could cause mental breakdown. Only long psychological analysis can help them to move on, if it is possible. As is almost always the case, the abuser minimised or ignored the suffering they inflicted on their prey and felt no guilt. “My conscience is clear,” said Jean Vanier when talking to a former psychiatrist for L’Arche, Erol Franko after the first complaint about him. He defended himself, saying he considered they had given their consent freely, adding with almost amused detachment: “In fact, I think those women must have been in love with me.” When women told him how much they had suffered from their relationship with him, he never acknowledged the abusive nature of his conduct”.
- The behaviour of Thomas Philippe can also be categorised as perverse. In some cases, sexual abuse was the result of individuals mixing psychosis and perversion, but it is not always easy to separate them. These perverse traits influenced the way Thomas Philippe exercised his control over all his followers, and therefore Jean Vanier. Thomas Philippe’s theological reflection commands total submission to the divine personalities, and as a result, total submission by his victims to their representatives: “Jesus loves you through me”.
- Various testimonies depict Thomas Philippe as authoritarian and unconcerned about others, eager to satisfy his impulses, justifying his practices with religious arguments. He deceived the women he abused. They were impressed to have been chosen by this “Saint homme” (holy man) who ordered them to say nothing Thomas Philippe possessed all the characteristics of a sexual pervert: moral transgression, ritualised sexual practice in an imperious and exclusive way to achieve the satisfaction he needed, considering the partner as a mere object to serve his satisfaction, and justifying sexual practices with a higher goal. A Holy Office document written by Father Paul Philippe describes him as a “subtle pervert”. Thomas Philippe was beyond morality and reason, and therefore felt no guilt towards the people he abused. He justified himself, considering he practised a higher order of sexuality and celibacy”
- From 1950 to 2019 there was a culture of secrecy and lies. The support of a recognized and well-off family and high level social network contributed to manipulating the Catholic hierarchy.
- The insufficiencies of communication between the various authorities of the Church are obvious, and allowed the maintenance of Philippes and Vanier’s reputation for holiness.
- All over the world, members of L’Arche expressed their incomprehension and their feeling of betrayal. In Canada, a country where the Vanier family was revered, J. Vanier schools were renamed. In the Catholic world, there was shock and amazement.
- The conclusions echo not only the denunciations made by the global me too movement, but also the investigations into sexual crimes, particularly in Catholic institutions.



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