# Jean Vanier, Untiring Advocate For People With Disabilities, Wins Templeton Prize

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It started with an act of kindness.

In 1964, Jean Vanier [invited two men with developmental disabilities to share a house](http://www.larche.org/discover/larche-since-its-creation/) with him in Trosly-Breuil, near Paris. It was a life-changing move for the Canadian philosopher that would, over time, radically improve the lives of many others.

Though Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux had been institutionalized -- essentially shunned by the world -- Vanier reached out in recognition of their shared humanity. That first leap would serve as the spark for [L’Arche International](http://www.larche.org/), today a global network of residential communities in which people with and without disabilities share their lives.

On Wednesday, in honor of Vanier's five decades of advocacy for people with disabilities, he is being named the 2015 recipient of the [Templeton Prize](http://www.templeton.org/signature-programs/templeton-prize).

The $1.7 million award is given annually by the Templeton Foundation to a person who “has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life’s spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works.” The foundation was established by the late billionaire investor and philanthropist Sir John Templeton.

In a statement Wednesday, Vanier, 86, said he hoped that his receiving the prize would lead to more opportunities for people with and without developmental disabilities to meet and learn from each other:

People are healed and become more human as they enter into real relationships with others. They then discover that under all the feelings of stress, rejection and humiliation, that they are someone! Those in need and those who come to help are all being healed, and are all, together, becoming more human. Our society will really become human as we discover that the strong need the weak, just as the weak need the strong. We are all together working for the common good.

Vanier, the son of a Canadian diplomat who was ambassador to France before World War II, began active service in the British Royal Navy in 1945. During the ensuing years, standing watch for long solitary hours aboard ship, he began to pray and to ponder a different life, according to the Templeton Foundation press releases. This prayerful period led him to resign his naval commission in 1950 and, for the next dozen years, engage in spiritual and theological studies based in France.

The next turning point came in 1963, when at the urging of a priest and spiritual mentor in Trosly-Breuil, Vanier visited people with disabilities who were living in psychiatric hospitals and other institutions. One of them reportedly asked him, “Will you be my friend?”

It was a request Vanier would never forget. He followed through the next year, asking Simi and Seux to live with him. Today all three are named as [co-founders of L'Arche](http://www.larche.org/discover/larche-since-its-creation/) on its website.

Others came to join them -- some with disabilities, some who were university students. Vanier dubbed the new community L’Arche, a word that symbolized both Noah’s Ark, a refuge for people in pain, and an arch that connects heaven and earth.

Inspired by Vanier’s accomplishment and his ongoing advocacy, the students and others went out and started similar communities around the world. There are now 147 L’Arche communities in 35 countries. Another 1,500 Faith and Light groups, also sparked by Vanier, offer spiritual support to people with developmental disabilities, their families and friends in 82 countries.

At L'Arche, those with disabilities, called core members, share their lives with "assistants," who live on the same campus. The assistants provide direct care for core members, but they are also asked to form deep bonds of friendship.

Heather Bixler, who has served as an assistant in the Washington metropolitan area and in Portland Oregon, said [on the L'Arche website](http://www.larcheusa.org/who-we-are/stories/heather-bixler/) that the organization encourages people to "give and receive love."

"L’Arche is a lifestyle, filled with moments joyful and mundane. It is also an idea, an alternative way of understanding one another and the world, manifested through small, daily acts of care and generosity," Bixler wrote, adding, "There are few places in the world where this type of mutuality is enacted, if even encouraged."

Over the years, Vanier has traveled extensively around the world to promote interfaith cooperation to support people with disabilities.

“We must start to meet: people must meet people; we are all human beings. Before being Christians or Jews or Muslims, before being Americans or Russians or Africans, before being generals or priests, rabbis or imams, before having visible or invisible disabilities, we are all human beings with hearts capable of loving,” he said in his statement Wednesday.

Past recipients of the Templeton Prize include the late Mother Teresa (who received the first award in 1973), the Dalai Lama (2012) and retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2013).

Vanier, who still lives at L'Arche in Trosly-Breuil, will formally receive the Templeton Prize during a ceremony at St. Martin-in-the-Fields church in London on May 18.