

## ***Geography, Jean Vanier's L'Arche, the Catholic Tradition and the Mystery of Place***

### **Abstract**

Teachers often make comments called 'asides' about ideas that are, in some way, extensions of their involvement with their subject matter. If teachers were to systematize and reflect on the intrinsic capability of the human mind involved in such asides, it might suggest a wondrous way of introducing their faith tradition into their classes. When Teilhard, after studying lithosphere, biosphere, and atmosphere comes to imagine a 'noosphere' and when, Bernard Lonergan, after reflecting on the hydrologic cycle and other cycles in life, comes to posit 'schemes of recurrence', there was at work in them some power of mind, imaginative or logical, or both, which we might emulate in the classroom. Both teaching and learning advance when this power of mind is evoked. And insights, as Lonergan himself pointed out, arise most often when two disparate pieces of material are rigorously encountered. This paper uses as an example of such imagining/thinking the applicability of the idea of tectonic plates to an understanding of Jean Vanier's analysis of the modern world in *Finding Peace*.

Systematizing the idea of the aside is one way to integrate faith and disciplinary knowledge. Another is to incorporate into a class with specific disciplinary knowledge such as cultural geography, whatever in the Catholic intellectual tradition or in Catholic Social Teaching expands, illuminates, amplifies or critiques a given piece of disciplinary knowledge. The incorporation of the Catholic intellectual tradition into a study of cultural geography is exemplified by consideration of Vanier's L'Arche movement as illuminative of cultural encounters in specific places. The L'Arche movement breathes actual life into the program of Catholic social teaching and, in Vanier's own writings, offers a considerable literature descriptive of its efforts.

The geography course appended to this paper uses Vanier in several of its assignments. It also offers insights from the Catholic intellectual tradition which expand and enrich disciplinary knowledge in physical geography and insights from Catholic Social Teaching which expand and enrich economic and cultural geography.

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“The river is within us, the sea is all about us”

“...to apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint--  
No occupation either, but something given  
And taken...”

T.S. Eliot *Four Quartets*

“In one of his *Catechetical Lectures*, the fourth century Church Father, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, says that the Church is Catholic not just because she is geographically and socially universal, but because she ‘teaches universally and completely’.... [Jesus’] mission is realized in and through the varied responses of those around him.”  
John Saward *The Mysteries of March*

Tectonic plate movement is a global earth building activity. It works as a profound and monumental process over grand, almost inconceivable, scales of time to fashion the multitude of places which we humans inhabit. Intimately associated with tectonic activity are processes like subduction--in which the edge of one plate is forcefully submerged under the edge of another-- and volcanic activity--in which interior forces and materials under great pressure and high temperatures build up earth’s surface in different ways in different times and places. Connected with both tectonic plate movement and volcanic action is a wondrous cycle of building up and transformation of materials called the rock cycle in which uniquely structured minerals join together in different arrangements to give a particular character and profile to various parts of earth’s surface.

The building up of various places through volcanic and tectonic activity is accompanied by a wearing down of those same places --geographers call it a *denudation* of these places--through the inter-actions of sun, wind, and water. Sometimes this wearing down is rapid and observable, often it is almost imperceptible.

The wearing down and the building up give to each place on earth’s surface a unique structure which invites both wonder and dispassionate study. And in all the workings of this building up and wearing down, there is both uniqueness of place and the gossamer interdependence of one place on another. Disturbances anywhere affect earth everywhere.

The building up and the wearing down which geography studies is suggestive of things we have heard in the gospels: “ Every valley shall be exalted and every hill

brought low.” Suggestive too is the interdependence of global places and features: the mystical body has its counterpart in earth’s own physical being.

The discovery of persistent echoes of our faith life present in the study of the processes at work in physical geography offers a way of incorporating some reflection on our faith life into the curriculum. One teacher recently told me that the only way in which he incorporates the Catholic tradition into his course is through asides and personal reflections. I did not ask him if he had reflected on what it was in what he was teaching which caused the asides or reflections to occur. But I might well have done so. For it seems to me that there are resident in my own field of geography a number of events, topics, and processes which actually call forth the kind of reflection that we too easily dismiss when we talk about ‘an aside’. Such reflection forms a part of the process by which we come to understand what T.S. Eliot calls “the point of intersection of the timeless with time.” In fact, it might well be that consciousness of such intersections, and the very fact that they arise in the reflection each of us engages in as part of our work, offers one of the best ways in which a teacher can speak to the presence and wisdom of the Catholic tradition in the classroom.

Certainly, the psalms are a meditation on what David and others saw present in natural processes: “The Lord’s is the earth and its fullness, the world and all its peoples. It is he who set it on the seas; on the waters he made it firm. Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord? Who shall stand in his holy place?”

Certainly it was more than an aside that led early Christians on numerous occasions to meditate on the frequent and varied understandings resident in the rising of the sun. Christ, for them, is in a dramatic and powerful way the new risen sun which promises continuing sustenance and increased being.

The kind of reflection which I am urging on myself in geography must have been resident in the person who framed this hymn dating to the 6th century: “The God whom earth and sea and sky/ Adore and laud and magnify, /Whose might they own, whose praise they tell,/ In Mary’s body deigned to dwell.”

If we were to incorporate into any course of study not only the elements proper to that course of study but also a reflection on what those elements suggest about the ordering of things that our faith discovers, are we not making at least an initial appeal to the unity of all knowledge, while also honoring and leaving intact the language of discourse and methodology proper to the course of study? And might we not also be making learning a more integrative and forceful activity for our students? Don’t they love our ‘asides’ because they suggest something more personal and dramatic than a reasoned sequence of ideas?

In our own time, the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, Lecomte du Nouy, and others invite us to amplify our study of the physical processes which build up the earth so that our examination of these processes speaks not only to the work of our reason

but awakens in us also the call of our faith to a higher understanding. The more we understand of the processes at work in the created world, the deeper our realization of the presence of the divine in it. Time's intersection with the timeless (the phrase is T.S.Eliot's) is given to us in all our study if we would open ourselves to its presence (this idea is also Eliot's)!

Whether that be true or not, personal experience in the classroom shows me that student interest is increased when I suggest that there is hidden in the geographic processes of building up through tectonic movements and tearing down through processes of denudation the possibility of a mystic entry into the wonders of our own personalities--to the ways in which we are built up and worn down so that we (and perhaps even the kingdom) might be made more perfect. Certainly, it enriches our understanding of a prayer like the Magnificat to understand that a building up and a tearing down are incorporated into the fashioning of earth. It may be no more than an overtone that is added when the two events, the prayer and the building of earth, are placed side by side. But it may also happen that a student might see that building up and wearing down are a part of the fabric of physical life and spiritual life as well. In such a case, that student has not only learned geography but something of himself or herself that deserves reflection. The earthquake which accompanied the sacrifice of Golgotha might be a sign of change that should occur in the depths of our own lives as well as in the depths of the earth.

Geography, from such a perspective, remains a study of the physical processes which are in continual operation around us and which can be studied through the application of reason. But it is also the latest stone in a well-marked pathway by which we might come to understand ourselves and the universe more fully and more wondrously. Certainly Isaiah used the geography he saw around him to shape the vision of the suffering servant who would re-make Israel and in some deep way fulfill its very geography. The Pauline insight that, with us, all creation is yearning to be free also has some relevance here. It is, parenthetically, of some interest that Alan Paton's modern re-telling of the story of the suffering servant, *Cry the Beloved Country*, is powerfully attentive to both geography and environmental science even while imaging the suffering servant in modern dress.

Let us suppose that one has rigorously exposed students to the processes which fashion all the earth's varied landforms and acquainted them with the details of the works of the processes of tectonic plate movement and volcanic activity. Does it move their understanding forward or retard it to suggest that there are parallels in their own lives to these processes to which they have been introduced?

We might begin by telling them that story and myth are ways of dealing with such processes as are studied in geography. Odysseus's encounter with the angry and wrathful one-eyed Polyphemous before whom human beings are nobodies is a way of understanding the response of humans to life in the shadow of a volcano which might erupt at any given moment. Toynbee in his multi-volume history of

civilization argues that myths have within them an implicit understanding of what we now call science.

Or might we not go even further and suggest that the universe is made in such a way that to discover truth in one of its aspects is to have an entry to truth in other of its aspects? Isn't such a way of teaching a way of re-orienting ourselves to the unity of knowledge and the oneness of the universe we inhabit? We might argue that such a way is fancy's way or the poet's way, but if we hold our knowledge of the processes at work in geography to rigorous standards of reasoned inquiry, does it not enrich the process of both teaching and learning to suggest that there are echoes of geographic processes at work in those of us who have feet in two kingdoms, the physical and the divine. Do we not treat the world as sacrament precisely because whatever it is in its daily workings, it is also a sign of God's love and God's presence in those same workings?

In *Insight*, Bernard Lonergan argues that coming to self knowledge and knowledge of the world requires understanding of an element in our thinking which he identifies as a scheme of recurrence. For our purposes here, it is only important to say that Lonergan's discovery of schemes of recurrence is suggested by cycles he saw at work in the physical world: the hydrologic cycle, the nitrogen cycle, the carbon cycle, the Krebs cycle, etc. So, when we move from processes in the physical world to understanding processes within ourselves, we are doing something intelligent. It also makes for good teaching.

In his latest work, *Finding Peace*, Jean Vanier examines the deep-seated forces at work in all of us which predispose us to war and the search for power and dominance. Our understanding of these forces is not diminished if we think of them as the tectonic plates of personhood, forces which are at work early in our lives constructing our character. Vanier identifies these forces as experienced conflicts which emerge within the person, family, society, and culture which promote the urge to power and aggression. These various conflicts, however much they make us who we are, curtail our full development within the human family. So within the human psyche are powerful movements which contribute to our egoism, the form we have. In some way, we must tear them down. There is at least the pronounced shadow of a parallel to the formation of earth's landforms within our own psyche. Once we, as individual persons and as cultures, recognize the elemental nature of these forces which have contributed to our being who we are at this moment in time and space, we can come to a more profound understanding of the corrective work we must engage in to make it possible to construct a new heaven and a new earth within ourselves which will bring forth a world more responsive to Christ's vision of our love for each other. Geography has done its work at this point. Our new task, once we have felt the power of elemental forces within us, is to understand Vanier's insight that we must come to recognize our own weakness and fragility, our brokenness and fragmentation, if we are to overcome our blind devotion to power and aggression.

. The new understanding to which Vanier urges us arises out of an encounter with those whom Vanier calls “prophets of peace. These prophets are those who mysteriously both elicit our compassion and simultaneously “carry and love us.” To allow oneself to be carried by those one thinks to carry is “difficult and demanding, because it implies a revelation of one’s own weakness.” (C&G, p.78) In the loving acceptance of one’s own weakness, one discovers in oneself a new heaven and a new earth: ” to be covenanted to others is to be earthed with them. Without roots we can neither discover where we belong, nor can we grow” (C&G 82).

The understanding Vanier urges us to is not a geographic understanding. But the understanding he would have us arrive at is enriched by a sense of how elemental conflicts in each of us mold us into a form which prohibits the building of the new heaven and the new earth we were destined to build. Our understanding of the wonder of this act is enriched when we come to it from an understanding of the slow work of tectonic plates in building up earth’s landforms and realize that each of us has something analogous to tectonic movements within us which needs to be worn down if we are to arrive in the land Scripture promises us--the promised land.

Understanding is always enriched by analogy, metaphor, and comparison. This paper suggests first, that the matter for comparison be our subject matter and our faith tradition and, second, that such comparisons have within them a fruitfulness which brings fuller human understanding to both the subject matter being rationally studied and the faith seeking greater understanding. Third, one begins to suspect that we are meant to think in this way as a way of furthering both reason’s reach and faith’s promise.

In the geography course I teach, the earth’s lithosphere and biosphere and atmosphere are studied in the idiom of geography, and the course is enriched , not vitiated, when Teilhard’s notion of the noosphere is conjoined to the discussion. The carbon cycle and the hydrologic cycle are both examined, but students are also introduced to Lonergan’s efforts to re-think what it is to understand and to his annunciation of the importance of schemes of recurrence in that re-thinking. Conversely, when students are introduced to the psalmist’s understanding of the natural world as it leads him to a new realization of a loving Creator, they are also given John Polkinghorne’s “So Finely Tuned a Universe” to suggest one way in which the modern universe might be read so as to enrich faith.

So the first suggestion as to how the Catholic tradition might be incorporated into the curriculum goes beyond the occasional aside to a purposeful meditation on what in our faith resonates with the subject matter under study. My observation is that students find such a pairing of the work of reason with the work of faith helpful and intriguing while it also offers a personal response to which they themselves can relate. The geography syllabus which I have appended to this paper gives some indication of the fruits of my own reflection. I think it brings me, and I hope it brings my students, closer to an understanding of what the work of natural philosophy is or might be. At least, I hope that they will come to understand that

there are hints in any subject of themes in another. When I ask students to prepare web pages which describe their personal response to both the topic in geography and the topic in the Catholic tradition which the geography topic has suggested, I hope they will come to some understanding of how their own intelligence works and how specialized knowledge contains intimations, hints, and echoes of other kinds of knowledge.

The conjoining of faith and reason takes another tack in that segment of the geography course in which I turn from physical geography to cultural geography. Here, in addition to whatever is given of cultural geography, I also seek 1. to emphasize that the church's mission must operate within diverse geographic and cultural contexts. 2. to show how, in the best of Catholic thought, the value and richness of other tradition is recognized and 3. to argue that Catholic Social Thought has within it a rich vision of the human which has universal significance--a universality which is not afraid to recognize that place and time are both sacred since they are the dimensions within which Christ seeks the human and the human seeks to understand his/her full development and potential. An introduction to the principles resident in Catholic Social Thought runs concurrently with case studies in the problems in economic development in the global arena.

Geography and theology can speak to each other and inform each other wisely here. Much work has been done in geography to identify cultures and to say, with the aid of insights from anthropology, how they are born and flourish in particular places. Much work has been done in theology, missiology, and ecclesiology to speak of the importance of inculturating the Church's message. Both geography's insights and theology's insights should meet each other happily in a general education course which makes students aware of the diversity of the earth's cultures and the seriousness of the Church's response to that diversity, and of the Church's conviction that there are valid responses to subjects as far apart as cultural relativism and economic justice which can be reasonably centered in the Gospel teaching of the dignity of the human person.

An affirmation of the value of global diversity is a great challenge in the new millennium. The refusal to succumb to a meaningless relativism and the determination to ground our efforts in the dignity of the creative human person as one of the sources of diversity of cultures (geographic challenges being another source) is a great challenge our Catholic universities must face. Here, the rich focus on the dignity of the human person in various global movements like that of Vanier's L'Arche movement offers, as Charles Taylor indicates, a powerful response to a psychology which has failed. Taylor writes in *Sources of the Self*: "Great as the power of naturalist sources might be, the potential of a certain theistic perspective is incomparably greater" (p. 518). The theistic perspective which Taylor sees at work in Vanier and Mother Theresa is also present in various conciliar documents and recent papal encyclicals. The Catholic Church has, in Taylor's perspective, a rich gift to offer the entire human community in all its variousness. This gift does not detract from our humanness, it enriches it by seeing

it within the truth of God. Vanier puts it simply but eloquently in *Community and Growth*:

“Humanity is one. We are all part of the same human race. However different we maybe through culture, race, or disabilities, we are all human beings....The fundamental questions of humanity are always around love and hate, guilt and forgiveness, peace and war, truth and lies (or illusions), the meaning of life and death, and belief in God”(p. 85).

Vanier is only one of the Catholic voices we study in the cultural geography component of the course. Others are noted in the syllabus. But Vanier is a good focus for our thinking here today. For Vanier has come to understand that his love rooted community in l'Arche is able to reach across cultures and cultural barriers, and students are invited to ask how a movement which grows out of the secret inner life of the Christian gospel can find such an eager and willing home in Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist cultures and call as deeply to human need and human love as it does in its Christian source. There is, Vanier says, great strength to be found in a love rooted community unafraid of acknowledging its own weakness. This strength addresses itself to a persistent problem: “the earth is ringing with the cry of despair, of the starving, of the parched, with Jesus' cry, ' I am thirsty' . “ (C&G, p.73)

Vanier, though thoroughly immersed in, and confident of, the call and example of Jesus in his efforts in l'Arche, feels no need to belittle or negate the presence of love and compassion in other religions and traditions. As his l'Arche moves across cultural boundaries, it calls forth in those other religions and traditions a love not afraid of weakness and filled with compassion. The presence of l'Arche in other traditions is an invitation to see how deep the current of love and compassion runs in those traditions. In all his writing and talks, Vanier loves to cite instances of self-forgetfulness and loving concern in the 120 houses of L'Arche in 30 countries and within various cultural traditions as a way of indicating that our searching in other cultures ought to be a search for a deep humanity and an elemental compassion which satisfy the deepest human longings. When he recently returned to the Aristotle which he had studied in his youth, Vanier re-affirmed that Aristotle's great gift to him was the insight that he should search for his deepest longings and most profound desires. It is this searching that Vanier urges us to when we examine other cultures--to know the deepest longings and most profound desires in those cultures.

When l'Arche moves into other cultures, or accepts workers from other traditions and cultures, it obliges itself to do what Vanier asks anyone entering a community to do: “Assertiveness, which enriches an individual, will have to give way to a greater ability to listen; impatience will have to give way to patience. A new strength will be born and new gifts will appear” (C&G, p. 73). When one notes the presence of l'Arche on the West Bank, in India, in Africa, in Japan, and hears of the simple elemental human concern expressed there, one is forced to ask “What is

there in this culture so seemingly foreign to my own which can provide such models of wondrous human action and love?" or "What is the universal power hidden human weakness and affliction that can cause such care and compassion to flourish and the caregiver himself or herself to be more excellently human?" The posing of such questions, and the examination of cultures, religions, and traditions to find what in them disposes those who grow up in these traditions to hear the message and find the life Vanier has found in l'Arche, is an important activity. Cultural geography is enriched by a study of those elements in a given culture which dispose a human towards the kind of work l'Arche is. L'Arche becomes a privileged perspective from which to examine culture and cultural interaction.

It is because Vanier sees such opportunity for deep thought resident in the kind of human action l'Arche represents that he founded a movement called Intercordia which offers the university itself an opportunity to make a part of its academic curriculum an effort grounded in the kind of living l'Arche represents. The goal is to train graduates for peace by asking them to immerse themselves not only in conflict resolution and peace studies but also to commit themselves for a time to the service of the neglected and unfortunate so as to learn more deeply the mystery each one of us, rooted in our own time and place, represents. This mystery is revealed in an acceptance of our own weakness and brokenness, of our need for community, of our need to heal and be healed, to forgive and be forgiven. The kind of situation in which training for peace is best arranged is "a place of reconciliation and forgiveness where each person feels carried by the others and carries them. It is a place of friendship among those who know that they are weak but know too that they are loved and forgiven. (C&G, p. 331). The wonder that we ought to reflect on is that such places and such communities grow and are nurtured in cultures and in religions other than our own. We ought to direct our studies to understanding what in other cultures and religions makes possible places "where our heart can put down roots, a place where we are at home. The roots are not there to comfort us or to turn us in on ourselves. Quite the opposite: they are there so that each of us can grow and bear fruit for humanity and for God" ( C&G, p. 330).

Finally, the inclusion of voices like Vanier's, (as well as the inclusion of the response of other cultures and religions to his voice) in the study of cultural geography is a way of alerting students more deeply to the riches to be discovered in the journey to another culture and the fundamental dignity we all share as humans.. Once one comes to understand these core values, it is easier to address those issues of economic justice and human freedom so wisely addressed in Catholic Social Teaching. As has been pointed out on a number of occasions, the true value of Catholic Social Teaching is most powerfully seen within the entire tradition and culture of Catholic life and expression.

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