



ISSN: 2038-3282

**Pubblicato il: ottobre 2022**

©Tutti i diritti riservati. Tutti gli articoli possono essere riprodotti con l'unica condizione di mettere in evidenza che il testo riprodotto è tratto da [www.qtimes.it](http://www.qtimes.it)  
Registrazione Tribunale di Frosinone N. 564/09 VG

**The problematicism of Giovanni Maria Bertin as an opportunity to critically read Jean Vanier's pedagogy**

**Il problematicismo di Giovanni Maria Bertin come occasione per leggere criticamente la pedagogia di Jean Vanier**

*di*

Anna Aluffi Pentini

Università degli Studi di Roma Tre

[anna.aluffipentini@uniroma3.it](mailto:anna.aluffipentini@uniroma3.it)

**Abstract:**

Bertin's works on ethics, the phenomenology of commitment, problematicism and the rational personality helps to clarifying how the charisma of the educator must never cross over into the abuse of irrationality. In the specific case we want to try to re-read Jean Vanier's message, identifying the essential border between holiness and loss of contact with reality and lack of respect for others. A critical review of Jean Vanier's contribution to a revolutionary philosophy and pedagogy, on the role of the mentally disabled person<sup>1</sup> in society, seems particularly necessary after the accusations of abuse perpetrated by him, in the name of an unsane spirituality.

**Keywords:** Bertin; Vanier; commitment; abuse.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term mentally disabled person is borrowed from the writings of Jean Vanier, undoubtedly "old" with respect to the terminology most commonly used today as *people with learning disabilities*

### **Abstract:**

I lavori di Bertin sull'etica, la fenomenologia dell'impegno, il problematicismo e la personalità razionale si prestano a chiarire come il carisma dell'educatore non debba mai sconfinare nell'abuso dell'irrazionalità. Nel caso specifico si vuole cercare di rileggere il messaggio di Jean Vanier, individuando il confine imprescindibile tra santità e perdita di contatto con la realtà e mancanza di rispetto verso il prossimo. Una rivisitazione critica del contributo di Jean Vanier ad una filosofia e pedagogia rivoluzionaria, sul ruolo della persona con deficit cognitivi nella società, sembra infatti particolarmente necessaria dopo le accuse di abusi da lui perpetrati, in nome di una malsana spiritualità.

**Parole Chiave:** Bertin; Vanier; impegno; abuso.

### **1. Introduction**

Analysing Bertin's literary production<sup>2</sup> in a short article seems difficult, especially given the large number of illustrious pedagogues who have written about him, also in memory of him as Gattullo, Bertolini, Canevaro, Frabboni, Telmon, Bertagna, Contini, Genovese and others (AAVV, 1985; Contini e Genovese 1997).

I have therefore opted for a tribute to his thought that may help to address a thorny issue that concerns the disappointment of many with respect to a public figure who had a great influence on a pedagogical approach strongly imbued with spirituality.

In an attempt to honour Bertin, I make use of his proposal of "pedagogical goodwill" of those who feel "ideally involved in the educating community"<sup>3</sup> (Bertin 1982, p.729). By making reference to the writings by and about Giovanni Maria Bertin, I try to give an answer to certain questions related to a pedagogical message that is fascinating, but potentially dangerous, precisely because of its being open to irrationality and abuse.

Bertin defined the central aspect of the term "personalism" as the "strength of faith to answer the great existential questions" and of that of "problematicism" the "strength of reason and the possibility to give an answer to a utopia and to go beyond where it is possible to plan and experience a new humanity" (Frabboni 1985, p. 16). The two P's, personalism and problematicism, thus correct and balance each other in Bertin's thought, in an intellectual effort aimed at highlighting the distinction between an authentic and an inauthentic existence. This can also help educators to commit themselves in an ethical and rational way: a commitment that takes the form of feeling fulfilled by making others feel fulfilled (Contini and Genovese, 1997). This also represents "for many a point of reference and a stimulus to combine together in pedagogical culture as in educational work the principle of reason with the essential moment of each human being in his/her specificity and originality" (Beria D'Argentine, p. 661).

A critical re-reading of the contribution of Jean Vanier<sup>4</sup> in the form of a revolutionary philosophy and pedagogy concerning the role and participation of the mentally disabled person in society, seems to

---

<sup>2</sup> Bertin's works will be mentioned by translating their title into English. The translation is by the author of this article, but the date goes back to the original Italian title shown in the bibliography. The same applies to translations of literal quotations. The number of pages refers to the Italian text in the bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> "Educating community" in this paper is the translation of Bertin's "comunità educante".

<sup>4</sup> Jean Vanier was born in Quebec in 1928. He joined the Canadian navy in 1942, but left it rather early and in 1950 went to live in France and began studying theology and philosophy in Paris. He then wrote a doctoral thesis on Aristotle. He

be particularly necessary after the accusations of abuse perpetrated by him in the name of an insane spirituality (AAVV, 2020). In a previous paper about Jean Vanier (Aluffi Pentini, 2018), I underlined the centrality of the metaphysical dimension in pedagogical reflexions and practices, highlighting the revolutionary significance of the message of welcoming the disabled person in society and in the Church, at a time when the very possibility of their aspiration and their right to participation was still being questioned. I therefore placed J. Vanier among "those who have contributed to humanizing our society, especially with regard to the reception of disabled people in society and in the Churches" and I affirmed that "by reading and listening to the words of Jean Vanier, it is clear that at the basis of his spirituality is the Gospel of the Beatitudes, seen as the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy: a God who takes the heart of stone from his people to give them a heart of flesh" (ibid, p.122). I stressed that for him "the poor become the catalysts for a profound transformation of the heart of those around him"<sup>5</sup>. When we are close to the poor, many certainties fall away and, if we wish, we have the opportunity to open up to a dimension of sharing. It is a question of responding to a call that manifests itself in a cry, an appeal" (ibid).

At the time of the aforementioned article, only the abuses perpetrated by Père Thomas Philippe were known to all, which occurred in the first "community of the Ark"<sup>6</sup>, that of Trosly Breuil, later to become the parent house of all foyers in the world. As a Dominican, he had been traveling companion and spiritual father of Jean Vanier and of many members of the community for many years. In a certain sense he was considered the co-founder of the first community. Faced with such an incredible discovery, albeit clouded with mysteries, such as the suspension *a divinis* of Père Thomas well before the foundation of the Ark, and his subsequent rehabilitation in conjunction with assuming responsibility towards the late 1960s as chaplain of the Community, it was believed that any kind of involvement in these abuses by the near-Nobel Peace Prize candidate, Jean Vanier, was absolutely out of the question. Jean Vanier's stance on the Père Thomas affair, while considered by some to be too bland, had nevertheless taken the form of an open letter, understandably pained, expressing a kind of inability to reconcile the actions attributed to Père Thomas with a figure so important to him (Vanier cited in Hoyeau 2015). But if it had taken seventeen years after the death of Père Thomas for the first victims to start talking, it took much less time after the death of Jean Vanier for him to be accused of abuses, perhaps fewer in numbers but just as serious. Indeed, some believe that the reason for his stay in Paris during the last months before his death - in May 2019 - and for his low-key funeral - and not for example in Notre Dame as his fame might have justified - may be found in the intention of let him die before following up on the accusations, and above all making public prior to his death the statements of the women he abused.

The women, all of them "assistants" in the Ark communities, denounced psychological and sexual abuse in the form of a disturbing mixture of pseudo-spirituality and pseudo-sexuality, based on his

---

taught for a few years at the University of Toronto, at Michael's College and then returned to France in 1963 and decided to go and live in a small village in the Oise, in the Compiègne Forest, in the village of Trosly-Breuil.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Vanier relates how in Trosly he listened to the "cry of the poor man", and that "poor man" from that moment formed the center of his lectures and his writings, as well as of his life. He bought a house and began living with two mentally disabled men, Raphael and Philippe.

<sup>6</sup> The community he thereby founded was named "the Ark", with evident reference to salvation from the Flood. Today there are more than 120 Ark communities in the world, in about thirty countries and on every continent. In 1971 J. Vanier together with Marie Hélène Mathieu founded the "Foi et Lumière" (Faith and Light) movement, based on the same philosophy that guides the Ark and which is made up of communities of encounters with people with disabilities who live with their families. This movement also spread around the world.

power to persuade women of the efficacy of a spiritual direction, which included sexual practices with the spiritual director, practices justified as vehicles and instruments of manifestations of the Holy Spirit and of Mary's love for Jesus Christ. Therefore, it was not a matter for the astonished survivors of the communities of the Ark and of Faith and Light around the world of simply accepting *shadows*, in the Jungian sense, in the charismatic figure of an ordinary sinner. It was not a question of putting aside or modifying an ideal version of him, as might have happened by discovering any clandestine relationship he might have had.

In fact it was necessary to ask ourselves how it was possible that a man, who was so loved and appreciated, who had played such an important and prophetic role for so many believers, and more specifically for so many disabled people, for so many of their families and for so many of their assistants, had come up with and enacted such a mystical and bizarre construction, an apparently Christian construction to which he had given an abusive spiritual direction and which he used for his own devious purposes, thereby taking advantage of the trust victims had invested in him and of the seductive power based on his charisma (Deaucourt, 2020). This construction by the way corresponded with the one many years earlier a small group of followers of Père Thomas Philippe indicted him with and this led to the belief that the abuses, masquerading as mysticism, had never come to an end. With this dilemma, many, myself included, will have to continue to live for the rest of their days. Many others prefer to continue to believe that the accusations are lies and to keep the mythical figure they had encountered in person or in his writings intact<sup>7</sup>. However, from a pedagogical point of view, it is important to attempt a reflection that identifies possible alternatives to a stalemate in thinking, which risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Denying the value of Jean Vanier's message would actually mean putting in crisis many people, who in total good faith gave their lives for the vision of the Ark. It would put in crisis many others who are more fragile, live at the center of these communities and found in the Ark and in Faith and Light experiences of the *good life* (in the sense of Martha Nussbaum) not available to those living in other conditions. And fortunately, those continuing to work and live constructively in the Ark community are making a huge effort in holding on to its core principles and show their commitment to people with disabilities.

Power and gender issues leading to sexual abuse and related to pedagogical commitment in conjunction with an exaggerated personality cult of prominent figures are not new in the history of education and in religious settings. For these motives I found that the criteria of pedagogical problematicism, found in the work of Bertin, are useful in order to analytically identify those aspects of rationality and commitment that deserve to survive the fall of Jean Vanier's myth. This contribution attempts to identify what kind of learning can be derived from honestly facing up to the fall of a personality and which kind of values still deserve to be saved for religious and secular reflections on special education and disability studies and more generally on education itself.

Therefore the work of Bertin on Ethic and pedagogical Commitment (1953) where he problematizes the concept of the rational personality lends itself for an analysis of the very foundation of Jean Vanier's message. Bertin holds that it is important to make a distinction between the spiritual aspiration to greater gifts and the realization of this aspiration: in fact, it is dangerous to foster the illusion of being able to behave on a level of irrationality, by affirmation of absolute principles and ideal messages that are not critically examined. In this regard it is a question of recognizing the

---

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that of 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2022 the Wikipedia entry on Jean Vanier still makes no reference to the abuses

objective needs of human beings. As Bertin recalls, "the religious need and the aesthetic need are not to be confused with the moral need, because if they are absolutized as ideals of life outside the moral life they become not forms of resolution of existential contradictions but forms of escape from them" (Bertin 1953, p. 34).

## 2. Jean Vanier and his core message

Jean Vanier represented in an integral way and until the accusations were made against him, a living model based on a *metaphysical* regard for the person with a cognitive disability. It is precisely this metaphysical gaze that has given rise to a real philosophy of education with respect to disability, which is articulated according to certain fundamental assumptions that can be summarized as follows: God looks with particular love on fragile people, defined as *little ones*. Under the banner of the Gospel message "Let the little ones come to me", Jean Vanier's philosophy of education has become a kind of theology of education, a special pedagogy inserted in a wider framework of meaning (Aluffi Pentini, 2017). From this perspective, the right to welcome every person is not affected by disability and is based for Christians on the loving gaze of Christ who bases his pedagogy on "shaming the wise and the strong through the weak"<sup>8</sup>, and "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone"<sup>9</sup>.

Human frailty characterizes every person, regardless of their intelligence, beauty or performance. This implies the discovery of a commonality between all humans, namely all being fragile, that goes beyond their physical appearance and their intellectual gifts.

In addition to the objective fragility of the person, borrowing from Saint-Exupéry (2000, original 1943), "one can see well only with the heart" the greatness of the person, in any case in the image of God. Believing in this principle, the gaze of the heart translates into gestures of proximity that lead *healthy* people to share their existence for longer or shorter periods with people with disabilities and to build a community based on forgiveness and celebration (Vanier 1989). Concerning frailty, a unique opportunity is therefore given to mankind: that of building a society based on solidarity and the desire to be close to people with disabilities and their families

The success of J. Vanier's message can be sought in several elements: for example, in his ability to have understood and thematized a mysterious and central aspect of human experience: that of asking fundamental questions in the face of pain and suffering, in addition to the need for being unconditionally accepted. The aspiration to go beyond appearances is particularly characteristic of situations of pain, illness or death, situations that we find hard to accept. For this reason, radical responses such as those of J. Vanier undoubtedly constitute a viable path towards utopia and a pedagogical proposal of great depth. The more the questions become inescapable, the more the temptation to *simplify* the answers into a defined value system may seem attractive. As regards the transnational and interreligious success of this message, which cuts across cultures, this consisted not only in finding an answer to the suffering of the world, but also in giving substance to this response in a dimension of hope. Moreover, when facing the dilemmas of education, one looks for those who are masters of life and for fellow travellers, with whom to share an existential breath, a broader horizon, and in the case of J. Vanier this existential breath seemed to be rooted in everyday life and

<sup>8</sup> First Letter to the Corinthians, 1, 26-31, <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/1corinthians/1?10=#54001010>

<sup>9</sup> Holy Gospel after Matthew, 21,42, <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/EN/Matthew%2021%3A42>



it was within everyone's reach. In fact, the principle of the recognition of *the other* as being *very different* in the pedagogy of the organizations and communities of the Ark and Faith and Light all over the world seems to be firmly connected to the personality of their founder. The message of Jean Vanier about tenderness related to the care of excluded people, consisting also in sharing their ineludible loneliness, concerning love and sexual relationships, constitutes a milestone of a very demanding approach to faith, as well as to educational work, especially in preparing to be able to join living communities for longer periods (Vanier, 1989).

No specific training was required to become an assistant at the Ark: those who stayed longer sometimes attended training courses, but what the assistants were required to cultivate was not on the level of skills, but on that of the alliance with the poorest, and eventually with God. So those who thought of studying medicine or enrolling at university were mostly discouraged by more mature assistants and by J. Vanier himself and almost accused of betrayal when they were thinking of leaving. Jean Vanier's utopia - that is to say the conviction of putting the fragile person at the center of the community - can constitute a project on the borderline between action and dream, between reality and desire and in a dimension of religious belief has therefore assumed for many the semblance of an earthly dividing line between *already and not yet* in an eschatological perspective.

The leading figures serve to guide us in going beyond and in this sense pedagogical reflection has something metaphysical about it, because pedagogy has to do with a type of encounter that is profound and never completely utterable. An encounter that does not or should not stop at what we see.

The authority of a model as Bandura (1965) claims, is a well known mode of leading people to choose specific types of behaviour and commitment. Just as it is well known its tendency to attribute a meritorious purpose to harmful behavior and to deny responsibility for the harmful effects of one's actions. (Bandura 2016). The tendency to portray Jean Vanier as a saint and prophet of our era gives rise now to a serious, critical and unavoidable debate about his work, and could easily bring people to reject everything in his message. Proximity with particularly weak members of communities (e.g. women working as educators) was used and abused by means of a pseudo-spiritual philosophy.

### 3. *Making use of Bertin problematicism*

The idea of reflecting on the Vanier affair by linking it to "problematicism" arises from the rereading of some of Bertin's writings and in particular of his plaidoyer for "a renunciation of metaphysical presuppositions from which to necessarily derive the directives of education", or rather for "an availability on the part of the educator to a continuous questioning of his position and his intervention and of the tools in relation to a multiplicity of variables that differ from time to time" (Bertin e Contini 1983, p.12). This type of educator necessarily resembles the *sans espoir* man whom Bertini borrowed from Camus (ibid) and who therefore "renounces omnipotence" and has a "clear awareness of limits (...) even in the rough territories that metaphysical arrogance excluded or declared impracticable" (ibid, p. 13). With this educational vision that does not disregard an integral humanism such as that of Maritain, we can try to recover the good of J. Vanier's message within a framework of meanings that include "the incompleteness of God, advanced by the theologies of hope" (ibid.).

Making the proclamation coincide with the announcer, the gospel with the messenger, the charismatic leader with the leadership of the community, cultivates instead a definitely determined image of God within the community and therefore removes any room for doubts. In a sense this had allowed that

the same unhealthy philosophy that had led to the mere suspension *a divinis* of Père Thomas, even before the foundation of the Ark, could be cultivated undisturbed with the result that victims became reduced to an irrational and uncritical following of the charismatic leader who was seen as a saviour. The criteria of pedagogical problematicism that we will use here refers mainly to Bertin's autobiographical writings. These seem particularly useful for reducing both enthusiasm and disappointment with respect to the message of Jean Vanier and to his person. However, identifying those aspects of rationality and commitment that can reasonably survive the fall of his myth appears to be extremely important, especially if we think of the large number of people and communities all around the world who have found a place of welcome and commitment thanks to his insights.

How can we fail to reflect on issues of power and gender, so problematic for a secular look today at Catholic doctrine, in the face of abuses perpetrated by a charismatic leader, who seems to have lowered himself to the behaviour of gurus of unlikely sects? How to distinguish between message and messenger in the face of the very frequent news reports that almost typify the *preach good and act evil* that can be found among more or less authoritative members of the clergy?

For the writer, it is not easy to attempt this recovery operation, given the direct and prolonged acquaintance with Jean Vanier over the years and his undeniable influence on life choices and pedagogical beliefs. However, the rereading of the work of Bertin about ethics and phenomenology and commitment (1953) provided the stimulus to undertake this delicate operation which consists in objectifying and exploring the possibilities of recovering Vanier's message in the light of the problematic of rational personality. I want to distance myself from taking recourse to forms of escape from reality and from existential contradictions, to concentrate instead on the affective and educational relationship in solidarity, still lived in the communities of the Ark and of Faith and Light scattered throughout the world.

The parallel re-reading Jean Vanier and Bertin seems to give a possible perspective on the meaning of pedagogical commitment keeping in mind the need for professionalisation in every pedagogical context, especially with reference to *ideal* communities, which most of the time were founded by a charismatic figure. Professionalization can today be understood as a process of educational supervision which forms the guarantee against power abuse, at the level of personal relations and also at organisational level.

#### **4. Bertin's guiding criteria**

In his famous autobiographical writing of 1965, Bertin clarifies the foundations of his pedagogical problematicism. All three are extremely useful for critically examining Jean Vanier's message. The first concerns the need to interpret existential situations not only in a subjective way, but by inserting them into the "problematic nature of the relationships that arise between man and the world" especially where they are "devoid of an internal principle of teleologically evident organization" (Bertin 1965, p. 713).

By applying this principle to the theme of disability and proximity to disabled people, we understand that what in the writings of Jean Vanier might appear to be a definitive answer to the objectively painful experience of evil, involves the danger of suspending the problem, by means of a *positive* solution which derives directly from the message of the Gospel. It therefore represents an utopia that is fascinating because it appears timeless, but is based on an interpretation that defines itself as historicizing. In fact, the solution is based on the philosophy of a single charismatic leader, but it is

not systematically and critically examined by a pedagogical community that analyzes the psycho-physical and existential conditions, and this not only of people with disabilities. In fact, it is a question of placing in a correct perspective also the people who choose to be assistants in the communities, the educating subjects - also fragile - who in the mystique of the Arche are in some way educated by disabled people. These choose to respond to the aforementioned cry of the poor with whom they share daily life. However, they implicitly carry out a predominantly non-professional educational function, which often begins at an age or at a stage of life characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty. The choice to commit to the Ark is validated on the basis of the evidence, if not exaltation, of common fragility, between the disabled person and the assistant, and is however mainly encouraged and supported by those who hold charismatic power. The founder and the co-founder were in fact able to subjugate for years, with mystifications, the very assistants who brought a recognized and explicit fragility to the community as a dowry (Vanier, 1989). In the specific case, the charismatic power by definition was represented by J. Vanier. Indeed, the situation of fragility cannot, in any way, be considered a situation with an internal teleologically evident principle of organization in Bertin's sense. The telos, shifted to spirituality and devoid of historical problematicity, is not in fact sufficient to guarantee a balance of affective relationships and of power that are solid and mature.

Tenderness as an element of sublimation and sharing the lack of sexual life of disabled people (Vanier 1986), and the orientation to chastity for assistants, become fascinating elements that undoubtedly release a spiritual force worthy of attention, but risk creating a climate in which the physical and psychological interpersonal boundaries can be bypassed by those who hold the helm of the boat and know how to build philosophical presuppositions, which seem quite noble to those who are in a situation of fragility and seek guidance. Denying the sexual need in order to use it then in an unconventional way is just the most extreme example of irrationality turned into a system.

And here Bertin's second principle comes in, namely that of "rationality as a general criterion for the solution of problematicity" (Bertin 1965, p.713) and as a "negation of one-sidedness, of the partial, of the indeterminate, of the confused, according to a process of incessant mediation and integration" (ibid.) of experiences. This type of mediation and integration is deficient precisely because the spiritual path is confused with the educational function, power relations are ignored and not thematized, the psychological level is confused with the spiritual one. In many religious fora and in that of the Ark, led by Jean Vanier, it is believed that spiritual direction can be all-embracing of all the individual and social aspects of life in community and in community of service. The acceptance of a call to respond to the *cry of the poor*, as Jean Vanier presents it in a certainly fascinating way, does not take into account the other cry that is also genuine and worthy of attention: the cry of recognition of the confused person, who, moved by the desire to serve the poor, does not sufficiently value his own strength and balance, and ends up being at the mercy of the figure universally recognized as prophetic and therefore unreachable and indisputable. The attention of this charismatic figure for the individual, expressed in the form of spiritual accompaniment, becomes a potential trap for those who feel they owe him everything and feel honored by his interest and attention. The collusion between the accompanied person and the companion, however gradual and disguised as an out-of-the-ordinary mysticism, makes any rational *move* impossible, also because the charismatic leader by definition knows how to identify the people who need him most and with whom the principle of rationality can be circumvented.



Bertin's work on Heller<sup>10</sup> underlines how against the possible ambiguity in everyday life, a need for totality and reality must be asserted, which "requires a dialectical integration of the need for work and for enjoyment in order to avoid falling into alienation". And it also requires "the overcoming of superficial objectivism and flat realism, which loom over everyday life, in the dialectization of the real with the category of the possible" (Bertin 1987, p. 64). If in the everyday life of the community the category of the possible is eliminated for an individual member, this creates an opening for ambiguity and abuse.

The third Bertinian motif integrates the first and second. It is an "ethics of commitment to rationality" seen as "a criterion of concrete mediation of the aspects that contrast individual and collective life in it, in relation to the mutual instances of strengthening and development". (Bertin 1965, p.713)

It becomes clear on the basis of these pillars, which Bertin defines as motives, that when "verifying the universality of the solutions" the persuasion of individuals is not enough, whether they are "beautiful souls" or "desperate souls" (Bertin, 1965, in AAVV, 1985, p. 711).

In Bertin's definition of these souls we find a polarity that includes precisely those frailties most exposed to abuse in communities guided by charismatic impulses. Bertin calls beautiful those souls "anxious for inner consolations and looking for alibis and justifications" (ibid.). And he defines desperate souls those closed in their own inner conflicts. There is no moral judgment on his part in this classification, but only the need to clarify for which people, and for what reasons, persuasion (in our case hidden by the charismatic charm) can be more dangerous. It is an effective warning against the forms of persuasion capable of obstructing that exercise in problematicity which makes us recognize the incompleteness of God and the need for personal critical thinking.

In religious community contexts, or in any case in contexts that feed on ideal and utopian ideals, it is precisely these people who can suffer unfair spiritual direction without using the yardstick of rationality. The communities of the Ark all over the world welcome, for shorter or longer periods, people animated by ideals, by a spirit of service and love for their neighbour, but also often people in existential crisis, in search of their own path, uncertain on the choices to be made. The opportunity to share a stretch of the road with people who are clearly fragile, feeling affectionately and unconditionally welcomed, accepted, valued, is an experience of great human and spiritual value. The fact remains however that this experience risks blocking the growth of the person, the development of her potential, precisely in the name of the discovery of a common destiny with those who have no alternatives and indeed with those who, in that community situation, have found the best that they could have imagined for themselves. Thus, the assistant who performs a caring function towards *the poor who cry out*, is exposed to situations that silence his or her own inner cry. They may forget taking care of themselves, evading the responsibility for their own personal life, neglecting the very message that community spirituality exhorts them to cultivate in the poor and the disabled. Vanier's motto that we are all disabled, in its instrumental vision, eludes the fine line between the sharing of existence and the quelling of rationality. An unfair spiritual direction can find fertile ground on this type of fleeting border, which becomes the bearer of precisely what Bertin warns against, namely a private relationship with the absolute which then translates into a mystifying thought, disconnected from the reality and therefore evasive.

Bertin's thinking helps to navigate the complicated intersection between prophecy and mystification with respect to Vanier's philosophy, and between awareness and fragility with respect to potential

<sup>10</sup> Bertin refers to her work Towards a sociology of knowledge of everyday life, 1970.

victims of mystification. Fortunately, however, the power of a revolutionary welcoming message has borne fruit regardless of the shadows of the messenger and most of the assistants of the communities of the Ark and of Faith and Light have not been abused. What has failed, however, and what has been betrayed, as it were, is that guarantee of quality and sanity of protection and unconditional acceptance that Arche offered to so many fragile people<sup>11</sup>, but which in reality it probably guaranteed only to those who were evidently very, very fragile<sup>12</sup>.

## Conclusions

J. Vanier's utopia has enriched the world, despite the disappointment in the face of his opaque and unjust practices. But, as Mencarelli argued recalling Bertin's thought, negative is "everything that can alienate and deprive man of education and creativity" and positive is everything that makes man a "pilot of himself" (Mencarelli, 1985, p.499). The people abused by Vanier have undoubtedly been alienated and deprived of a forum that presented itself in all respects as an educating community. Borrowing another very strong statement from Mencarelli, we can say that a community (he speaks of society) "centered on the person and open to personal research does not need utopias" (p. 512). The unexpected, shocking but necessary rethinking of his figure would perhaps require a psychiatric diagnosis, but it certainly needs a careful re-reading of the power dynamics rooted in religious organizations, and an acknowledgment of the damage done by obscurantist sexual morality of a large part of the Catholic Church, more inclined to draw a merciful veil over sin than to liberate the bodily component of human relationships bringing it out of the shadows of possible abuse. However, the utopia of the Ark remains viable as a possibility of community life, both in its characterization linked to faith, and in its pedagogical characterization. However, it is necessary to distinguish the level of the helping relationship from the level of the similar existential journey, which is possible between very different people - assistants and disabled people - who make up the body of the Community. Both are called upon to make use of their talents and their responsibilities, without easy solutions of levelling or interchanging roles. As Bertin argues: "problematicity, risks and contradictions mark the utopian journey in all its stages, making it critical and experimental, constitute the background that precedes and impels its progress: the adventure of such a journey, the possibilities it leaves glimpsing - or imagining - are nonetheless valid (...) the "astral cold" that accompanies the wandering of those who are not sure of the goal to reach "(Bertin e Contini 1983, p. 24). It is perhaps the recognition of the importance of the astral cold that re-emerges and that must be faced without shortcuts, by a community that wants to be educating, and provides a chance to save the message of peace and sharing that so many people have concretely experienced. If one believes this, every passage in J. Vanier's writings must be problematized in an honest, frank and collegial way. All persons who from the experience of the Ark or of Faith and Light have drawn enrichment for their own vision of the world, have the duty to contribute to the reconstruction of an acceptable message, with the awareness

---

<sup>11</sup> Here we mean by fragile assistants, in a situation of subjection of the charismatic leader / spiritual guide and by very fragile people with mental disabilities. In fact, there is no news of disabled people who have been abused from Jean Vanier or Pere Thomas Philippe: this relegates the abuse to a dimension of false mystical understanding of the doctrine of the Church by people who are "able" at cognitive level, rather than physical sexual violence against people who are clearly incapable to understand and subservient to purely sexual needs. The assistants victims of Père Thomas and Jean Vanier entered into perverse practices, pretending to bring closer to God and to Our Lady and to become instruments of the Holy Spirit. Irrationality becomes a "mystical" delirium.

<sup>12</sup> People with disabilities.

also of the evil that this message has made possible to convey and perpetrate. On the other hand, they also have the duty to recognize and discuss those margins that I would define as minor abuse that had possibly negatively affected their life, also taking on this astral cold. Accepting that, according to Bertin, the educator's task is to "disseminate existential restlessness" (Bertin e Contini 1983, p.29), also makes the story of J. Vanier revisable in the light of an educator's restlessness, who questions the perverse dynamics that can derive from education and from utopia and on the countermeasures to be adopted to prevent them. Accepting the problematicity and complexity of the reality that surrounds us means reflecting incessantly on the conditions that make possible the life of an educating community and its function of welcoming fragile people. The welcoming community must guarantee recognition and protection to those who are welcomed into it. But the more the people welcomed are, so to speak, *demanding*, the more there is a need for structured interpersonal exchange and specific interprofessional discussion that translates into practical supervision. Those who offer protection must in turn be protected, in the sense that their actions must be verified, questioned by third parties and renewed together with third parties. It must be clear to all members of a community what spaces exist within a structure, whether secular or religious, where to express their discomfort, which independent figures are in charge of defending against abuse and are ready to listen to them and put an end to them.

An educational community that treasures problematicity can never remain self-referential and accept the intuition of a founding father without opening up a circle of reflection to external eyes and ears, without periodically recreating its own transformed identity. This means that the coordinates of the roles and the distribution of responsibilities must always be made explicit for each and every one.

The safer the protection offered to the people being welcomed, the more protected must be the people who welcome them in. No single individual can claim the right to lead everyone else. Protection must be translated into sustainable methods of care and treatment, but also in articulated structures that are periodically monitored also from the outside. The danger of going beyond the limits of respect and the right distance between people is inherent in the nature of every person and particularly lurking in helping relationships and educational contexts, especially those based on a utopian vision. Utopia does not cancel out power aspects and therefore does not prevent abuses. To problematize utopia means safeguarding its dynamism and limiting its potential damage. Finally, it is interesting to note how Bertin, in his last address, retrieves a possible positive meaning from the irrational, as that force that allows us to escape from something that confines us, something that alienates us, especially if we were focused on the functionality of our every action. And it is also interesting to note how he, in the same discourse, and therefore in old age, declares himself "awaiting an original and absolute call yet to be deciphered and experienced" (p.717) and that he recognizes in this sentiment something that he probably shares with most others. We are all sensitive to this call, but being aware of and grateful for this, we must treasure, as pedagogists, Bertin's thought, precisely in the setting up, accompanying and evaluating of real educational communities, and in any case as persons who find themselves "in a process that involves research and thought, and therefore refinement of sensitivity and intelligence" (Bertin, 1984, p. 102).

### **Bibliography:**

AAVV. (1985). *Educazione e ragione 2. Scritti in onore di Giovanni Maria Bertin*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia.

- AAVV. (2020). Dossier Affaire Jean Vanier, La Croix, <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Catholicisme/jean-vanier-affaire-abus-sexuel-arche-pere-thomas-philippe-chretien>.
- Aluffi Pentini, A. (2018). Per una pedagogia dello sguardo. Jean Vanier e il volto dell'altro, in *Formazione Lavoro Persona*, 8(23), 118-125.
- Bandura, A. (1965). Influence of model's reinforcement contingencies on the acquisition of imitative responses. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 1, 589-595.
- Beria d'Argentine, A. (1985). Impegno culturale e sociale, in AAVV (1985) *Educazione e ragione 2, Scritti in onore di Giovanni Maria Bertin*, (659-664). Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Bertin, G.M. (1953). *Etica e pedagogia dell'impegno*. Milano: Marzorati.
- Bertin, G.M. (1981). *Disordine esistenziale e istanza della ragione. Tragico e comico. Violenza e Eros*. Bologna: Capelli.
- Bertin, G.M. (1952). Esistenzialismo. Marxismo. Problematicismo. in Biblioteca dell'Educatore. vol. 5. (pp. 771-992). Milano: ed. Viola.
- Bertin, G. M. (1965). La mia formazione ed il mio orientamento filosofico-pedagogico, AA VV. (1985). *Educazione e Ragione, 2. Scritti in onore di Giovanni Bertin*. (pp.699-718). Roma: Armando.
- Bertin, G., M. Contini. (1983). *Costruire l'esistenza. Il riscatto della ragione educativa*. Roma: Armando.
- Bertin, G.M. (1984). *Lezioni di Pedagogia Generale*. Roma: Armando, V edizione.
- Bertin, G.M. (1987) *Ragione proteiforme e demonismo educativo*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Contini, M.G., G. Genovese. (1985). *Impegno e conflitto. Saggi di pedagogia problematicista*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Daucourt, G. (2020). Lettre. *La Croix*. <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Catholicisme/France/Mgr-Daucourt-Jean-Vanier-Je-peux-reconnaitre-cette-stupefiante-realite-2020-03-02-1201081587>
- Frabboni, F. (1985) Introduzione in Contini M.G., G. Genovese (1985) *Impegno e conflitto. Saggi di pedagogia problematicista*. (pp. 3-25). Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Hoyeau, C. (2015). L'Arche a fait lumière sur la face cachée du P. Thomas Philippe. *La Croix*. <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Actualite/L-Arche-fait-la-lumiere-sur-la-face-cachee-du-P.-Thomas-Philippe-2015-10-15-1368960>
- Mencarelli, M. (1985). Educazione permanente e società educante. AAV *Educazione e ragione 2. Scritti in onore di Giovanni Maria Bertin*. (pp. 499-516). Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Saint-Exupéry, A. (2000). *The little prince*. Paperback (original edition 1943).
- Vanier, J. (1986). *Man and woman*. Mahwah USA: Paulist Press.
- Vanier, J. (1989). *Community and growth*. Mahwah USA: Paulist Press.