An interview with Father Jim O’Donnell, June 15, 2015 at Camp Christopher, Akron, Ohio with Kirt Bromley, a friend in Faith and Light

Kirt: **How did you meet Jean Vanier?**

**Fr. Jim**: On August the 4th 1969, a priest friend of mine, Father Tom McKillop, was a diocesan youth director for the Diocese of Toronto, and he and I had come together because of some mutual thinking. When I was appointed diocesan youth director, I didn’t think my role should be just taking care of youth athletics, and high school clubs, and camps and things. I felt we were called to challenge our youth to something greater than that. So I saw he was doing the same thing; he started this group called Youth Corps. Because I had already talked to him about that, he told me that there was a man coming to Toronto from France, and he thought I should come and hear him. So I arrived there August the 4th, and there were over a hundred people there and it was my first exposure to that reality, not just L’Arche, but people with disabilities and parents who were carrying a heavy burden with their own mentally challenged son or daughter. And I was just happy to be there. And Jean Vanier sent word through someone to come and get me. So I had a visit with Jean.

He said to me, “Have you ever read the life of Brother Charles (de Foucauld)?” So I said that I had; it was in the Seminary. He said, “I want you to go back and reread it.” Then he took my hands, and said, “Now, don’t you see?” And I said, “See what?” “You are called to live your life with poor people.” And that is where our journey began, and we’re still together. And we still communicate.

It’s been a wonderful, wonderful friendship, and that led me to his brother who was a Trappist monk, who just died last year, and his brother guided me from 1972 until his death in May of 2014. And Jean and I were both present for his brother’s death, and it was again a precious moment. So all through these years then, after that retreat, came Faith and Light.

Sue (Mosteller) was then involved with L’Arche Daybreak with her friend Marie, who just died. Marie and Sue began the Faith and Light in Toronto, and they organized the Canadian pilgrims going to Lourdes in 1971. We had 25 people from Cleveland. Among the group from Cleveland were Dorothy Gauchat and Todd. Dorothy told me, “Todd is your responsibility. You take care of him.” Well, I’d never been involved in caring for a person with a disability. He had cerebral palsy, and she said to me, “I’m going to be with you on this pilgrimage. But I’m not going to do a thing to help you. You are on your own.”

**Kirt**: That reminds me a little bit of Jean’s experience in being given two men to care for.

**Fr. Jim**: Well, as you know, Marie-Helene Matthieu brought Jean into Faith and Light. She had already started a lot about Faith and Light already. She was already working in the field, and thinking about going in this direction. They knew each other, but then they got together, and then look what happened. That first pilgrimage in 1971 was powerful. It was a powerful experience for me to be with Todd all weekend, just to be with him and make sure all of his needs were being taken care of.

His first night, I’m already a nervous wreck and we get him into the hotel in Lourdes, and I go down this hall for one minute, and I hear this terrible thud. I came running back to the room and there is Todd; he had fallen out of his chair and he is lying there on the floor, and he was laughing. He couldn’t talk; he could only communicate by this board, pointing to the letters. So he started pointing and spelling the letters on his board, which read, “Cool it baby, this is the way I always get out of my wheelchair.” “Cool it baby!” That was my beginning with Faith and Light and Todd…that whole week, never having cared for someone, how you dress them, what should you do, what shouldn’t you do, how you want to treat them with all the dignity if possible. For me it was a powerful thing. So it began with that Faith and Sharing retreat in August of 1969, and with that I’ve been moving ever since.

After that I became involved more and more with L’Arche. In 1972 we started to think more and more about (starting L’Arche in Cleveland), and Jean came to Cleveland to run a retreat to celebrate Jesus. That was August 1972; it was a retreat we gave out in the streets, out every night on east 79th and Euclid. That’s where we began. I was still diocesan youth director, and I had this big youth center on the east side and all of the people that were coming on the retreat from other places, I housed them there and a bus would take them back and forth to the city. And while Jean would be giving his presentation or visiting a nursing home, they would be on the grounds where Jean was preaching. Bill Clarke (was there), and he conducted the retreat. Bill Clarke wrote, Enough Room for Joy. In 1974 Father Phil Pritt, and also Posie O’Connor and Pearl Cahoon got involved planning the Faith and Light trip to Rome. I was so “challenged” on that trip when our pilgrims’ luggage became lost. I said to Pearl, I’m so out of it. I was down on my hands and knees (searching the airport for it). Pearl and Posie were so good. It has been with me all these years.

My priesthood has been a very joyful one, a very happy one and because of Faith and Light Faith and Sharing and because of L’Arche. People often ask me, “How are they the same and how are they different?” I always tell them it is like a big tree with many branches. The one branch is Faith and Light and another branch is L’Arche, but it is the same tree, and gives life in different ways. And Faith and Sharing has never taken off the way Faith and Light and L’Arche have.

**Kirt**: It’s growing in Texas. New communities are starting there. Faith and Light has a special chrism; it’s not a curriculum; it’s relationships and love.

**Fr. Jim**: I wouldn’t be where I am without them.

Every human being on the face of this earth has a heart with which to love. If we did that, our world would be different. That’s my prayer always, that some kind of light would come to those countries like Syria.

**What is your favorite activity in Faith and Light?**

Just being with them. I had an experience here last Thursday where they’re making bookmarkers, as part of the L’Arche’s 50th anniversary. So they asked me to be part of their project to make bookmarkers. So I went to one of the L’Arche homes and BJ, she’s been there a long time, she said,

“Sit next to me.”

And I said, “I will.” So I sat with BJ.

And then Jessie said to me, “Do you know about me?”

And I said, “Jessie, I really don’t.”

“Well, I was hit by a car when I was six years old.” Of course, she’s is quite incapacitated now, but she is bright.

And I said, “Jessie, I didn’t know that. Thank you for telling me.”

And there was Diane Bosman; she’s been there like BJ for a long time. Just coming out and then being with them is enough. So then my job was to stand with them and take a picture with them. I was there an hour and a half, and it was joyful and fun. I don’t get there very often. I wish I could get there more often than I do but again, it was a simple thing. It was a joyful moment, sitting around the table, listening to each one’s story, where they had been today.

I asked Jessie, “What do you do?”

And she said, “I sort out cloth.”

And I said, “You mean you sort out clothes.”

“No,” she said, “I sort out cloth.”

“O.K., I said, “what kind of cloth?” And she said,

“Some are yellow, and some are orange, some are brown, and I separate them.” Again, I just love the honesty…”I said cloth, not clothes!”

“O.K., I got it.”

So you know, it’s so simple. And then I have a group who come to my Mass at St. Malachi’s every Sunday. I have this girl Janet who repeats everything I say from the back of the church. So if I say, “the Lord be with you,” she will say, “and the Lord be with you.” And she repeats everything I say. If I say, “Our Father,” she will say “Our Father.” So she is my echo. It’s simple.

So, what do I enjoy? I just enjoy the simplicity of their presence.

Last Thursday just taking pictures for their 50th anniversary was joyful. I was so glad they asked me to do that, and be part of that. So I thought over and over again, it’s those kind of experiences (that are precious.)

It’s all about, “Pay attention to me”, and if you don’t, they’ll find ways. It’s moments like that, teaching me something. Teaching me to just recognize them.” Or their need to be with you, or my need to be with them.

What’s the most joyful thing?

Again, I think it’s just being in their presence and paying attention, and let whatever is going to happen, happen. Let it flow; just let it flow, you know. Maybe it means singing a song, or like at a Faith and Sharing Retreat somebody just got up and danced, and we danced with them. There is so much spontaneity. In their life there is so much spontaneity; we don’t know how to be like that. They sing. They laugh. We complicate life so much in this world. So I guess the most joyful time is when we are together, and everything happens in a very spontaneous way. And to just jump in with them and do whatever that is.

You have fun and they have fun.

We’re all born all children of God. I talked about the whole idea of compassion and forgiveness, and we all have it.

**Kirt**: It’s really a grace, I feel. Joyful Witness Faith and Light community is so aptly named. I would drive home from a meeting, driving a member, Tammy, back home to her group home, and I would feel so joyful. You know I didn’t fully understand it, part of me, from my background, emotions are at a distance, at least since joining Al-Anon I’m a little bit better with that I’d feel so joyful, but I couldn’t really articulate it. I was so free! And we went through times too, in the 1990s, as I became more involved in Faith and Light, and Hilda too, she had the medical problems, I could be at the Joyful Witness community meeting, and just be myself. I’ve got these little social antennae in my mind, they register how people will react to what I say or what I do, and at Faith and Light meetings, I would just leave it at the door. I would just be honest with the community; I’d just tell them how I felt. “I’m feeling really lonely today. I’m feeling really upset.” Whatever. And that was freedom for me. And in doing that, that’s finding joy too. Finding an environment where you can totally be yourself, and let people know how you’re feeling, what’s going on inside. You’re free, but also joyful because you’re really connected with God’s love.

**Fr. Jim:** Yes, you can say, “I don’t have it all together. And I need help. I’ve heard that all the time, with the kids, and Maggie… It’s great for me. It’s very good.

**Kirt**: Yes, our schooling takes a little while.

**Fr. Jim**: It’s hard.

**Fr. Jim**: With the Garden, when someone comes along to see the garden, you just stop what you’re doing and be present. Let’s not be worried about whether I get all this planted today or not, It’s O.K.; or if you want to help me get it planted, we can plant. It’s all right.

**Kirt: What was your most memorable moment in Faith and Light?**

**Fr. Jim**: Being the first National Chaplain for Faith and Light, when the plane was coming into Lourdes, it was my role to go out and greet them all. We were able at that time, 1971, to go out on the tarmac and greet the people coming in from different countries, and a very powerful memory for me was when I greeted the plane from England and this man was getting off the plane and he with a great big smile, he took a deep breath and said, “This is the first time I’ve been out of the institution since 1918!”

I thought to myself, “From 1918 to the present in 1971!”

And that was one of the most powerful memories I had of that time, as well as being in that shopping area of Lourdes, and watching these two mothers, one from France and one from England, with their two boys who had Down Syndrome, and the two boys were talking with each other with great enthusiasm, and I watched this. Neither mother knew what the other was saying because neither mother could understand the other’s language, but the two boys in front of them were communicating without knowing the other’s language. For me, it was a little miracle of Faith and Light in Lourdes. It was an incredible moment. And I thought now, “Where else in the world would you find this!”

**Kirt:** Yes, it’s true that feeling of belonging here, and identity.

**Fr. Jim:** And there was Richard Kohan who came to our Faith and Light pilgrimage from St Augustine’s parish on the west side of Cleveland, and he had cerebral palsy from birth. The only thing he could do, in his day, to make a living was to sell pencils and shoelaces from his suitcase, which he could hardly carry because of his palsy.

And he said to me before I lowered him into the waters of Lourdes, “I am never going to sell pencils and shoelaces again. I am going to become the president of St Vincent Society in my parish.”

After Lourdes, he went back to Cleveland, and he told his mother, “I’m not going to live with you anymore.”

And of course, she was upset with me, and I told her, “I’m sorry, but he has to try it. He’s 41. I know you’ve been so faithful to him since his birth, and that you’ve been all alone since the death of your husband, but you gotta let him try.”

And he did, for six months and then it didn’t work out, and he had to move back home. But in the meantime he became president of his parish’s St Vincent de Paul Society. So that to me was another miracle of Lourdes. It was the joy of Faith and Light. And he came home, and he was able to do what he set out to do. So this is another memory I have from that first pilgrimage.

**Fr. Jim**: in that first pilgrimage in 1971, we were something like 6,000. Which was still incredible, but from that the seed was planted. And it’s continued to grow.

**Kirt**: I was there in 2001, and we were 17,000, and we were told that the population of Lourdes in the off-season was 17,000. We doubled the population of Lourdes at Faith and Lights 30th anniversary pilgrimage to Lourdes! It’s a witness or a statement that a place that couldn’t accept people with developmental disabilities in a restaurant, thirty years later, they can’t turn them away. It’s the economy of God, taking someone like, Bernadette, or the Mother of Jesus, or the Fatima children, or Charles de Foucauld; it’s the economy of God in choosing the weakest and the poorest, …and the people flocking, needing, hungry coming to them. So, it’s amazing! An amazing, amazing God!

**Fr. Jim**: It’s just a precious gift, a flower. Like the reading at last Sunday’s Mass about the little mustard seed, that gave life to all the birds of the air. I think that Faith and Light, L’Arche and Faith and Sharing, they are like little tiny seeds that were planted, in 1964 for L’Arche, in 1968 in Faith and Sharing, and 1971 for Faith and Light. And now, with this gigantic big mustard seed, we’re still the same tree, and it’s still providing places for everyone to come. So that’s what I’d like to think today, that we are that mustard seed, and through God’s goodness and love for us, He blessed us and allowed us to plant those seeds. He didn’t plant them; the littlest among us planted them. They just needed the soil. They needed to be shown where they could be planted.

And now we are at our age in our life where we are able to see the fruits of that. I am now 85, and I don’t worry about it. I just take each day, and know that when the end comes, it will be fine. As they say in French it will be “tout a grace”, it will be all grace.

I live in the moment again. I am out here with my children again, and watch them grow. They call me Abba. (Father Jim and Sister Maggie are raising three children: Martin, Caroline, and Josie.)

It is pure grace, amazing grace. And joy is such a part of that, isn’t it?

I sure would like to pass this on to as many priests as I can before I go, because this will enrich their priesthood. They’ll be priests closer to their people, which is what our people need today. It’s not how much education you have, or what your skills are electronically.

We are given a great gift.