When it comes to saints, there is wisdom in letting the dust settle

No matter how wonderful a person is putting them on a spiritual pedestal will lead to disappointment, writes Prof. Salvador Ryan.

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evelations of psychological and sexual abuse of a number of women by Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche, have sent shockwaves across the world. Though quickly turned forth by the victims who experienced his manipulation and abuse, and who had been prepped upon when they were at their most vulnerable, seeking spiritual counsel, then to all members of L’Arche communities around the world who would now have to grapple with the cognitive dissonance of someone who was widely regarded as a saint having been exposèd guilty of an horrific abuse of power and status over many years.

There was also a grave breach of trust for those who encountered Jean Vanier more remotely, and drew inspiration from his life’s work, his writings, spirituality and teaching. For some, this has led to profound disavowal of Jean Vanier by many, if not all, of his teachings, leaving them to grapple with the idea of a person who was considered a saint but was also guilty of sexual abuse.

Immaturity

I begin with a disclaimer: my knowledge of Jean Vanier was, and still is, quite limited. I never met him; I’ve never read any of his books. The closest I got to doing so was in 1992 as a 17-year-old seminarian when Vanier’s Community and Flame was recommended to our first-year group as spiritual reading. I confess to not having got past the first few pages.

The fault, of course, was not with Vanier but with me, my adolescent immaturity. So no, I wasn’t familiar with his work but here’s the thing, I am familiar with the work of many people who were. And these are people whose writings I greatly admire. People who quoted Mr. Vanier on vulnerability. Who saw him as a bona fide spiritual giant (but, refreshingly, wearing the hundred petal gown, not ego-seizingly in sight).

And so, I admired Mr. Vanier, on first glance, second-hand, as it were, through the lens of the admiration of others, because I implicitly trusted their judgment. It was a case of “show me your Carboniferous and I’ll tell you why you are”.

And that led me as far as reasonably possible to gain clips of his wisdom on social media without having personally vetted them first (always a risky business). But Mr. Vanier was another. His supporters (many of whom I admired, and whose spirituality I could identify with) told me so. Mr. Vanier wouldn’t come out with anything embarrassing or off-centre. He could be trusted to say the right thing, not to make things up the wrong way.

“How could we have got it so wrong? Why couldn’t we have dared to look beyond the image we had created?”

His broad appeal crossed both confessional and religious lines. Although clearly a highly intelligent man, his message was essentially a simple one: and the core of that message was to be found in his work. His work was lived, the very fabric of his being, the heart of community living. When Kriya Tippett interviewed Mr. Vanier for the programme On Being in 2007, she described the rare quality of his presence as “wisdom in teaching”.

As Jean Vanier’s reputation grew, and as he published a string of books, his ideas were featured in various publications and in countless interfaith dialogue forums worldwide and participated in countless international events. The global spiritual authority he established became firmly established. This led to his being widely quoted by prelates, priests, pastoral care-specialists, and spiritual writers. By the time of his death last year, and in the midst of a torrent of tributes from the great and the good, there were few who didn’t expect his cause for canonisation to open soon afterwards. But this would only be the official recognition of a movement that was already well underway. If this is the case, we can never shake off the fear of a new saint being created on a pedestal and then looked up to as a new role model whose life was worthy of imitation. And, in doing so, we also help create the cult of personality that surrounded him, despite his seeming retiring nature.

As ever, one of the most pertinent issues facing the church today is: what is the origin of the phenomenon of the cult of personality? And, in many cases, there is a new cult of personality that surrounded him, despite his seeming retiring nature.

As ever, one of the most pertinent issues facing the church today is: what is the origin of the phenomenon of the saint? And, in many cases, this is not always the case.

“How we have got it so wrong? Why couldn’t we have dared to look beyond the image we had created?”

The rush to recognise a saint in their own lifetime is rarely a healthy move and can easily lead to disaster

Whatever about Martin Luther’s seemingly pica
tic take on human nature, it does mean, that, taken seriously, one could never hold any spiritual figure so aloof as to forget that, ultimately, we all have feet of clay (or, for that matter, of dust). It also allows mutual entry into the realm of human significance and authenticity.

The rush to recognise a saint in their own lifetime is rarely a healthy move and can easily lead to disaster. In the recent film The Two Popes, one cardinal is heard remarking in advance of a papal conclave: “The most important quality for a leader is not wanting to be a leader.” We could very profitably adopt this statement to the realm of saints: “The most important quality for a saint is not being recognized as a saint”.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the Jean Vanier revelations is how he used the language of spiritual mysticism to justify his actions to people whom he was supposed to be spiritually counselling, and in each case, where there was a hugely significant power differential at play.

The Church historian Hubert Wolf in his work The Nuns of Sainte Sengle, set in a Roman convent in the 19th century, and based on exhaustive study of records from the period, describes how the nuns were mistreated by the abbot, who was also deeply influenced by a mentor, his ‘spiritual father’ Père-Thomas Philippe.
This quotation takes on a whole new meaning when, after the death of Père Philippe and the revelations concerning his behaviour, Mr Vanier preferred to remain in denial, stating in 2015 that he was "overwhelmed and shocked, absolutely unable to understand how this could have happened". He went on to say that he was "unable to peacefully reconcile" the horrific actions of Père Philippe with the immense good done by L'Arche through him. So many feel the same today about Mr Vanier, although, in their case, they didn't have the insider knowledge of these activities that he had.

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Such adulation.
If the 'saintly' individuals in question are, indeed, the genuine article, this surely what they would want in the first place ("not to us, not to us, O Lord, but to your name be the glory" - Psalm 115). If, by contrast, they are offended by our neglect of spiritual deferral, then they will have unmasked themselves.

Perhaps this is also a salutary reminder to us all to seek for our role models closer to home: the everyday 'saints' who live in our midst. Those who do not lead global movements. Who are not inspired to international events to walk among the great and the good as living icons of godliness. Who do not wield immense spiritual and moral authority by virtue of their very name.

Millions of people worldwide know the name Jean Vanier and what he stood for; yet, I suspect few enough could actually claim to know the man himself. Really know him. The spiritual aura attached to figures such as Mr Vanier can make that very difficult.

And one more thing: can we ask that the size qua non for 'saints in the future simply be decent human being?"