

Today is the 50th anniversary of the death of Governor-General Georges-Phileas Vanier in 1967. The night before, he spoke to Prime Minister Lester Pearson by phone. He said that he would soldier on through Canada's Centennial Year despite frail health. However, on Sunday morning, after Mass in the chapel he had installed in Rideau Hall, he died.

On September 15, 1959, Georges Vanier became the 19th Governor-General of Canada and the first French-Canadian to hold that title. He spoke noble words that may sound dated today.

"My first words are a prayer. May almighty God in his infinite wisdom and mercy bless the sacred mission which has been entrusted to me by Her Majesty the Queen and help me to fulfill it in all humility. In exchange for his strength, I offer him my weakness.

"May he give peace to this beloved land of ours and, to those who live in it, the grace of mutual understanding, respect, and love."

Vanier's son Jean, the founder of l'Arche, wrote a spiritual biography of his father called, "In Weakness, Strength." For Georges, love was the "central aspect of human faith and God."

His father coped most of his life with the pain of an amputated leg, Jean wrote. He believed that pain and weakness were foundations for communion with God.

Born to a francophone father and an Irish mother in Montreal, Georges Vanier was studious and serious. When a journalist asked whether he spelled his first name with an "s" or without, he replied, "Take your choice. I am a Canadian either way."

After graduating with a law degree, Vanier joined the Canadian army at the outbreak of the Great War. He helped found Canada's first French Canadian battalion, the famed 22nd Regiment, the "Van Doos."

War and the battlefield loss of a leg forged Vanier's reputation as stalwart and courageous. He was quickly appointed to increasingly distinguished positions in diplomacy—aide-de-camp to Governor General Lord Byng, a member of the Canadian military delegation to the League of Nations, secretary to the High Commission in London, Envoy Extraordinaire to France.

Ever-present was Pauline Archer. Although she had little formal education, Pauline was central to her husband's achievement.

Their marriage thrived from a shared spirituality and devotion. "We work as a team," Vanier declared to External Affairs at the end of World War II.

Lester Pearson, when ambassador in Washington, told Georges about the high praises "which I hear about you and your mission, and, more particularly, about your wife."

Georges and Pauline became concerned about the state of families. They were distressed that teenagers were dropping out of school, families were suffering from alcohol and drug abuse, and breadwinners were working away from their family because of economic pressures. The Vaniers invited sociologists, economists, writers, and doctors to Rideau Hall in 1964 for a conference on the family. A year later, they founded the Vanier Institute, a think tank on the family.

Many institutions are named in honour of Georges Vanier. The best known is the neighbourhood—from 1969 to 2001, Municipality—of Vanier. In this sesquicentennial year of Canada, we treasure the memory of a man who called his fellow Canadians to authentic virtues:

“The road of unity is the road of love: love of one’s country and faith in its future will give new direction and purpose to our lives, lift us above our domestic quarrels, and unite us in dedication to the common good... I pray God that we may all go forward hand in hand. We can’t run the risk of this great country falling into pieces.”