

Faith Today

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In today's world, who has time to pray?

By Sister C. Hope Allen, RSM

Georges Vanier was a striking military hero, who led a life of great honor as a colonel of the Royal 22nd Regiment of the Canadian Army, as a diplomat in England and as ambassador to France. During his career, however, he also reached some important conclusions about prayer.

For him, prayer began in the family.

Vanier was 70 when he became governor-general of Canada in 1959, the post he served in until 1967. His installation address began with the words: "May Almighty God...bless this sacred mission...and help me to fulfill it in all humility. In exchange for his strength, I offer him my weakness."

Vanier was born in Montreal in 1888 and studied law before joining the army in 1915. He distinguished himself under heavy fire and received the military cross before being seriously wounded and having his right leg amputated above the knee.

Later, Vanier's request to rejoin the army was greeted by a superior officer's laugh and the comment, "You have lost a leg." Vanier replied, "I know that, but don't you want a few officers with brains as well as legs?" Within three weeks Vanier was back in the army.

In 1921 Vanier married the deeply religious Pauline Archer from Montreal, who greatly influenced his life as a Catholic. It was on Good Friday in 1933 that he accompanied her to a lecture given in London by a Jesuit priest. Vanier told the priest after the lecture that he now realized how much God loves people.

From then on Vanier accompanied his wife to daily Mass.

The Vaniers had a daughter and four sons. Their son Jean founded L'Arche, the communities for the handicapped; Therese is a physician at St. Christopher's Hospice in London; Benedict is a Trappist monk in Oka, Quebec.

Vanier once said: "In the interplay of responsibility and dependence within the family are also found the wellsprings of

He wasn't always such a man of prayer. But at one point in his life, Georges Vanier changed. This illustrious government leader and father of five began a journey of family prayer that sometimes was difficult, other times intensely profound.

love, love for God, for one's religion and for one's country."

During Vanier's diplomatic career, the family lived in London and Paris. As the pace of his career increased, the Vaniers' life of prayer grew more intense. The couple decided to give 30 minutes each day together to silent prayer, sometimes in church, other times at home.

According to their son Jean, those times of prayer were sometimes dry and difficult. At other times, Vanier himself records that he really experienced God's love.

In one note written sometime between 1945 and 1954, he described his prayer in some detail: "Today as usual I started by thanking God for allowing me to come to see him...I said...I wanted to love him more." Then Vanier asked God "to show me how to love him as I did not know and needed his help."

But that day Vanier said he had a surprise. "I began to repeat, in a way which was both intense and spontaneous, that I loved him, thanking him for giving me the grace to love him thus. For some time I could not move on to the next point, but just kept repeating that I loved him and wanted to love him more."

This man came to look upon the Spirit as one who lends dignity to human beings and allows them to transcend their limitations. The interweaving of prayer and active service became Vanier's pattern of life. And it is difficult to imagine a more active life.

Concerned about the disintegration of the family, the Vaniers established the Vanier Institute of

the Family in 1964 to study family needs and to aid projects for its development.

At the institute's first meeting, Vanier expressed his concern that faith was becoming much less a family affair. Other activities may express people's unity to one degree or another, he observed. But prayer "goes to the very essence of our being, touches all that we feel important in life."

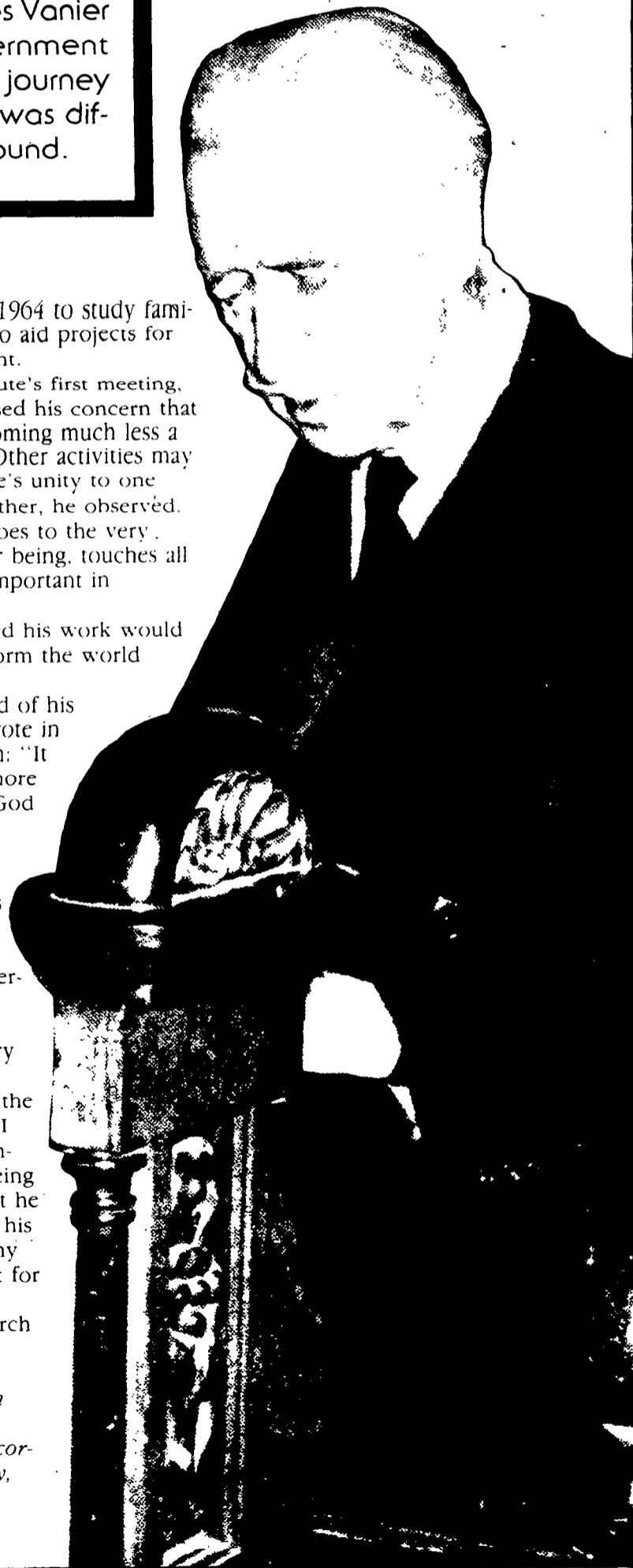
Vanier hoped his work would help to transform the world around him.

Near the end of his life, Vanier wrote in a letter to Jean: "It is more and more obvious that God is sustaining me. Left to my own human resources I could never accomplish all that I am undertaking at this moment."

"I sense very clearly and irrefutably that the prayer which I made at my installation is being answered, that he is exchanging his strength for my weakness. But for how long?"

He died March 5, 1967.

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