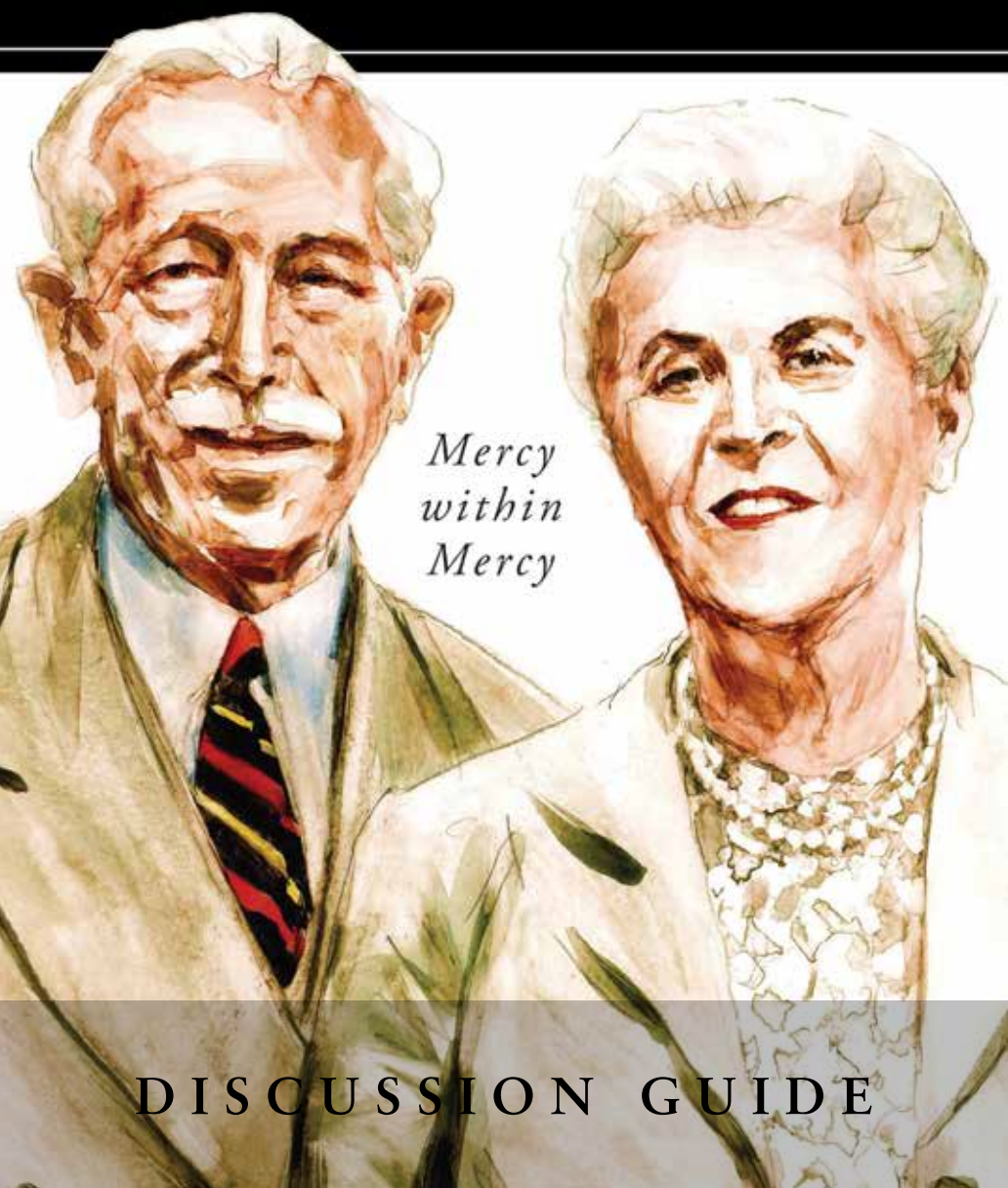


MARY FRANCES COADY

GEORGES AND PAULINE VANIER



*Mercy
within
Mercy*

DISCUSSION GUIDE

About the Book

Georges and Pauline Vanier were the parents of Jean Vanier, the cofounder of the L'Arche communities. They lived an intensely spiritual life, influenced mainly by the Carmelite tradition. *Georges and Pauline Vanier: Mercy within Mercy* is the warmly told story of their life together through World War II and the second half of the twentieth century, drawing on many letters and journals by Georges and Pauline themselves and those closest to them.

An incredible thirst for God can be seen in the lives of this couple, who were always striving in spite of (and through) human imperfection. The excerpts from letters and journals in this volume show a rare example of the contemplative life and struggles in prayer of an active and prominent married couple. The Vanier story is unique in that it forms a direct link back to the spiritual teaching that includes St. Thérèse and the Carmelite tradition in its emphasis on simplicity, trust in God's love, and self-abandonment to the mercy of God.

After Pauline's death in 1991, an investigation began into the possible introduction of their cause for beatification as a married couple.

About the Author

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Discussion Guide

Introduction

1. Have you ever visited a Carmelite monastery to request prayers and seek guidance? How does your experience compare with that of the Vaniers that we read about here?
2. Reflect on Fr. Pichon's advice and guidance to Therese de Salabery Archer, revealed in passages from a letter. What parts of it would you most like to take away as your own?
3. What is your reaction to Pauline's written words to Georges a few days before their wedding?
4. What might it mean to "have a vocation at the heart of the Church"?
5. Coady observes that certain personality traits "threaten[ed] to drag down [Pauline's] trust in God." How can personality traits threaten our spiritual lives? How can they fortify them?
6. Reflect on the words of Saint Teresa of Avila, which Mother Mary of the Cross offered to Pauline: "His Majesty loves to show His power in frail souls because in them His goodness meets with the least obstacle." How might this be expressed in a more contemporary way? Have you seen the truth of this revealed in real life?

Chapter One

1. We've seen already, by the end of this first chapter, that the Vaniers drew great benefit over the years from several spiritual guides/advisors. Have you ever had a formal spiritual director? Who in your own life has helped you most to grow in your relationship with God?
2. Georges and Pauline were very different in personality and spirituality. With whom do you identify more closely, or which would you more have liked to have met? Why?
3. What do you suppose Mother Mary meant by the admonition, "Just Magnificat together?"
4. Dame Juliana (better known today as Julian of Norwich) writes of Jesus as "our kindly Mother." Why does Mother Mary refer to this in her communication with Pauline? Do you find it helpful?
5. Is any of the advice offered by Mother Mary in this chapter notable or helpful to you?

Chapter Two

1. We “listen in” again in this chapter on more spiritual guidance offered to Pauline by Mother Mary of the Cross. How does it strike you? Is there anything in particular that you’d like to hang onto for yourself? Anything you’re uncomfortable with?
2. What does Mother Mary mean that “feelings are a great nuisance, but they do not really matter much”? Do you agree?
3. “Just be a living hearth of his love.” What does this mean? How might an ordinary Christian follow such advice?
4. What do you make of Pauline’s impressions of the Algerian people?
5. Do you find Mother Mary’s advice to Pauline on how to think about her failures helpful? How about her guidance on prayer?

Chapter Three

1. Mother Mary of the Cross wrote to Pauline: “God wants to be loved and served by you, as you are, with all your weak humanness and *not* by an angel.” What do you take this to mean for Pauline? For you?
2. After the war, Pauline experienced (if somewhat from a distance or second-hand) “the bursting out of evil in all its horror,” as she put it. What does her reaction to this experience seem to have been?
3. Georges and Pauline worked to maintain a daily prayer routine, though it is clear that they struggled at times to be consistent about it. Have you ever tried to maintain a similar routine? How well were/are you able to maintain it? What has gotten in the way of success? What advice would you offer to Georges and Pauline if you were able?
4. Byngsie’s comment about God’s Providence working “through the normal channels as a rule” is interesting and insightful. What does he mean, and why might it be important to understand?
5. The affection between Georges and Pauline and their son Byngsie is clear in this chapter. What lesson might it offer us about holiness in family life?
6. The Vaniers’ family friend wrote to them of visiting their son in the monastery where he lived: “As I looked at Byngsie I felt all my own cheapness and superficiality and cynicism falling away.” Have you known people whose presence prompts this sort of experience for you?

Chapter Four

1. Georges Vanier's prayer time on August 15, 1952, marked what Coady calls "a pivotal moment in his spiritual life." Reflect on Georges's notes from that experience. What are your thoughts or reactions to it?
2. How would you describe Georges Vanier's relationship with Jesus? What would you like to learn from it, or how might it be of help to you in your own spiritual life?
3. Consider Coady's comment about Georges and Pauline's relationship—that "each embraced the weakness in the other." What does this mean in practice? How has this been true in your own marriage or other important relationships? How might you learn from this example to improve your relationship?
4. Georges read Thérèse of Lisieux's *Story of a Soul* repeatedly and closely. Have you read the book? If so, what did you draw from it, or how did it impact you?
5. "God's grace needs its agents . . . and you happen to be one of them," Pauline's daughter Thérèse wrote to her, and this story of Pauline and Georges are full of examples of the truth of this statement. Who are agents of God's grace for you? For whom do you suppose you have been such an agent?
6. How must Pauline's personality have made the move out of Rideau Hall following Georges's death more difficult? How must it have at the same time been a strength?

Chapter Five

1. What is your impression of Pauline's response to the Gospel reading she heard at Mass at the Carmelite monastery in Montreal?
2. Pauline's life changed pretty radically in 1972, with her move to the L'Arche community in France. Is this decision surprising to you? How did this stage of her life represent a fitting next step in her biography?
3. Pauline's April 15, 1976, letter to her cousin makes it easy to imagine how she might have found her new setting frustrating, doesn't it? What advice would you have offered her? Did she make a mistake by moving to L'Arche in Trosly?
4. Pauline wrote of learning in "the school of L'Arche." How did this involve being "stripped," and why would this "stripping" be a good thing?
5. In her letters, Pauline wrote repeatedly about the L'Arche community being a place of suffering and of joy at the same time. From what you have read of the community in these pages (or perhaps from your familiarity with it outside this book), how can this be?
6. It was unclear until the final pages of this chapter that Pauline would choose to make the L'Arche community in Trosly her permanent home. Were you surprised by the decision she made, or not?

Chapter Six

1. Why did Pauline perceive herself to be a hypocrite? Are you familiar, from your own experience of trying to live a Christian life, with Pauline's perception of herself?
2. How is Pauline's experience of old age similar to those of many other people? What were its joys and its challenges?
3. Of the various pieces of spiritual advice offered to Pauline by her son Fr. Benedict found in this chapter, did any strike you as especially helpful to you personally? Or particularly relevant to your own concerns and struggles?
4. Even in her eighties, Pauline was not only still praying, but engaging in new kinds of prayer experiences, such as the group meditation prompted by the work of John Main. What does this say about Pauline? To what new experiences might God be calling you?
5. Having read Coady's *Georges and Pauline Vanier: Mercy within Mercy*, what do you want most to take with you from it?