



General Vanier was a devoted man of many passions and a prominent figure in both the history of the Institute and of Canada as a whole.

## General The Right Honourable Georges P. Vanier: A Life of Devotion

NATHAN BATTAMS

Every family has its own unique history, and the same is true of the Vanier Institute of the Family, which has now been studying families and family life across Canada for 50 years. The Institute was founded by then-Governor General Georges P. Vanier and Madame Pauline Vanier at a time of widespread social, economic and cultural change – a context in which they felt it was vital for Canadians to understand the importance of family to society. General Vanier was a devoted man of many passions and a prominent figure in both the history of the Institute and of Canada as a whole.

Georges Vanier was born in Montreal on April 23, 1888, into a devout, middle-class household led by Philiias and Margaret Vanier. He grew up in a mostly English-speaking home but became enamoured with his French heritage in his youth, later perfecting his French through his studies. A deeply committed Catholic, he would eventually earn a degree in church devotional fellowship. Outside his theological life, he was a passionate hockey fan who enjoyed the arts, and he wrote plays and poetry in his youth.

Following the outbreak of the First World War, Georges Vanier dutifully joined the military, where he was instrumental in organizing the first battalion of French-Canadian soldiers, the Royal 22e Régiment (also known as the “Van Doos”). He earned many honours during his service, including the Military Cross, the Cross of the Legion of Honour, the 1914–15 Star, the British War Medal, the Victory Medal and a Distinguished Service Order.

After the war, he met Pauline Archer while having tea at Montreal’s Ritz-Carlton Hotel. The two married in 1921 and raised a family of five children – Thérèse, Georges, Bernard, Jean and Michel – with whom he would regularly spend time at their Laurentian cottage with extended family. After being promoted to Major-General in 1942, he served in several diplomatic roles,

eventually becoming Canada’s first ambassador to France in 1944, where he contributed to post-war efforts.

Following his retirement from his diplomatic role, General Vanier’s deep sense of commitment to his country continued. In 1959, he became the first Quebec native to be appointed Governor General of Canada (1959–1967), when he fought for unity in a time of national crisis by promoting bilingualism during his many travels. Always committed to youth, General Vanier also served as Canada’s Chief Scout, and he created the Vanier Awards for Outstanding Young Canadians to recognize excellence and achievement.

An ardent believer in the importance of family to society, General Vanier convened the *Canadian Conference on the Family* at Rideau Hall in 1964 to mobilize knowledge about families and family life, and to guide future research. The Institute was created the following year to act as a “Royal Commission [that] will never be discharged.” Part of the Vaniers’ interest in family was rooted in their faith, but to maintain a spirit of inclusiveness and unbiased inquiry, they chose not to tie the Institute or its work to their particular religious beliefs. Since its founding, the Institute has continually worked as an independent and authoritative voice to enhance the national understanding of families and family life in Canada.

General and Madame Vanier were laid to rest in La Citadelle in Quebec City, but their dedication to families continues through the Vanier Institute of the Family and its work. General Vanier was a man of many legacies, and his devotion to his country, its culture and the families that make it strong have served as a solid foundation for this organization over the past half-century – and will continue to do so in the years ahead. ♡

*Nathan Battams is a writer and researcher at the Vanier Institute of the Family.*