



## An open letter to the Congregation

Dear confreres,

From 2 to 27 July 2019, our Congregation organized an exceptional conference on the ongoing formation, with a group of 30 confreres from different countries. It was a pilgrimage to the Holy Land following the footsteps of the Founder (8-24 July), led with a moment of preparation in the Generalate (2-7 July) and concluded with the visit to the Dehonian places in Rome (25-27 July). The idea of this pilgrimage as a moment of ongoing formation for a group of Dehonian religious, was born during the previous administration of Mgr. Heiner Wilmer, former Superior General. Our group is constituted of confreres who participated in the course of formators in the previous year in Rome and by another dozen confreres sent by various entities of the Congregation. We travelled through various regions of the Holy Land for seventeen days, beginning with the experience in the Negev desert, where God revealed himself to Abraham and to the Patriarchs, and continuing with a visit to the holy places that welcomed the Saviour's manifestation: Bethlehem, Nazareth, Tiberias, Jerusalem and the various relevant and nearby places. In these places, we have contemplated the mystery of the incarnation, of the apostolic life, of the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We trekked on foot for many miles, touching the ground touched by the feet of the Lord with our feet. We were led by confreres Fr. José Zeferino Policarpo Ferreira (POR), Fr. Sergio Rottasperti (GER) and Fr. Ricardo Jorge Ribeiro Freire de Oliveira (POR); we had the opportunity to deepen the writings of our Founder during his two trips in the Holy Land. In fact, the theme of our pilgrimage

was “in the Heart of Jesus with the heart of Dehon” and helped us to have a profound experience of faith by demonstrating that the way of Jesus is our way (cfr. Cst. 12).

To narrate what we lived on this pilgrimage to the Holy Land is like writing a piece of the gospel. The places visited and the experiences lived with emotion and joy lead us to believe that God the Father blesses those places. We will never forget the journey that began at dawn in the desert, the story of creation, the experience of God’s proximity, the mass celebrated on the heights, the fountain of En Avdat and the experience of Hagar whose intervention with God’s angel guided our whole journey: “what are you doing here?” From there we proceeded to Bethlehem, where “The Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14). The contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation, the place of birth, the mass celebrated in the cave of St. Jerome, the adoration in the chapel of the Sisters Adorers and a visit to the paediatric clinic (Caritas Baby Hospital), had inspired to see in the face of children and their parents the fragility of a God who is close to suffering. Nazareth has called us to *Ecce Ancilla*, dear to our Founder: the *Angelus* celebrated together with the Franciscans in the Basilica and the torchlight procession lived and animated by some of us have strengthened us. In the days spent in Galilee, we climbed Mount Tabor and the Mount of Beatitudes where we experienced a moment of silent prayer in Tabgha, a place of multiplication of the loaves and fishes. The Lake of Tiberias, on that afternoon on the boat, called us to throw the nets, to trust Jesus, to cling to Him in the moments of storm of our life. The hermitage in the Garden of Olives, a wonderful place of meditation, made us rediscover prayer: as Jesus there in Gethsemane prayed intensely, we too, in the silence of that afternoon, abandoned ourselves to Him. The *Sabbat* invited us into that Friday night to enter the Jewish quarters to go and to pray to the wall too: we saw how the Jews pray, their gestures, their prayers and songs, their way of dressing. On the last day, the meeting with the Risen Lord at Emmaus also happened for us, where we met the Community of the Beatitudes.

Our journey was particularly guided and illuminated by the texts of Father Dehon, especially from what he wrote about his pilgrimages to the Holy Land. We read the texts in which the Founder refers to every place where we went. We tried to grasp his feelings and impressions, as he wrote in his diary on his journey to the Holy Land in 1865: “In these places I received profound impressions that have always helped me for contemplation” (NHV 4/1). We were struck by the depth of his meditations and his historical and archaeological knowledge of the places, almost always with great precision. From the spiritual point of view, the texts of Father Dehon made us feel more intensely the love of the Heart of Jesus that culminates on the cross, when we found ourselves in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, a favorite place for many pilgrims from various parts of the world who want to draw on the core of the Christian faith. In fact, according to Father Dehon, the building offers the greatest memory of God’s love: “It will be necessary to return there often, to pray, to reflect, to take communion, to participate in the sacrifice to enjoy the graces in this sanctuary; all life, the memory of the holy places will help to contemplate the mysteries of our salvation” (NHV 3/171). Following the advice of the Founder, in the five days spent in Jerusalem we tried to return often to the Basilica

to relive what Father Dehon had already heard, namely the blessings flowing from the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In this way, the disposition of the heart of the Founder encouraged us to live physically and above all spiritually the visit of those places.

We must say that the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, following Christ in the footsteps of Father Dehon, has made us rediscover the Christian roots and the prophetic role of the Church in this Israeli-Palestinian environment. Thanks to the remarkable contribution of the Franciscan friars and some religious who work in collaboration with the bishop apostolic administrator of Jerusalem, Mons. PierBattista Pizzaballa, and also in a spirit of ecumenical dialogue with the other Christian churches. Contact with this reality allowed us to understand how Christians try to respond to God's call in these holy places and how they keep the flame of hope in an often hostile environment, this "little hope" that Charles Peguy spoke so well and who reminds them of the words of the Lord: "do not be afraid, I am with you every day until the end of the world". The meetings with the bishop of Jerusalem, with friar Francesco Patton, Franciscan guardian of the Holy Land, and with some religious who are there, such as friar Diego della Gassa, superior of the Franciscan community of the garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, helped us to discover how this people live always the joys and hopes, the pains and the anxieties, in a situation of conflict as followers of Christ. We have found a Church whose hope is not superficial or utopian, but realistic. In fact, in the statistics, the Christians in the Holy Land are a minority, just over 1% of the population. But through their humanitarian actions, Christians respond in the best and most visible way to the interpellation of Pope Benedict XVI who spoke of a "creative minority"; under the action of the Holy Spirit and prayer life. In spite of being few in number, the Christians in the Holy Land, seek to restore the trust of the people. In order to gain their trust, they live their faith in an original way through a coherence and a testimony of life and through the gift of self for the love of Christ. We believe that the Christian presence in the Holy Land has led us to believe that Christianity is still alive.

Our pilgrimage to the Holy Land has also brought us into contact with a social and religious context that touches two realities: Israel and Palestine. It is a context marked by a majority of Muslim Arabs (Palestine) or Jews (Israel) and a minority of Christians. We have seen expressions of differences and expressions of collaboration in this pluralistic context from the social and religious point of view. The differences are felt in the organization of divided neighbourhoods and different times of ritualistic prayers. It was a climate of silent tension due to the lack of mutual trust. Nevertheless, these differences brought us into contact with a different cultural and religious universe and challenged us to a broader understanding of this reality. On the other hand, we witnessed the cooperation between Christians, Muslims and Jews in the case of the service of the children's hospital in Bethlehem or in matters of the pastoral and educational ministry in Jericho, which for us appear as a sign of a possible dialogue for peace and welfare of men, no matter what religious denomination. Even on a personal level, we experienced in the streets of Jerusalem, the indifference as well as the contempt in the places of prayer of other religions. There was also a warm welcoming from those who saw us

as tourists to do business. Resuming the words of Fra. Mario Hadchity, guardian of the Franciscan community in Jericho, we can say that the mutual distrust leads to separation, instead the initiatives of dialogue on the social, pastoral and inter-religious field emerge as a sign of hope and future.

Certainly, from this pilgrimage to the Holy Land, we have taken many fruits for our personal life and our experience of faith. Someone said that the Holy Land is the fifth gospel, it is looking with our eyes and touching with our hands the places where the founding events of our Christian faith happened, which allows us to re-read our own experience with Christ. However, being a Dehonian pilgrimage, following in the footsteps of Father Dehon, surely there are fruits to be taken as a Congregation from this journey. We asked ourselves many questions about the role of the Holy Land for our Founder who always wanted a presence of the Congregation, which often invited us to return to Nazareth or Bethany to learn to be the family of Jesus, the friends of Jesus. Is it not the moment to deepen what Father Dehon meant? Is it not necessary to ask ourselves about the importance of offering this experience to other Dehonian religious? From what we have experienced, it seems clear to us that the spirituality of the "Recordatio mysteriorum", of the union with the mysteries of the life of Jesus, proposed by our Founder, is fully lived only if we have the opportunity to deepen our encounter with the Heart of Jesus where the Word of God pitched his tent, where this divine Heart was opened by the spear and where he is resurrected to give us life in fullness: The Holy Land.

At the end of our pilgrimage, we want to thank the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus who offered us this program of ongoing formation. We thank the superiors of our Entities who permitted and encouraged us to live this experience. We thank the organizers and the collaborators who prepared and conducted everything with zeal and solicitude. It is true that we have already concluded our pilgrimage to the Holy Land. But we feel that our true pilgrimage has not yet been completed; indeed, we have just begun it: it is in the mission entrusted to each of us that we want to continue our pilgrimage, "in the Heart of Jesus with the heart of Dehon", to always walk in His way which is also our way.

Rome, 27 July 2019

*Dehonian pilgrim group to the Holy Land*