



GENERAL SUPERIOR  
CONGREGATION OF THE  
PRIESTS OF THE SACRED HEART  
Dehonians

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Rome, 25 June 2015

**Rev. Dr. Philip A. Cunningham**  
International Council of Christians and Jews  
Martin Buber House  
P.O. Box 11 29  
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**Open Letter**

Dear professor Philip A. Cunningham,

In your capacity as President of ICCJ, I address myself to you especially at this time when you are holding the Congress: *The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Nostra Aetate: The Past, Present, and Future of the Christian-Jewish Relationship*. It remembers not only an important event in the Jewish-Christian relationship but also your intent to be a protagonist for a renewed communion between Christians and Jews.

With great attention but also with some sadness we have followed the reports in the media after the audience which Pope Francis granted to the members of the General Chapter of the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart (Dehonians).

From the beginning the Congregation has taken very seriously the allegations of anti-Semitic statements by our Founder. We have sought to understand the statements historically. In the course of the centuries, we realize, anti-Semitism has taken on many faces. The same is true for Catholic anti-Semitism in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Catholic Church found itself in great difficulty to come to terms with modernity. The intense struggle was unfortunately, to use David Nirenberg's words, "put in Jewish terms" also by our Founder. Among our efforts to understand this profile, the Congregation has not only made available online (Dehondocs.it) all the sources but also organized a colloquium held in Paris in 2007 entitled *Catholicisme social et question juive – Le cas Léon Dehon (1843-1925)*. The proceedings were published in 2009.

As a religious community founded by Léon Dehon we are, of course, not solely concerned with understanding his anti-Semitic remarks. We are facing the challenge of integrating this facet in the social writings of Léon Dehon in our overall picture of the Founder. Neither in his many spiritual writings nor in his more than 4,000 surviving letters can we find even a hint of the prejudices found in his socio-political writings. Dehon has, over the years, inspired thousands of people to a Christian spirituality of love, mercy and justice. He inspired confreres from the beginning of the 1930s to raise their voices in the face of an imminent

racist Nazi regime. He inspired confreres who in their commitment to world peace paid with death in the gas chambers of the Nazis. He inspired confreres like Fr. Middendorf who in Nazi Germany hid many Jews in one of our monasteries and who is now honored by the State of Israel in Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations. What generations of confreres and other men and women have esteemed in Dehon and we still esteem today, has nothing to do with his negative statements against the Jews. However, for us it is clear: Dehon is not only for us a model but also part of the failure of human beings.

We have not sought to remain only at the level of understanding this historical event. In France, the diocese of Soissons and our Dehonian confreres have already "humbly ask[ed] for pardon from our brothers in Judaism." If we carry the burden of his guilt, we will seek ways to address this.

The beatification of Fr. Dehon is solely the responsibility of the Holy Father. What the Pope said among brothers in a spontaneous speech to us should not be over-interpreted.

Dear Professor Cunningham, as you see, the topic touches us deeply. This is not because we see a distorted image of our Founder in the public eye. What moves us primarily is the need to gain an understanding of his anti-Semitic remarks and our relationship to them. It touches us that Léon Dehon is a part of the human failure in history, to whose overcoming you and the groups affiliated with ICCJ have engaged yourselves for many years. In line with this, we are grateful to you and wish you a fruitful Congress.

If in the course of the Congress you consider it opportune to read this letter to your participants we would be delighted.



*Heiner Wilmer*

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