



**DEHONIAN SEMINAR**  
**Charism and Devotions**  
Towards an Inculturated Dehonian Identity

With these brief notes on the Seminar entitled "Charism and Devotions - Towards an Inculturated Dehonian Identity" held in Yogyakarta (Indonesia) from July 20 to 25, 2107, we offer a first account of what was experienced in Indonesia. This is a very brief summary of the presentation of the seminar. It is followed by a second paper devoted to a critical re-reading and the necessary in-depth study of the issues that emerged during the seminar work. We remind you that a considerable number of documents relating to the work done during the seminar in Yogyakarta are available on the Seminar site - ([www.charismdevotions.org](http://www.charismdevotions.org)).



### *Brief History*

The birth of the International Dehonian Theological Commission (CTID) and later the Continental Theological Commissions (Europe, Latin America, Africa, North America, and Asia) are significant events in the life of the Congregation. For many years these organizations, along with the Dehon Study Center (Centro Studi Dehoniani - CSD), have done excellent work in deepening our historical and theological understanding of our charism and its identity. This has been done both through the publication of the writings of the Founder (an excellent work that is not yet completed) and through the promotion of international events of which this is the most recent.



There were three theological seminars prior to Yogyakarta 2017: *Theologia Cordis* (Theology of the Heart) in 2008 in Lisbon (Portugal), *Missio Cordis* (Mission of the Heart) in 2010 in Brusque (Brazil), and *Anthropologia Cordis* (Anthropology of the Heart) in 2013 in Taubaté (Brazil). This marked the

first time that this kind of congregational event was held in Asia. This was a first and precious opportunity for mutual knowledge and to engage in truly intercontinental work. It saw the active involvement of all the cultural areas in which Dehonian confreres and communities are present. It is therefore important to emphasize the role that the individual Continental Theological Commissions played in the seminar, working in close collaboration with the Dehon Study Center and with the support of the General Administration, which allowed involvement of the entire international Dehonian base.

### *Yogyakarta 2017*

The trip to Indonesia was long; it involved many hours of flying. International airports are crossroads of immense crowds. You see the faces of all kinds of people and of all backgrounds: men and women, children and young adults, all on the go. As you casually weave through the airport exchanging an infinite number of glances, you have only one certainty: you know very well that you will never see them again. The planes are crammed. The most naive of questions comes spontaneously, where are all these people going? Is the world really so large to contain all these routes and all these endless stories? Families, single travelers, couples, groups... each one having their own destination and perhaps a dream. Does God really know them all, each and every one?



When you get to Jakarta you are impressed by traffic: chaotic and disordered, but above all immensely disproportionate for those roads. Cars and motorcycles glide and slip into any free space. The major streets move at walking speed. No one curses at you or pushes against you. Yet, the sound of horns is constant, as if honking were a national sport. There is constant chatter on the streets: people live, eat, rest, sell merchandise that is then transported on bicycles adapted to this use, all in the street. Cleanliness on the street is nonexistent. People respond to a smile with a smile. They look like a peaceful people.



In our communities they warn of not drinking water from the tap. We were a large group of almost 60 Dehonians. There is not a local community big enough to host the seminar. For this reason we went to a large conference house managed by sisters inspired by St. Charles Borromeo, the house name has a strong Indian influence: "Syantikara." We were near the equator. Sunrise and sunset are constant throughout the year: at six in the evening it is already dark. The house where we were has no

showers with hot water because the cold season does not exist, there is only the dry season and monsoons. The cars have the right of way and are without heaters, people use only the air conditioner.

### *Seminar theme and pre-seminar work*



The theme chosen by the International Theological Commission expresses a positive, basic intuition: first of all, it obliges us to work on understanding fundamental elements of our Dehonian identity. It calls us to examine the very close relationship between the charism and devotions, which, as we can perceive, are not fully explained by a couple of definitions. And then the weaving together of *devotio* and devotions, of charism, structures of the faith, and action of the Holy Spirit. These issues favor an analysis of devotional life

and therefore focus on the practical dimensions of faith, on those experiences that structure and nourish our personal, community and missionary relationship with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Consequently, the purpose of a theological seminar of this type is as clearly not for its immediate effects, but is to develop intercultural approaches to our charismatic identity, and thus be able to equip ourselves with a renewed hermeneutic lens with which we can use to comprehend more deeply our charismatic, spiritual and devotional heritage.

In this perspective, the pre-seminar phase, which had been entrusted to the individual Continental Theological Commissions, was very valuable because it involved the entire Dehonian base. Every Dehonian religious received a questionnaire. This allowed the participants of the seminar to begin by examining work that had begun a couple of years ago. Each of the Continental Theological Commissions worked on a theological re-reading based on the responses to the questionnaires. Following the guidelines outlined above by the Scientific Committee, each Theological Commission drew up its own document and distributed it in advance to the participants in the seminar. These documents were taken as the first phase of the program.



### *The Seminar*

The word “seminar” has a different meaning than the classical “conference.” In our case, the difference refers to the method by which the work was done together, built with patience, giving a real voice to the cultures where Dehonian confreres and communities are present and working. This method means that an intentional choice was made not to resort to external experts, who are asked to give a critical response to the subject, but rather to privilege our own inner work, our own deep encounter with these issues. The only exception to this method was the beautiful text by Sister Niela Spezzati, ASC,

Undersecretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. She gave a critical reading of the individual reports of the Continental Theological Commissions which offered valuable directions in which to proceed forward.



Entering into the universe of devotions dear to Dehonians means in some way to gain access to a plural and varied world; accepting a step-by-step approach, essentially discreet, attentive to the insidious risk of spiritual integration.

We did not naively expect the work of the seminar to give easy and formulaic answers of how to inculturate the Dehonian charism, as if our congregational identity was an "object" and thus an easy concept to convey. What was

certainly not expected was the outcome that offered some basic starting points, extremely precious for today and tomorrow. We will share some.

We have experienced the importance of an encounter between ourselves, giving us the space to hear the plurality of voices and cultures in which we ourselves live; and where a posture of deep listening flows from true asceticism. With the Indonesian seminar, Dehonians have taken a significant step towards raising deep questions about our spiritual and charismatic identity. Aware that if a charism is a gift from the Holy Spirit, it is up to us to develop it, thus making it exist in reality. It can be said that this first starting point still needs to develop insights, which will be entrusted above all to the work of the single Continental Theological Commissions. It will be from them that these ideas about our devotional life will be developed, and the decisions made about whether we should talk about interculturality or whether it is even possible to talk about the horizon of inculturation.

We have also experienced the hard work of talking and reasoning in concrete terms about devotions. It seemed to us that there is a certain separation between actual theory and practice, which is understandable if one thinks about the reversals of meanings these practices have gone through in recent decades, leaving in the wake of their recent history a confusion that prevails over the experience of each person. This dimension, which touches on the quality of our religious life, needs to be further deepened to rediscover the devotions given to the Congregation and to examine them with greater depth and subject them to the inevitable process of refinement that has no other criterion than that of the Gospel: evangelizing the devotions means to pass them through the sieve of their theological purpose and their theological quality.



For us Dehonians the focus is clear: the heart of Christ, mystery of charity. "The Dehonian devotion is thus characterized by the sensitive approach to the humanity of Christ that leads to the experience of

God the love" (CSD, Input for the Seminary of Yogyakarta, p. 7). From here, the plurality voices of the different cultural sensitivities begins to take shape.

The attempt to give some sense to this plurality must be done through a relationship of dynamic fidelity to our history. While on the one hand it is a never-ending process, on the other hand these insights must take form and become actual and concrete conscious actions, adapting devotions by means of education and education by means of devotion. Here lies the interest in the founder's story: Father Dehon found access to the mystery of the Heart of Christ through devotional practices, and he understood well that *devotio* creates an affective quality in faith. And secondly, devotion was for him the language deliberately chosen to convey the un-conveyable, his spiritual experience.



The seminar gave us some fixed points and an orderly direction for future work. Amongst the most important points, the fundamental one is this: the Dehonians have embarked on an effective way of deepening their charismatic identity by choosing a bold access point to their spirituality: the relationship between charism and devotions. We found that this experience was, simply stated, very fruitful.



As we said at the beginning, we will be able to return to seminar and pre-seminar days, to offer further insights and try some critical synthesis.

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