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According to the Founder's Charism (II)

DEHONIAN STUDIES



A series of presentations of the "Reading Guide" to the Constitutions, written by Fr. Albert Bourgeois.

by *Fr. Albert Bourgeois, scj*

1. A constitutive reference

97 The title of the first chapter of the Constitutions fixes from the beginning, as a kind of constitutive principle, reference to Fr Dehon's experience, his grace and his mission:

- for the founding of the congregation: "This institute takes its origin from Fr Dehon's vision of faith" (n. 2);
- for the spiritual life of its members: ... in what, in the unfathomable riches of Christ's mysteries, "finds an echo in the experience of Fr Dehon and our elders" (n. 16).

98 We should note the change made in the 1979 text regarding the

position and significance of these articles on Fr Dehon's experience:

- in 1973, they formed a simple introduction to our *Rule of Life*,
- in 1979, they constitute the first chapter of the Constitutions.

Such a change emphasizes the constitutive nature of this reference.

99 The phrase "according to Fr Dehon's charism" may at first appear somewhat restrictive. In any case, if it were rendered "SCJ spirituality" or "the spirit of Fr Dehon", this would harden and distort the meaning. The text does not speak of spirituality or spirit in the traditional sense of these words and not even of a "special end", as the old Constitutions did. The expressions "specific intention" and "particular character" appear as citations from the conciliar documents (cf. PC 2). Typical expressions in our text are: spiritual vision, common approach, particular conscience (n. 16), spiritual purpose (n. 26), prophetic charism (n. 27), what we are and do (n. 38), prophetic witness (n. 39).

100 Spirituality is an abstract term. If we speak of a proper or specific spirituality, we run the risk of suggesting a doctrinal ensemble, a sort of ideology belonging to a group; developing and growing its difference and distinction in a closed vessel. Fr Bouyer speaks with irony about certain presentations of the spirituality of orders, institutes, fraternities, etc. in his *Introduction a la vie spirituelle* (pp. 22-24). We can speak rightly only of evangelical and Christian spirituality.

101 However it is also an abstraction that an evangelical spirituality as such, belonging to all, belongs to no one in particular. There is only one gospel, proclaimed and lived by someone (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), and there are as many evangelical spiritualities as there are persons, in accordance with a personal approach, with their own particular and favorite accents, which characterize a spiritual experience and in some way a spirituality.

102 The expressions from our new Constitutions quoted above confirm what I have already pointed out regarding the whole of the

text and the existential approach, in accordance with experience. Rather than SCJ spirituality, I prefer to speak of SCJ fidelity, of that fidelity (*fidelitas*) conceived and lived in faith (*fides*), living faith, a fidelity that unites us in faith, which works through charity.

103 In reference to Fr Dehon's experience this fidelity is clearly justified through its charismatic character. As with all founders, his experience was both personal and exemplary:

- personal, and as such incommunicable and unrepeatable, clearly marked by various circumstantial and cultural traits: his times, formation, sensibility, temperament, milieu, associates, etc. There is nothing charismatic about any of this;
- exemplary, at least in its essential approach, in its thrust and in the ends it pursued, in virtue of the grace received, of a founder's charism, to which the council texts and our Constitutions allude (nn. 1-2). Obviously, it is in this sense that Fr Dehon's experience is constitutive for us.

2. Fr Dehon's faith experience

104 In the Constitutions Fr Dehon's experience is described very synthetically, in an almost elementary but still thought-provoking way, in articles 2-5.

- a) A life "by faith in the Son of God" (Gal 2,20): the experience of the active presence of Christ's love in his life, a love that finds its most eloquent expression in the open side and pierced Heart (cf. nn. 2-3).
- b) Great sensitivity to sin and to social evils, whose causes he had carefully studied, discovering the rejection of Christ's love as the deepest cause (n. 4).
- c) "Overwhelmed by this neglected love, he would respond to it by an intimate union with the Heart of Christ and by the establishment of his Kingdom in human hearts and in society at large" (n. 4), as well as by grace and mission, founding a

congregation to render to Christ “that worship of love and reparation which his Heart desires” (nn. 6-7).

105 The first two points indicate and describe what could be called the first aspect of Fr Dehon’s vision of faith: the call to the discovery of Christ’s love, with its own particular characteristic of being “neglected love” (n. 4). The third point introduces the second element, Fr Dehon’s response.

106 We do not yet have any full and comprehensive work on Fr Dehon’s spiritual experience. Various aspects can be found in different biographies, monographs, articles etc. But direct contact with the sources is always more thought provoking.

107 Fr Carminati’s commentary (pp. 1-12) gives some quotations and interesting documents in French. In particular, I should like to recommend the following: on his seminary years NHV, V 133-VI, 24 or NQT I-II and on the founding of the congregation NHV XII, 151-172, and also the *Souvenirs*.

108 Together with his correspondence, the NQT are the richest source, especially in his later years, when Fr Dehon revised and meditated on God’s action in his life.

109 In respect of the years leading up to the founding, much information can be found in the essay published in *Studia Dehoniana* 9, “P. Dehon... Vocation et Mission”.

2.1. Presence of an active love

110 “A love whose active presence was a reality in his own life” (n. 2).

111 In these words we see the most characteristic and basic expression of Fr Dehon’s vision, which explains all the rest. Two points help us specify the content:

- “By faith in the Son of God” (n. 2).
- “Overwhelmed by this neglected love” (n. 4).

2.1.1. "By faith in the Son of God"

112 Fr Dehon often quotes verse 20 of the second chapter of Galatians in his notes and other writings. It usually appears without any exegetical comment, simply as the expression of his personal contemplation and an explanation of his vocation and life. He dwells above all on the fact of the love of Christ who gives himself and, of course, on the personal call implied in the words "who loved me".

113 The reference to the pierced Heart is first of all a living illustration of this experience. It is "the most eloquent expression" of Christ's love, experienced as an active presence in his life. "The words of our Lord to St Margaret Mary made a deep impression on me" (NHV XII, 167).

114 But there is also the mystery of the open side, recalled and experienced as a revelation of the active presence: the Heart is not only an image and symbol, but also a gift and source.

115 The Constitutions return to the mystery of the open side and devotion to the pierced Heart in describing our experience and SCJ spiritual life (cf. nn. 19-21).

116 Of course the quotation must be set in its context (the whole verse, then the entire epistle and especially 2,16-21). With regard to the phrase "faith in the Son of God" (literally faith of the Son of God), the Ecumenical Translation of the Bible adds an interesting note. Without prejudice to the doctrinal and catechetical implications of the verse on justification through faith in Christ, we can hold that this justification is effective through the faith of Christ, the faith in and by which he accomplishes his saving mission and lives in us.

117 The experience of a life of faith is that of union with Christ who lives in us his own faith and his saving love. Our life of faith is above all our accepting of this faith and love of Christ's and our offering them hospitality within us. "The faith of the Son of God, while not identical with ours, is its source and model" (Ecumenical Translation of the Bible). In all this, there is something that concerns and has

consequences for the way of conceiving our oblation and reparation, in complete harmony with genuine Pauline and Johannine theology of charity.

118 The question of the faith of Christ is a current christological topic (cf. Balthasar and Guillet: *La foi du Christ*).

119 Fr Dehon experienced the active presence of love in his life in that union described in Gal 2, 20: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in (of) the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me", the Son of God who lives his faith and saving love in me.

2.1.2. "Sensitive to sin..." and "overwhelmed by this neglected love..."

120 These two phrases can be considered together, since they both concern Fr Dehon's sensitivity to sin.

121 Art. 4 describes briefly the twofold approach and the discovery of the mystery and reality of sin:

- the historical and sociological approach in "social evils". Fr Dehon's social writings are evidence of this approach and of his social sensitivity,
- the theological approach to sin as "the rejection of the love of Christ", a rejection that makes this love a "neglected love". To this sin, Fr Dehon is theologically and spiritually very sensitive.

122 This reflection on SCJ sensitivity to sin is especially important regarding the foundation and particular character of the congregation, as a reparatory congregation. It is one of the primary and most basic motivations for the founding of the institute; it is the bond lived by Fr Dehon between the SCJ religious life, reparatory devotion to the Heart of Christ, pastoral and social action, etc. This subject needs to be studied, not from motives of historical and psychological curiosity nor in support of one or other spiritual, apostolic and sociological angle, but for a better understanding of this

experience, from which the institute takes its origin and in which it discovers its nature, grace, mission in the church, its “prophetic charism” as art. 27 of the new Constitutions states.

123 Sin is here understood not so much as a rejection of love (*aversio a Deo*) but as a refusal to open oneself to love, a refusal to let oneself be loved. In a similar way Peter, refusing to let Christ wipe his feet, could not be one of his followers. Sin is considered not as a violation of the law or a blow to God’s glory, but a wounding of God’s very being which is love. In this sense, God is touched in his heart. Man, rejecting God’s love, in some way prevents him being God. In this way, it is the deepest cause of human misery and social evils.

124 This idea of sin as a rejection of love must be kept in mind for a good understanding of Fr Dehon’s experience, the nature of his oblation and of his reparatory vocation, born from the contemplation of the Heart of Jesus and from the message of Paray-le-Monial.

125 All this is summed up in the phrase “overwhelmed by this neglected love” (n. 4).

2.2 The SCJ response

126 Logically for Fr Dehon this response must be the effect of the active presence of the love he has received, which has overwhelmed him and by which he has let himself be overwhelmed.

127 Here the word overwhelmed is used not in the sense of overcome emotionally or upset, but rather in the sense of conquered. Just as Paul, conquered by Jesus Christ, presses on to conquer him (cf. Phil 2,12), so Fr Dehon “overwhelmed by this neglected love... would respond to it” (n. 4). This response is not first of all compensation, satisfaction and expiation (for sin as the rejection of love), but opening to love, acceptance of the neglected love, an acceptance that is in itself reparatory (and also consoling), giving the Lord that joy he manifested when the little ones received him and listened to him (cf. Lk 10,21-22; Mt 11,25-26).

128 Here the stress is on the dynamism of love, love that takes possession of the being who opens himself to it, this neglected love experienced as an active presence within oneself.

129 Fr Dehon's response is letting Christ's love act within him:

- through intimate union with the Heart of Christ, a clinging to Christ that comes from the intimacy of the heart;
- through the establishment of his Kingdom in human hearts and in society at large, by his apostolate and, by a special grace and mission, through the founding of an apostolic religious institute, a congregation whose members, "pledged with Christ to undo sin and the neglect of love in the church and in the world" (n. 7), propose to render Christ that "worship of love and reparation which his Heart desires" (n. 7). This means that, in accordance with Fr Dehon's experience, they open themselves to Christ's neglected love and experience the active presence of that love in their lives.

130 This is the profound sense of the initial statement on the origin of the institute and its essential relation to Fr Dehon's experience and on what in this reference to the founder's experience is constitutive for us, and thus a source of inspiration for an authentic SCJ spiritual life (cf. n. 16).

2.3 Additional notes

131 **1)** Regarding the impression made on Fr Dehon by the words of our Lord to Margaret Mary, mentioned as one of the reasons for founding the congregation (NHV XII, 167). In Fr Dehon's notes, the word impression always refers to a deep spiritual experience (cf. NHV for his first communion, his retreats, his vocation, 1, 9v; 26r, 29r). His experience of evil and sin as neglected love gained during his ministry at St Quentin contributed to the impression made on him by the Paray message. This explains his "strong attraction to an ideal congregation of love and reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus" (NHV XII, 163).

132 **2)** In support and confirmation of the interpretation given to the

SCJ response, we can note two reflections of Fr Dehon himself:

- on the meaning of his oblation, which he likened to that of Teresa of Lisieux, an offering to which he often referred. In particular, he wrote: "We were born from the spirit of St Margaret Mary and we are close to that of St. Teresa" (NQT XLI, 53•56, April 1925). In 1905, he devoted a meditation in *Couronnes d'amour* to Teresa's offering (III, pp. 162-166).
- Regarding the bond between his oblation with his experience of social evils and his personal social mission, note his surprising words to the 1880 novices on pure love. "During his whole life our Lord practiced reparation through pure love and he demands it today, for it is the salvation of the church and of men. This will solve the present social question" (CF III, 46).

133 And he associates the motive for founding the institute with improving the situation of men through reparation for consecrated souls and priests who will prepare and determine it.

134 In this sense also, I think, the synthetic presentation of Fr Dehon's experience in our Constitutions is very faithful to his thought and to his intentions.

3. Conclusion

135 From Fr Dehon's spiritual experience our Constitutions have mapped out a path whose main lines must be retained as the model of an experience and a spiritual life for members of the congregation.

136 Experience of a life of love, whose source is the active presence of Christ's love, mystical in the broad sense of the term as revealing a mystery of union. Therefore, it is not primarily a question of an asceticism of imitation and moral effort, although it must be acknowledged that the way to union presupposes a serious purifying asceticism. Union and attachment are the key words of the SCJ spiritual experience, along the lines of attachment to Christ's states, taught by Cardinal Bérulle

and the French School and taken up by the movement of devotion to the Heart of Christ.

137 Experience of a union of love, whose law must be that of Christ's love which is limitless, the law of pure love always in tension according to the Pauline formula. "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own... but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize" (Phil 3,12-14). It is the law of the response of love, of the thrust born from possession (the *epektasis* according to Gregory of Nyssa), a spiritual and mystical tension which, for Fr Dehon as for Paul, and is the source of their apostolic impetus. It is not only union as soul and support of the apostolate, but as its source and reason, in virtue of the very nature of the love-agape of Christ operating in us.

138 Ours is an experience of the religious life that is necessarily apostolic but by its very nature, also deeply contemplative. "In our enterprises," said Fr Dehon to the novices, "our life will be largely permeated by the contemplative life". In so far as our religious life is and must be union of love with Christ who has loved and given himself, it is life in Christ who loves and gives himself in us; it is essentially apostolic life; not a mixed life, according to a certain traditional terminology, but experience of the active presence of Christ's love in our life.

139 It is this that must verify and develop the description of our experience and our spiritual life as finding "an echo in the experience of Fr Dehon and our elders" (n. 16).