

09
JUL
2021

Our Spiritual Life (IV)

The Principle and Centre of our Life

DEHONIAN STUDIES



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

by **Fr. Albert Bourgeois, scj**

1. Nova et vetera

195 This principle is very clearly enunciated: "We, the disciples of Fr Dehon, would like to make intimacy with Christ in his love for the Father and for men the principle and center of our lives" (n. 17).

196 This echoes what has already been said regarding Fr Dehon's original and specific intention and the institute's particular character: "In founding the Congregation of the *Oblates*... Fr Dehon wanted to see his members unite their religious and apostolic life explicitly with Christ's reparatory oblation to the Father for the sake of man" (n. 6).

197 The 1885 Constitutions (repeating the original text of 1877) spoke of "consoling the Sacred Heart by making reparation for the injuries

committed against him and by offering ourselves to him as victims of his good pleasure in a spirit of reparation and love which is their distinctive character" (n. 1).

198 More plainly and in a style closer to our new text, the Latin Constitutions (1906-1956) define the life of love and immolation, qua Congregatio proprie distinguitur, as "the best way of imitating the life of Jesus Christ, who is constantly sacrificed for men – vitam Christi, pro hominibus continue immolatam imitari" (n. 9).

199 Our spiritual way is expressed in the offering of self to the Sacred Heart, in the imitation of his life of immolation and in union with his love. The cultural character of the offering, underlined in 1906-1956: sacrificium, reparationem, laudem et amorem Domino exhibere intendentes – returns in art. 22 of the new text, but with a different orientation.

200 In the new formulation the union with Christ – who is Christ-Servant, Savior and Lord presented in art. 9-12 – is a union with Christ in his love and in his oblation. His love, contemplated in the mystery of the opened side (cf. nn. 19-21), is a love that "in its total gift of self creates man anew according to God" (n. 21). Our oblation is an association, with and as Christ, with the "movement of redeeming love" (n. 21); it is "diakonia" (service) and as such is cultural, as was that of Jesus in the accomplishment of his mission (Heb 10,5-10) or that of Paul in his proclamation and service of the gospel, "to be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering to the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rm 15,16).

201 The idea of oblation as union with Christ was not foreign to Fr Dehon's original intention. In the 1885 Constitutions we read: "The vocation of Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is inconceivable without the interior life... The particular character of the interior life of Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is union with the divine Heart" (VIII, 2, nn. 1, 3; cf. *Spiritual Directory* VI, 21).

202 It would not be difficult to multiply quotations and references

regarding this union with the Heart of Christ to live and act with and like him.

203 But this union with the Heart of Jesus appears principally in connection with the interior life, under the aspect of personal sanctification. The text of the new Constitutions is very clear, leaving no doubt about its intention and direction. It can easily be seen as part of the renewal and adaptation carried out with dynamic fidelity to the original intention.

204 The great advantage is to characterize our oblation in itself not only as a means to perfection (imitation) or an act of devotion, but as a true charism that fits us for a mission in the church. Our oblation can be called a prophetic charism (n. 27) because it is a union with the redemptive and reparatory oblation of Christ.

205 Oblation as union with Christ in his love and his oblation is what must mark the SCJ "sequela Christi".

- Fr Dehon's oblation was "an intimate union with the Heart of Christ... companionship with Christ which began in the intimacy of the heart (and which) he would have to apply to his whole life and especially his apostolate" (nn. 4-5).

- Our religious and apostolic life must be:

- united with Christ's reparatory oblation to the Father for the sake of man" (n. 6);

- "intimacy with Christ in his love for the Father and for men, the principle and center of our lives" (n. 17);

- a vocation that calls us "to associate ourselves with that movement of redeeming love by sacrificing ourselves for our brethren together with Christ and in Christ's own way" (n. 21);

- an offering of ourselves to the Father in union with Christ and men (cf. n. 22);

- "Reparation... a response to Christ's love for us, in communion with his love for the Father and a cooperation in his redeeming work in the

midst of the world” (n. 23);

– the offering of suffering “as an exalted, mysterious communion with the sufferings and death of Christ for the redemption of the world” (n. 24);

– in “all that we are, all that we do and suffer in the service of the gospel, our love will, through our sharing in the work of reconciliation, bring healing to humanity... and consecrate it to the delight and glory of God” (n. 25).

206 This could continue with nn. 26, 27, 35, 38, 39.

207 Union with Christ in his love for the Father and for men (17, 23) is union with Christ in his oblation to the Father for men (6, 21, 22, 24), and that in virtue of the nature of the love, the agape, whose active presence we experience in our life. Hence the importance, for an authentic life of love and oblation, of a serious theological conception of this love that must be the foundation and guiding light of our SCJ spiritual life.

2. Two texts

208 To mark our experience and spiritual life the new Constitutions refer us to two texts of John:

– “Thus we have come to know and believe the love which God has for us” (1Jn 4,16);

– “Abide in me and I in you” (Jn 15,14). Although other apt texts could be found (Eph 3,17-19; 5,2 are quoted in nn. 17, 22), these two texts of John are rich in a profound theology of love, of the active presence of love in our lives.

2.1. 1Jn 4,7-21

209 I shall not attempt a detailed commentary but simply note a few

points.

210 Through the experience of being loved we live the knowledge and experience of the love of God who is love (v. 7-8). It is an experience that we have in Jesus and through Jesus, sent and immolated (v. 9-10) and in the act of loving, an experience that we can only have by loving each other, because this love that we live is God himself who loves in us and his love in us is perfect (teteleiomene) and at one and the same time recognized, received and active.

211 Love (agape), as well as being the practice of a virtue, is the mystery of God's very life which we live in Christ and through Christ (v. 16), an experience lived as reciprocal interiority. "We abide in him and him in us" (v. 13). And this love, operating "in deed and in truth" (1Jn 3,18) is a love that gives witness and confesses (cf. 1Jn 4,14-16); it is a principle of confidence and freedom (v. 17-18), through the Spirit whom he has given us (v. 13), the Spirit who makes us children of God (cf. 3,1-2) and who, according to Paul, cries out in us, Abba, Father (Gal 4,6; Rm 8,15-16).

212 This fourth chapter of John's first letter, and indeed the whole letter, is worthy of deep meditation, for it is one of the key texts for an understanding of the SCJ experience: a life of contemplative love (9-10), carried out in witness and service (cf. v. 11-15), a life based on reciprocal interiority (16), a life of filial oblation, for just as Jesus was sent to be the expiation of our sins, so we, living in him, must do likewise (cf. 9-10).

213 The knowledge to which we are called is obviously different from that acquired through study; it is the fruit of our oblation and will be proportionate to our union with Christ's oblation.

2.2. Jn 15,1-17

214 It is the allegory of the vine, a favorite text for meditation.

215 It was one of Fr Dehon's favorites, which he used himself and recommended to others as the best description of the SCJ

experience, the program of that life of love which constituted in his eyes the model of the SCJ spiritual life (cf. *Vie d'amour*, meditations 2, 11, 13, 22, 25, the last being based on Jn 15).

216 The text is to be taken as one whole, the second part (9-17) being an explanation and confirmation of the first (1-8). This is clear from the repetition of expressions and the hinge at v. 9, "Abide in my love", which joins the two key words of each section.

217 Two main lines of reflection can be indicated.

218 For a theology of agape and of the life of love, in the allegory of the vine, communion and communication of life and fruitfulness: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (v. 9). "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (v. 12). Exegetes point out that in these two verses, like similar formulas in John, "as" (*kathòs*) has all its force, not only comparative but also causal, for Trinitarian love and Christian love: the active presence of the Father's love in Christ and of Christ's in us, according to the law of reciprocal interiority formulated in vs. 4, 10.

219 For a theology of mission, of charism of the life of love to which the disciples is called and appointed (v. 16) through charism and vocation "to bear fruit" (v. 16).

220 A good meditation on these two texts will help to give the phrase "principle and center of life" all its theological, spiritual and apostolic resonance. According to this principle, our following of Christ cannot be just the imitating of a model, fidelity to a teaching or program. Rather it is "a total and joyous companionship with the person of Jesus" (n. 14) and for Fr Dehon this was a companionship "which began in the intimacy of the heart" (n. 5). For us as for him it is "intimacy with Christ in his love for the Father and for men" (n. 17). Our life program, if we have one, must be not only that of the beatitudes but also of the discourse at the Last Supper and the prayer of Jesus recorded in the 17th chapter of John's gospel.

3. Reciprocal interiority

221 The general law of our religious life is that of reciprocal interiority, formulated in the two texts just discussed (and found also in Jn 6 regarding the Eucharist and 17 as a principle of life for the disciples and the church).

222 Exegetes consider this theme particularly significant; it is a law of the Christian spiritual experience. We find it in Paul as well as in John, if we give expressions such as “life of Christ” and “Christ’s life in us” their full spiritual and mystical meaning.

223 Whatever clarifications and shades of meaning we must take into account, we find this law implied in Fr Dehon’s thought and explanations on the life of love and in the description in our new Constitutions of the SCJ experience (nn. 2-5) and of our spiritual life (n. 17), according to a characteristic that we must specify.

224 The 1885 Constitutions spoke of “union with the divine Heart” to explain and characterize our attachment to the “person of the incarnate Word” and “union with our Lord”, according to a way of approach to the mystery of Christ that is the mystery of the opened side and the pierced Heart. We are therefore called to unite ourselves with reciprocal interiority to Christ in the supreme act of his love and self-giving, of his redemptive and reparatory oblation.

225 There are many examples of this union in love and oblation throughout the text: “together with Christ and in Christ’s own way” (n. 21) so as to love “as he did, in deed and in truth” (n. 18; cf. 4, 6, 17, 18, 22, 23, 24, 26, 35). Here is his original intention and the particular character of the institute (n. 6). This union to Christ’s reparatory oblation to the Father for men is the service that the institute is called to render to the church (n. 6). Thus a correct understanding of the nature of this oblation is indispensable for a proper appreciation of what our devotion to the Heart of Jesus must be and of what the text calls “our prophetic charism at the saving mission of the people of God in the world of today” (n. 29).

4. A reparatory oblation

4.1. In the life and writings of Fr Dehon

226 This central theme of oblation should be studied and meditated in the life and writings of Fr Dehon and in the spiritual traditions of the congregation.

227 For Fr Dehon's life and formation, see his seminary notes (NQT I-II) and for the founding of the congregation and its development at St Quentin see his *Souvenirs* (NHV). For the long years of waiting and searching for his own vocation and mission, see *Studia Dehoniana* 9.

228 The official text of the 1885 Constitutions is found in *Studia Dehoniana* 2, while Fr Dehon's talks to the first novices (*Cahiers Falleur*) have been published in *Studia Dehoniana* 10.

229 The *Spiritual Directory* treats the subject in the first two parts, as well as in par. 5 of the third part on the profession of immolation and par. 19-21 of the sixth part on the virtues proper to our vocation.

230 Oblation permeates the SCJ religious life, the virtues, exercises and practices are all directed to it. Despite appearances and expressions that can appear somewhat outmoded, the life of oblation, certainly demanding, is not without doctrinal depth.

231 Identifying our oblation with "Christ's reparatory oblation to the Father", the new Constitutions have indicated and determined for us the way of dynamic fidelity to practice our oblation as a unifying principle of our religious and apostolic life.

232 All this must be based on a theology of love, which is not only a virtue (the "most eminent of the virtues according to the *Spiritual Directory*), but as God's life itself, it is the mystery of God to be known, to be accepted, into which we must enter, a mystery of oblation in which God loves by giving and by self-giving in which the Word loves by becoming man, living among us and dying for us. This is love as reaching out and as self-giving. Giving and self-giving are characteristic of love; this is oblation.

4.2. A filial and reparatory oblation

233 Oblation concerns and commits our being as men and Christians, in our relation with God our Father and Creator, through and in Jesus Christ.

234 Essential oblation of the creature to his creator, of the image to resemblance. It is the “principle and foundation of indifference” (Loyola) that is of openness to God in a positive thrust. It is the choice of responding more fully to his love and of committing ourselves to his service according to the end for which we have been created.

235 Filial oblation, of which Christ, Word and incarnate Son, “image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation” (Col 1,5), is the original and exemplary model. The Father “destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will”. And this “to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us” (Eph 1,5-6). Our oblation is not only a duty to be carried out, it is a demand of our Christian existence to be what Christ is, a son of God living in response to all the demands of filial love.

236 Redemptive and reparatory oblation, in union with the pierced Heart of the Savior, in whom “we have redemption through his blood... according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us” (Eph 1,7-8). Our oblation is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in us. In us the Spirit cries, Abba, Father (Gal 4,4). “Father... thy will be done” (Mt 6,9-10). “Lo, I have come to do thy will O God” (Heb 10,7). It is an oblation of filial love, of redemptive and reparatory love, to the point of sacrificial immolation, which realizes in us and for others, in the church and for the world, the Father’s plan of benevolent love to unite the universe under one head, Jesus Christ.

237 These perspectives, which are those of Eph 1,3-4, are found in the first three meditations of *Couronnes d’amour*. They are, says Fr Dehon, part of the “primary basis of our love for the Sacred Heart”. Seen in this light, our oblation is not a question of pious formulas or personal inclinations, but an obligation flowing from what is most

fundamental in revelation, and as a demand of life, by force of love, of the Spirit acting in us and assimilating us to Jesus Christ in his love for the Father and for men. It is not a pious exercise, but the principle of all our life – prayer, work, suffering, joy (cf. n. 7). It is what determines our spiritual perspective; it is the prophetic witness we are called to give in the church and in the world of today.

4.3. Sacrifice for sins

238 Our oblation is reparatory, that is to say a union with Christ in his “neglected love” to “undo sin and the neglect of love in the church and in the world” (n. 7). For us, as for Fr Dehon, an understanding of reparation and of the nature of our oblation depends on our sensitivity to sin (n. 4) and “to what in the world of today stands as an obstacle to the love of the Lord” (n. 29).

239 Christ’s oblation is the oblation of the Son of God “for our sake” (2Cor 5,21). Ours is that of sons “caught up in sin” (n. 22), in union with Christ who was made sin and with sinful humanity, of which we are members. Because of this twofold union, our oblation is redemptive and reparatory.

240 We must study this in greater depth, if we do not wish to reduce oblation, participation in redemptive grace, to a mere abstraction or a pious formula. The living offering, holy and acceptable to God is first and necessarily a sacrifice.

241 The word sacrifice (*thusia*) appears in the quotation from Eph 5,2 (cf. n. 22) together with offering (*prospora*) and is to be understood not only in the moral and ascetical sense (mortification-sacrifice) but in a strictly theological sense.

242 Fr Dehon referred to the theology of sacrifice of the French School for the definitions of sacrifice, victim, oblation, immolation-destruction (cf. *Spiritual Directory* III, V, 1). Dealing with oblation, Fr Dehon liked to stress that it was an immolation, an oblation “in the spirit of love and of immolation. Chapter II of the old Constitutions bears the title: “De spiritu amoris et immolationis”. He devoted one of

his "Avis et Conseils" to "the spirit of victimhood in union with the Sacred Heart".

243 The reference to the opened side and devotion to the Heart of Jesus according to the apparitions of Paray-le-Monial must be understood in this sense and, whatever is thought of the terms used, the sacrificial dimension of reparatory oblation cannot be denied. Art. 24 of the new Constitutions underlines this by citing Col 1,24.

244 However Fr Dehon did not refer to the sacrifice-destruction of the French School. (Fr André Prévot included this in the 1908 edition of the Directory). SCJ immolation is oblation of love usque ad finem, as that of Jesus.

245 Our oblation is union with the oblation of Christ, "who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2,20), who gives his life (Jn 15,13) "to be the expiation for our sins" (1Jn 4,10). And the Ecce venio refers us to the Letter to the Hebrews, dedicated in a special way to Christ's priesthood and sacrifice, inviting us to look "to Jesus the pioneer and perfection of our faith" (Heb 12,2). As did Fr Dehon, so we too must live our earthly life by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us (cf. Gal 2,20). Throughout the whole text, the citations and references emphasize the sacrificial dimension of oblation: Gal 2,20 (n. 2), Mk 10,45 (n. 10), 1Pt 2,21 (n. 13), Rm 8,32 (n. 19), Heb 5,9 (n. 19), 1Jn 3, 16 (n. 21), Eph 5,2 (n. 22), Col 1,24 (n. 24).

246 Our oblation, in the "movement of redeeming love" (n. 21), is our "cooperation in his redeeming work" (n. 23) and "our sharing in the work of reconciliation" (n. 25) "at the service of the saving mission of the People of God in the world of today" (n. 27). Our mission, like that of Jesus, is rooted in our oblation and is therefore reparatory and redemptive. Paul's sacrificial oblation, his spiritual sacrifice was first and foremost his apostolic life. "For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son" (Rm 1,19). We too live our prophetic charism as a sacrifice "for a spiritual purpose recognized by the church" (n. 26) in a spirit of love and reparation, "that worship of love and reparation which his Heart desires" (n. 7).

5. The ways of union

247 “Faithfully listening to the Word and breaking the Bread...” (n. 17).

248 The ways of union are those of knowledge: “to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3,19, cit. n. 17).

249 Referring to this text, art. 17 speaks of “an ever deeper discovery of the person of Christ and the mystery of his Heart” and of proclaiming “his love which surpasses all understanding”.

250 It is clearly intended to stress the prophetic and apostolic perspectives of this discovery and knowledge, in full harmony with the context of Eph 3,7-9, where Paul speaks as “a minister according to the gift of God’s grace... to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things”.

251 The new Constitutions indicate many ways of this union with Christ in his love and oblation, the principle and center of our life.

252 Art. 17: Listening to and meditating the Word will be developed and specified in nn. 76-79. “We contemplate the love of Christ in the mysteries of his life” (n. 77), particularly in the mystery of the opened side (n. 21), and in the life of men, seeking out the signs of his presence (n. 23) with “a ready ear for the pleas the Father makes to us” (n. 35).

253 This way of contemplation helps us go forward in our knowledge of Jesus (n. 78), which will let us be renewed in intimacy with Christ and associate ourselves with his love for men (n. 79).

254 And we are exhorted to regularity in prayer (n. 76), to assure ourselves periods of silence and solitude (n. 79); the fidelity of each of us as well as of our communities and the fruitfulness of our apostolate depends on this (n. 76).

255 Sharing the Bread. This very important theme is developed in nn.

80-84. It is the source and culmination of our entire Christian and religious life (n. 80), the sacrifice in which we unite ourselves with Christ's perfect oblation (n. 81); the sacrament of his presence, through which we deepen our union with Christ's sacrifice (n. 83) and respond to that invitation to encounter and communion made to us by Christ in this supreme sign of his presence (n. 84).

256 Suffering, as "an exalted, mysterious communion with the sufferings and death of Christ" (n. 24).

257 Service of the brethren, as openness to love through which "we express our union with Christ" (n. 18) and "our communion with Christ present in the life of the world" (n. 22) and "after his example... in positive solidarity with mankind" (n. 29) "together with Christ and in Christ's own way" (n. 21) .