



DEHONIANS IN SOCIAL COMMITMENTS

The impact of God's love for our Society

INSTRUMENTUM LABORIS

IX General Conference
Rome, February 13-18, 2022
Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Dehonians)

Prayer for the IX General Conference

Father of love and goodness,
who offer us the Heart of your Son
as a source of love and reparation,
to you we entrust ourselves
as servants of mercy and reconciliation.
May your Spirit lead us
so that faithful to the charism of Father Dehon
we commit ourselves by presence and witness
to the call to go to the people.
Bless the IX General Conference so that
attentive to the cries, yearnings, and hopes of your people
we may be promoters of the creation of a more just,
fraternal, and supportive society.
Amen.

IX General Conference logo

- The base is an **OPEN BIBLE** symbolizing the Word of God. It is the foundation of our spiritual life and an important aspect of our General Conference. From this source, Father Dehon drank of the love of God. From meditation on the Scriptures Dehonians continue to draw strength for their mission of adoration and reparation, especially with the most vulnerable.
- In the **FLAMES OF LOVE** we see the love coming from the Word of God. It is the light of the Gospel that enflamed Father Dehon and continues to enflame us today. They represent the impact of God's love in our society.
- The symbol of **OMEGA** not only points us to the end (eschatology) but also symbolizes the coming of the Kingdom that Father Dehon worked for and that Dehonians continue through the mission of adoration and reparation. It is also the symbol of fullness.
- The **SCJ CROSS** is at the heart of the logo and shows us that we are bound by a common purpose: *Sint Unum* in the Heart of God.
- The **THREE POINTS** on the flames symbolize the mystery of Trinity.
- The **GREEN COLOR** of the omega arc expresses hope and refers to nature and our common home that we must take care of as part of our social commitment.
- The **CIRCLE** symbolizes the Eucharist which is the heart and summit of our faith.

Objectives of the IX General Conference

Objective 1:

To inspire Dehonians and Dehonian laity by the passion of Father Dehon for social justice and promote a renewal that this legacy is rooted in the contemplation of the love of the Sacred Heart.

Objective 2:

To rediscover our identity as Dehonians when engaged in social commitment.

Objective 3:

To pass on our heritage and to inspire the next generation of Dehonians and laity to engage in social commitments.

Guiding questions

- Share a story about how an encounter in your social ministry made you feel more Dehonian.
- Describe one way that Father Dehon's life inspires your social commitment to caring for the most defenseless and remedying the pastoral inadequacies of the Church in our time (cf. Cst 5).
- How do you unite "in an explicit way" your "religious and apostolic life with the reparatory oblation of Christ to the Father for people" (cf. Cst 6)?
- What are the three most pressing social needs in your area that call for greater Dehonian involvement and response?
- Share one idea to encourage and animate SCJ formation programs and the laity toward the social apostolate.

Love as the source of Father Dehon's social commitment

1. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." (1 John 4:16). Father Dehon intimately understood the depth of God's love revealed in the heart of Christ (cf. Cst 2) and worked untiringly to share God's love with others (Manzoni, 248 and McGuire, *Social Catholicism*, 17). He especially was attentive to the conditions of the lives of people of his time (cf. Cst 4). In particular, he worried about the lives of "those whose dignity was being exploited and degraded by the spread of industrialization." (Ledure, 6).

2. According to his *Spiritual Testament*, the Heart of Jesus is the wonderful treasure that he left us. For him, our purpose and our mission in the Church consist of showing the tender love of the Sacred-Heart (DSP 474-475). It is in this Heart that loved us so much and continues to love us that we can look back and draw strength. It is above all a testimony to the love of the Heart of Jesus for each of us.

3. Even as a young priest, Father Dehon was moved by social challenges, and tried to find just solutions to these social challenges. He was sensitive to the pressing needs and the social context of his time. Father Dehon's social commitment came after a profound reading of the Gospel in the light of the person of Christ, of the Open Heart – a wide-open window through which he saw the love and mercy God had for all humankind, especially for the poor and needy (cf. Cst 5). He understood that the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of the Heart of Jesus, in souls and in societies, must be achieved through concrete love and mercy. The motto for our Founder's social action, which was adapted from Pope Leo XIII, was: "Get out of the sacristies. Go to the people." (Perroux, 19, and Manzoni, 369).

Social actions & commitments of Father Dehon:

1872: Established the St. Joseph Youth Club to help young people to persevere in their Christian life; to instruct them in their religion and to encourage them to receive the sacraments. Besides helping young people in their faith journey, Father Dehon committed to providing these youngsters with a reprieve from their harsh lives. The Club was the place that these young people could be who they really were as opposed to being only wage earners, even if only for some brief moments.

1874: Set up an Office of Social Works to advocate for workers; to raising employers' awareness about their moral obligations and responsibilities toward their employees; and to build bridges between employees and employers. Father Dehon committed himself to remedy inequities. He empowered workers to "play a bigger role in achieving their aims according to the norms of social justice" (Manzoni, 369, and Perroux, 32). He made them aware of their rights and duties. Above all, he rebuilt the dignity of these workers so that they could be agents of their own history. In effect, Father Dehon became an apostle of social action.

1877: Established the St. John Institute to provide an educational component that had been lacking; to equip young people in the area with a "fishing pole instead of a fish",

so that they could reasonably and independently stand on their own. Through this educational institution, Father Dehon made the commitment to provide a long-term solution that had been beyond reach for those young people, to mold “committed Christian men who were capable of holding their own in the tumult of the world.” (Perroux, 41).

1888: Began to send missionaries to the most difficult places of the world beginning with the mission in Ecuador. Father Dehon committed to “go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.” (Mark 16:15).

1889: Published his magazine *The Reign of the Sacred Heart in Souls and Society* to review current social and political events as they unfolded in daily life, and call attention to progress being made and to the obstacles that remained (Perroux, 32). Father Dehon committed to making a clear connection between the spirituality of the Heart of Christ and the transformation of society.

1887-1901: Organized, together with the entrepreneur Leon Harmel, summer formation meetings for seminarians in Val-des-Bois. This signified a spirit of cooperation between priests and lay people (Manzoni, 377-378).

4. These indicative social commitments by Father Dehon are not exhaustive. They demonstrate how he was not indifferent to the social challenges. On the contrary, Father Dehon and his contemporaries turned these challenges into opportunities to become “defender(s) of the masses of workers whose dignity was not being respected” (Ledure, 47). Father Dehon had taken these opportunities to concretely express his “love for one another” (1 Peter 4:8), and like St. John, he loved, “not with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

5. Father Dehon’s concerns and dedication to social justice and human dignity is a part of our beautiful heritage. They are part of our charism. How have Dehonians continued this heritage and charism? What are Dehonian projects that show this charism in action?

Dehonian social commitments as a mission of adoration and reparation

6. Looking at the world today, we can see that there are many changes since Father Dehon’s times. Today’s challenges and dynamics are quite different. Despite these changes, we should not be blinded to the shocking conditions of the most vulnerable (material poverty, elderly people, young people without hope or future, loneliness...), which are depressingly similar to those that our Founder fought to change (*Fratelli tutti*, 115, 130, 155, 163). Father Dehon asked of us to go to the people, to understand their needs and challenges, and together with them find just solutions.

7. For Dehonians, the call of Father Dehon to go to the people in their times of need, is all about sharing the love of mercy of the Heart of Jesus. Father Dehon teaches us that daily masses, eucharistic adoration, the holy hour, etc... are practical forms of reparation. We draw strength from the Heart of Jesus through them. It is our source of energy, and it is in His Heart that we find strength for the fruitfulness of all our social commitments. Eucharistic adoration is “an

authentic service of the Church (cf. *Notes Quotidiennes*, 1.3.1893)” (Cst 31). According to Father Dehon, works of reparation in our apostolate show the love and mercy of God especially for the most vulnerable.

8. Dehonians have generally understood the message of our Founder. They consider eucharistic adoration and reparation as a mission of solidarity with the most vulnerable, and journey together with them. However, to live this social commitment today, Dehonians face many difficulties and challenges.

9. Within the culture, for example:

- Disappearance of traditional marriage and family, secularization and relativism, biotechnological revolution, gender questions.
- Migration and people displaced by war.
- Integral ecological crisis (water shortages, soil depletion, biodiversity crisis).
- Abuse crisis in the Church.
- Life issues (abortion, euthanasia, death penalty).
- Wealth gap between rich and poor.
- Accompanying young people who do not believe or have little faith in God.

10. Within the Congregation:

- Aging of old Entities and fast growth of new Entities.
- Cultural differences (multiculturalism).
- Lack of experience and specialization in this fast-changing reality.
- Being restrained in response by various reasons (legal, financial or time).
- Unfamiliarity or lack of acceptance of Father Dehon’s teachings regarding social commitments.
- Social missions carried out by individuals and not by the community.

11. Clearly the challenges are many and can overwhelm us. It is easy to walk away from our social commitment. However, Father Dehon faced many challenges in his time (McGuire, *Foundation*, 33). Despite seemingly unsurmountable difficulties, he faced them head-on with faith and courage. He intimately understood Jesus’ message “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). In searching the solutions to the problems, Father Dehon collaborated and journeyed together with people such as Leo Harmel. Today, we are continually challenged “as the People of God to take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and in their spirit.” (Pope Francis, *Letter*, introduction).

12. Nevertheless, we discover opportunities. If we can take advantage of them, we can continue the beautiful heritage and charism of our social missions and commitments. For example:

- Willingness to engage.

- Human resources.
- Diversity of experiences and expertise (old SCJs can teach young SCJs with their experiences in the past).
- Collaboration between the laity and religious.
- Dialogue between the individual and community.
- International networking between Entities.

13. We have seen reported challenges, and we have also seen opportunities. Taking both into account, each person and every Entity needs to ask how to appropriately respond to the social problems. We are reminded of Father Dehon’s perspective: “Our whole vocation, our purpose, our duty, our promises, are found in these words: *Ecce venio...*, *Ecce ancilla*” (Cst 6). His spirit of availability and willingness should be our compass and direction. Faithful to the message of our Founder, how have we, Dehonians, overcome challenges and obstacles so that social commitments are not lost?

Concrete activities and motivation for the next generation

14. As we look forward to the future, we can be assured that our world will continue to evolve. Old challenges will continue to exist, and new challenges will emerge. We journey together and encourage each other as we look forward to the future. How can concrete activities and the community support help the next generation to be committed to service in society “in the promotion of social justice, in the protection of human rights, and in caring for the Common home, etc.” (Synod, *Preparatory document*, 30)? It is a journey of companions side by side during this year of Synod. It is a journey together in the spirit of Father Dehon. “Who are the road companions, including those outside the ecclesial perimeter? What persons or groups are left on the margins, expressly or in fact?” (Synod, *Preparatory document*, 30).

15. We are grateful that technology and communication advances and globalization provide many possibilities for us to create a better world. During the time of the Covid 19 pandemic we have seen how these means of communication help humanity to build solidarity, economic development and simplify human life.

16. However, we do not close ourselves to negative effects such as technical problems, isolation, loneliness, and other human problems. As Pope Francis said, “The goal should not be that technological progress increasingly replaces human work, for this would be detrimental to humanity. Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development, and personal fulfilment. [...] The broader objective should always be to allow them a dignified life through work.” (*Laudato si'*, 128) Unfortunately, the rate of unemployment, and early “retirement” has been on the rise, and people are afraid it will become a normal reality: “For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all.” (*Fratelli tutti*, 7). Pope Benedict XVI was well aware of this phenomenon and stated in his Encyclical *Caritas in veritate*: “In many cases, poverty results from a *violation of the dignity of human work*, either because work opportunities are

limited [...] or ‘because a low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family’.” (*Cari-tas in veritate*, 63)

17. In this global situation, we are called to concrete and effective action. We are reminded of our obligation/responsibility: “Our religious life shares in the evolution, the trials and the search of the world and of the Church. And so, our life is constantly called into question. We are bound to re-think and to find a new expression for its mission, its forms of presence and of witness.” (Cst 147). We are asked to be available: availability to serve God and the Church; and availability to respond to challenges. Furthermore, the Constitutions calls us to be willing. The spirit of willingness should be possessed by each member of the Congregation. In addition, our Constitutions ask us to be adaptable and creative. We seek new forms of expression and witness in this constantly changing world. We want to be creative so that we can carry out social missions amidst challenges and difficulties.

18. The General Administration sees social commitments as a priority of our mission. The Congregation wants to strengthen the integration of young Dehonians in formation into our social commitment. We also want to take advantage of better networking, technological advancements and better means of communication. Therefore, it is very important to prepare younger members for social commitments. Our ministry for the most vulnerable of our society should also include our Dehonian brothers in need. This also implies better cooperation and solidarity between Entities and other religious communities.

19. It is up to each Entity to make plans of action according to the needs of each part of the Congregation. Perhaps the Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy can serve as words of encouragement: “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7). It is true that God does not give us the spirit of fear and timidity. He gives us the power to do what we can to make this world a better place for ourselves and those who come after us.

20. Despite these challenges and difficulties, we are invited to take up new paths of hope: “For God continues to sow abundant seeds of goodness in our human family. [...] Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, it can open up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile.” (*Fratelli tutti*, 54-55). We either face these challenges head-on, trusting that God will accompany us in our commitment, or we allow ourselves to be paralyzed by these difficulties. We need to learn from the past and present about how we can recognize, identify, and deal with these challenges if we want to engage and achieve our goals of social commitment: “Let us continue, then, to advance along the paths of hope.” (*Fratelli tutti*, 55).

Resources

Congregational website for information and responses to the Conference questions: <https://www.dehoniani.org>

Father Dehon's original writings: <http://www.dehondocsoriginals.org> and translations: <http://www.dehondocsinternational.org>

Dedicated email for IX General Conference: confgen22@dehoniani.org

[Quotations in the text correspond to the English versions of the cited works]

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