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Rereading the Constitutions (I)

DEHONIAN STUDIES



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

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In his letter on February 2, 2021, our Superior General invited the entire Congregation to take a fresh look at Fr. Albert Bourgeois as Superior General for the renewal of the Congregation in the spirit of Vatican II. The Constitutions are the fruit of this renewal and on March 14, 2022 we will commemorate the 40th anniversary of their approval. One initiative we are promoting is the presentation of a "Reading Guide" of constitution numbers 1-39 that Fr. Bourgeois wrote in 1982. This text existed here and there in various formats, and now we can share it with the entire congregation in five languages. The merit of this "Reading Guide" consists first of all in the authoritativeness of Fr. Bourgeois because of his closeness to the process of elaborating the Constitutions. This Reading Guide does not comment on each individual issue, but offers an overall view, identifying internal dynamics and references, thus bringing out its foundations and

values.

Forty years have passed and yet this text remains a very rich reading for those who wish to penetrate the spirit of the Constitutions.

“The Reading Guide” will be published in several installments. The first is dedicated to the historical and theological context of the birth of our Constitutions

I. The Text

1. The new Constitutions

22 Without going into too many details, it will help our understanding of the text to have some knowledge of the main stages in its composition. The introduction to the provisional edition of 1980, “A Renewal Adapted to Circumstances”, gives a brief outline. Fuller information can be found in the Acts of the chapters and conferences (*Documenta X-XII*, especially Doc X, the opening address of the 2nd general conference, pp. 15-18). The printed matter issued for the immediate information of members of the congregation also gives many particulars.

1.1. The itinerary

23 In the first place it should be noted that this revision, or rather recasting – for it is considerably more than a simple retouching – is not the result of a personal initiative or that of a more or less avant-garde group intent upon change. It was undertaken at the church’s direction, as in 1902 and 1923, but in a much wider sense, according to the conciliar orientations and the call for *aggiornamento*.

24 The way was long and complex: 12 years of reflection, three general chapters (covering a total of 7-8 months), a most

comprehensive survey scientifically prepared and carried out (CIRIS, 1970-71), two general conferences (1969 and 1976), numerous meetings, discussions, publications and so forth.

25 In was a journey made in stages, not in confusion for sure, but nevertheless without any predetermined and fixed plan. There was no basic schema provided by the Holy See, as in 1902 and 1923, there was no model, but only general directions regarding the nature and content of the document, as well as the means and time for its realization.

26 Thus every moment was lived and every stage covered, if not for itself, at least according to the psychological, social, spiritual and ecclesial situation, following the evolution of outlooks and circumstances during those 12 years.

1.2. The stages

27 1966-1967. Four months of capitular meetings in two sessions divided by a year of work in inter-capitular commissions. This was a time of feverish research, somewhat unskilled, but certainly not without dedication and general ferment. A new awareness dawned in the light of the Council: identity of the congregation, widespread aspirations of members, communities and provinces for a renewal of spirit, lifestyle and internal organization; and particularly, in respect of ecclesial involvement in general, a clearer definition of the institute's character and apostolic mission.

28 *Documenta VII*, a little long-winded but rich from all aspects, are the result of this long reflection, carried into the 1969 conference (cf. Doc VIII) and summarized in the "Capitular Directives" then published.

29 1972-1973. The preparation and holding of the XVI general chapter. The period was one of general social, political and ecclesial unrest. In most provinces, it was a time of crisis or at least of great tensions, as was evident from both the preparatory provincial chapters and the difficulty experienced in getting the general chapter under way.

30 On this matter see the Acts of the chapter (Doc IX) and particularly the six important preliminary questions posed at the beginning of the deliberations (pp. 20-21). Finally, after three days of discussions on justice in the world in relation to our religious life (theme of the previous bishops' synod of 1971), the plan prepared by the commissions on the Constitutions was put aside and work began on drawing up the *Rule of Life*.

31 After considerable debate a text was eventually drawn up and passed by a large majority. In general, it was well received throughout the congregation.

32 1979. At the XVII chapter the atmosphere was relatively calm, thanks to a certain steadying and maturing that had taken place in the provinces. It was generally felt that there was need of a fresh impetus for a profound renewal, for a religious, spiritual and apostolic life supported by a kind of ongoing formation. The revision of the 1973 *Rule of Life* aimed at a more explicit and deeper "dehonzation", in accordance with the wishes and proposals of the provincial chapters, both as to the general plan as well as particular amendments. The watchword was to make Fr Dehon's charism fruitful according to the needs of the church and the world.

33 In this regard the celebration of the congregation's centenary (1978) played an important part as a providential occasion for going back to the sources and engaging in a deeper reflection.

1.3. Observations

34 This brief summary of course cannot describe the experience of individuals, groups and the whole congregation. However, some observations can be made.

35 The text that the chapter has given us is the result of continuous work, carried out at different levels, through information, inquiries, reflection and practice. Considering the whole journey, we find the life of the congregation not a dead or dying body, but one that is alive and wishes to live; with its knocks, its voids, its dullness and disquiet, but

also with an organic life continuous in its renewal. A comparison of *Documenta VII* (Capitular Directives) and the 1979 Constitutions reveals continuity, but at the same time purification and greater clarity. There are some key words and values with which members of the congregation and communities have always identified and felt themselves united. It has been the experience of the reality and value of an SCJ spirit, or at least an SCJ sensitivity.

36 Although we were not aware of it until afterwards, all along the way we were accompanied by the action of the Holy Spirit, guiding and inspiring our human efforts, both individual and community, bound up with events and situations, directing and adapting development, overcoming differences, giving coherence and cohesion. Despite our lack of skill, and especially during the critical days of 1973, his presence and guidance can be seen. Paragraph 15 of the new Constitutions in its own way gives witness to this particular moment of our life and religious history: "Beginning with its original grace, it continues to grow, drawing nourishment from what the church, illuminated by the Spirit, never ceases to draw out from its treasury of faith".

37 In this way, according to an expression that I shall explain, our new Constitutions are for us a sort of Deuteronomy, our Deuteronomy (cf. nr 417-479).

2. New Constitutions

38 These Constitutions are certainly new as far as their literary form is concerned no more than a fleeting glance is needed to confirm this. It is not poetry, to be sure; but the new layout is surprising and perhaps may not appeal to those who would have preferred the old format.

39 However, the newness goes much deeper than this superficial aspect.

2.1 Content

40 Firstly the content reveals a union of juridical and practical norms with spiritual elements.

41 Of the first 39 articles here under consideration, only one (n. 8) is strictly juridical, while those on ecclesial mission and apostolic enterprises are partly so. The rest, on the other hand, are more doctrinal and exhortatory.

42 Here we should bear in mind the two directives of the Holy See in respect of the revision of constitutions:

- distinguish the fundamental code (Constitutions), which must contain what is considered stable and constitutive of the institute's nature and life, and the complementary code (directory, custom, etc.), which is always subject to change according to time and place;
- unite the juridical and spiritual elements in the fundamental code, avoiding a text that is merely juridical or purely exhortatory (cf. ES, 11, 12-14, 1967).

43 It is of historic interest that there was a certain fusion of the juridical and spiritual elements in our first Constitutions (1885-86). But from 1902, with the introduction of the Latin Constitutions drawn up in accordance with the directives of the Holy See, this practically disappeared. From that time on we had the juridical elements in the Constitutions and the spiritual in the Directory. The repercussions of this dichotomy were felt in the life of the congregation.

44 This new conception and presentation gives us a text that is not merely perceptive, but also inspirational. The integration assures the juridical norms a doctrinal and spiritual foundation, as well as giving the spiritual orientations a certain constitutive character, which they did not have in the *Spiritual Directory*. The text of the Constitutions, our new fundamental code, together with the *General Directory*, our complementary code, form our *Rule of Life*, as decided at the 1979 chapter.

2.2. Doctrinal context

45 But more than the material content and literary form, it is the doctrinal context or atmosphere that is the principal new element in the Constitutions.

46 Regarding the doctrinal context, Vatican II outlined some general principles for adaptation and renewal:

- the gospel teaching as the ultimate norm of the religious life and the highest rule of all institutes;
- fidelity to the founders' spirit and special aims, as well as to the sound traditions, all of which make up the patrimony of each institute;
- sharing in the life of the church and its undertakings and aims in matters biblical, liturgical, dogmatic, pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social,
- adequate knowledge of social conditions of the times and of current events.
- real spiritual renewal of individuals and communities (cf. PC 2).

47 Reference to the life of the church and contemporary world, as well as to the founder's spirit, if not entirely new, was given new emphasis for adaptation and renewal. This is what was meant by the term dynamic fidelity, which came into our vocabulary during the 1967 preparatory reflection, to be used again in connection with the 1973 *Rule of Life* and then in 1979 for the revision and drawing up of the Constitutions themselves.

48 All this must be kept in mind and verified in studying and explaining the text, in its literary form and internal dynamic, as well as in regard to the pedagogical approach for presenting the founder's charism and experience, with which the Constitutions begin (nn. 1-5). The text continues with our experience (nn. 6-8) and various themes regarding SCJ religious and apostolic life: oblation, abandonment,

adoration, reparation and, of course, whatever concerns the vows, community life and the institute's apostolic mission.

49 Reference to the founders' spirit and special aims is meaningfully stressed by the initial description of Fr Dehon's vision of faith. It is at the origin of what is called the congregation's spirit and particular character in its general doctrinal, spiritual and apostolic orientations.

50 For this reason the general chapter decided to reprint the first two chapters of the old Latin text (1902-1956) as an appendix to the new Constitutions. According to Fr Dehon, these were substantially faithful to the 1885 French text, which he regarded as the congregation's fundamental charter.

51 Of course we must bear in mind that these two chapters can no longer be read in the preconciliar light of 1956. Our fidelity must be dynamic. The 1979 Constitutions therefore aim at re-reading them in the new post-conciliar light.

52 The principle of dynamic fidelity is formulated by our text.

- Regarding the religious life: "For each one of us, for our communities, the religious life is a developing thing. Beginning with its original grace, it continues to grow, drawing nourishment from what the church, illuminated by the Spirit, never ceases to draw out from its treasury of faith" (n. 15).

- Regarding our spiritual life as Priests of the Sacred Heart; living in accordance with the founder's charism is entering into a movement of life, which necessarily has a history; it is "a common approach to the mystery of Christ under the guidance of the Spirit, and a particular conscience of what, in the unfathomable riches of this mystery, finds an echo in the experience of Fr Dehon and our elders" (n. 16).

53 Finally we note the great frame that surrounds the whole text of the new Constitutions.

- The congregation "has the task of bringing this charism to fruition having regard to the needs of the church and of the world" (n. 1).

– “Our religious life shares in the evolution, trials and searching of the world and of the church. It is therefore subject to constant questioning. We have to re-examine and find new expression for its mission, the manner in which it is present in the world, and the form of its testimony... (It demands) openness of heart and mind to embrace God’s own TO-DAY” (n. 144).

54 In all these articles, the twofold mention of the church and the Spirit happily expresses what gives this dynamic fidelity its guarantee, not only ecclesiastical or ecclesial, but also charismatic and authentic.

2.3 Pedagogical approach

55 A final novelty of the new Constitutions is the way in which they are presented, or to be more precise, their pedagogical approach.

56 The text has a logical development, which can be clearly seen simply by going through the Table of Contents.

57 There are five parts, which more or less correspond to the traditional divisions:

- definition or description of our SCJ religious life under its different aspects: its spirit (1-39); profession of the evangelical counsels and community life (40-85);
- initiation to our religious life (entry and formation in the institute, 86-106);
- government and administration (107-143).

58 But what is more striking is the formulation of titles and subtitles; especially in the first two divisions (1-85) they make up a sort of continuous phrase.

59 I. Faithful to the founder’s charism (1-8)... II. In the footsteps of Christ... in the service of the kingdom (9-39)... continuing the community of the disciples (40-85).

60 The subtitles follow a similar pattern. Instead of the usual word or phrase summarizing the theme to be developed by means of definitions and deductions (e.g. *De fine congregationis, De spiritu amoris et immolationis*), we find part of a phrase that expresses the beginning of a movement or action. Obviously, this is not meant to be just a literary device, but rather a method; it is what I have called the pedagogical approach.

61 This approach enables us to arrive at the nature and purpose of the congregation, as well as our obligations, not through a process of deduction from ideas and definitions (e.g. regarding devotion to the Sacred Heart, oblation and reparation) but from experience itself, the founder's and our own, by a procedure that could be called existential or experiential.

62 This change of approach began in 1967. We no longer spoke of SCJ values to be maintained and lived, but of fidelity to the founder's prophetic mission, of an effort to identify and relive his basic attitudes, recapturing the very movement of his spiritual, mystical and apostolic life (cf. Doc VII, nn. 2-8).

63 A vital link was found between the founder's experience, his specific aims, the purpose of the congregation and its means of action. This is gathered from expressions such as the following: "Fr Dehon wanted..." (n. 6), "Fr Dehon expected his religious...", (n. 7), "We, the disciples of Fr Dehon, would like..." (n. 17), "Like our founder... we determine to play our part" (n. 32). It is evident that the intention was to put aside theoretical formulas and definitions, and provide an inspirational text, which could serve as a *Rule of Life* and not a mere collection of juridical and practical norms.

64 This explains the frequent descriptive and exhortatory formulas. Starting from facts – Fr Dehon's experience, our vision of faith, the life of the congregation in its tradition and mission seen today according to the needs of the church and of the world – norms of life are elucidated and an institutional framework determined, which accomplishes the ecclesial integration of our life and community.

65 From experience to law and from law to experience there is a sort of dialectic of life and of the institution, which is undoubtedly the most interesting and most original characteristic of the new formulation. It is precisely this that, in this fundamental code, lets us foresee and integrate into the movement of profound fidelity the possibility and even necessity of constant renewal and a “continual conversion... to embrace God’s own TO-DAY” (n. 144).

3. Literary structure

66 The essential lines of structure and logical development can easily be seen by glancing at the Table of Contents.

3.1. The first two chapters

67 However, Chapters I and II (nn. 1-85) are worth being considered separately since they form what we could call Part I of the Constitutions, on our religious life, its nature, spirituality and forms.

68 Firstly we should note three changes in the order of articles between the 1973 text and that of 1979.

- Attentive to the pleas of the world: nn. 9-10 (1973), nn. 36-37 (1979).
- United with Christ in his love and his oblation to the Father: nn. 47-55 (1973), nn. 16-25 (1979).
- Inversion of order between community life and vows: 27-41/17-26 (1973), 40-58/59-84 (1979).

69 There are not just formal changes for editorial purposes; they respond to serious questions concerning the concept of the religious life, not only canonical but also theological, as well as the pedagogy on formation and the congregation’s mission in the church, as will be seen.

70 The general structure and logical development of this part (1-85) are as follows:

- 1-8: Origin, nature and purpose of the congregation considered from the very beginning, the founder's experience and specific aims.
- 9-39: Meaning, spirit and mission of the SCJ religious life in the church and world today (identity, spirituality, mission).
- 40-85: Principal constitutive elements of our religious life as such:
 - profession of evangelical counsels (40-58);
 - Community life in its different dimensions (59-85).

71 However, underlying this general structure there is another one discernable in the two chapters, whose titles clearly indicate the continuity: "Faithful to the founder's charism... in the footsteps of Christ". We are called to follow Christ by relating to the founder's experience and charism.

72 Faithful to the founder's charism, we are:

- religious: 1. The congregation brought into being and sent forth by the Spirit (n.1);
- SCJs: 2. Faithful to Fr Dehon's vision (nn. 2-5);
- for the apostolate: 3. At the service of the church (nn. 6-7);
- in community: 4. Set in a community of love (n. 8).

73 In the footsteps of Christ we are:

- religious: A1. Our own vision of faith in Christ (n. 9); A2. Witnesses to the primacy of the Kingdom (nn.10-15);
- SCJs: A3. United with Christ in his love and his oblation to the Father (nn.16-25)
- for the apostolate: A4. Sharing in the church's mission (nn. 26-34); A5. Attentive to the pleas of the world (nn. 35-39)

– in community: B1. Called to profess the beatitudes (nn. 40-58); B2. Called to live in community (nn. 59-79).

74 Because of their particular role in our life, the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary were included.

– B3. Faithful to the breaking of bread (nn. 80-84).

– B4. With the Virgin Mary (n. 85).

75 In fact the articles on the Eucharist also belong to the community life, as the third element of the Christian common life mentioned in the Acts (2, 42), which is cited. On the other hand, the importance of Eucharistic adoration in the congregation's ecclesial mission (cf. n. 31) would suggest that Eucharistic cult be in some way incorporated in the part dealing with mission.

76 Dividing the whole into three parts (1-8, 9-39, 40-85), we see the first two are concerned specifically with the congregation's charism and identity. The third deals with the nature and practice of the religious life in general, which of course in every congregation bears the mark of its charism and identity.

77 Articles 1-39, that is the first two parts, practically correspond to the first two chapters of the old Constitutions (nn. 1-13):

– I. De fine congregationis.

– II. De spiritu amoris et immolationis.

78 The development and spiritual application of these two chapters, juridical in character and formulation, was found in the *Spiritual Directory*.

79 For this reason articles 1-39 of the new Constitutions are worthy of particular attention to test our fidelity to Fr Dehon's advice contained in his spiritual testament. "We must never lose sight of our end and mission in the church, as they are presented in the first two chapters of the Constitutions".

80 **N.B.** These two chapters were only a more juridical formulation

of the first chapter of the 1885 French Constitutions, entitled “But et esprit de la Société”. For these texts, see M. Denis, *Le Projet du P. Dehon*, STD n. 4, pp. 8-14, 124-135.

3.2. Articles 1-39

3.2.1. Schema

81 The structure and movement is easy enough to make out.

- Faithful to the founder’s charism (1-8). Fr Dehon’s vision of faith gave birth to the congregation (2-5). From this experience, the institute derived its particular character at the service of the church (6-7), with a definite canonical status (8).
- In the footsteps of Christ (9-39). Our own vision of faith and our SCJ religious life.
 - Art. 9-15: “with all our fellow Christians” (cf. 9 and 13), we live in faith, so as to attain to holiness and bring to fruition our religious vocation, as a particular gift and engagement to follow Christ by professing to strive after perfect charity.
 - Art. 16-25: “the principle and center of our lives”, the modes of our life of union with Christ in the mystery of his Heart, with an oblation lived in availability and solidarity (cf. 18 and 21) and by associating ourselves with the “movement of redeeming love” (21), in accordance with the different forms of a reparatory vocation (22-25).
 - Art. 26-39: “Our prophetic charism” is at the service of the church’s mission (26-34) in the world of today (35-39).

82 The concluding phrases of the last two sections are particularly meaningful:

- Art. 25 “to the delight and glory of God”.
- Art. 39 “to the coming of the new humanity in Jesus Christ”.

83 This analysis will be useful in providing clarity that will assist a first reading. At the same time, there is still the risk that it could lead to misinterpreting the text, by distinguishing, superimposing and emphasizing the baptized and religious vocation on one hand and spirituality and mission on the other. Reflecting on our vision of faith and our spiritual life, we must take care to correct the first impression.

3.2.2. An existential approach

84 The reference to experience, as I have noted, gives a certain rhythm to the text. From Fr Dehon's vision of faith (n. 2) to our own vision of faith with all our fellow Christians (n. 9) in what "finds an echo in the experience of Fr Dehon and our elders" (n. 16). This reference gives the whole a sort of internal dynamic, a movement whose times and moments are easily recognizable, as a new structure, both vital and literary, which offers a more logical reproduction of the first (cf. 3.2.).

85 The sections are distinctly marked in the three introductory articles, 9, 16, 26, by the participles: initiated, called, consecrated. These describe the movement from initiation to the Good News of Jesus Christ, committing us unreservedly "to the coming of the new humanity in Jesus Christ" (n. 39).

86 In these three articles, there is also a threefold reference:

- to the person and mystery of Christ, experienced in faith, love and gift;
- to the church as the place and means of our initiation, vocation and consecration;
- to the Spirit, through the confession of faith, the spiritual life and the spiritual perspective that characterizes the service of our prophetic charism.

87 These three references, together with some others such as the Kingdom, the world, humanity, can be found throughout the whole text in regard to various subjects. Undoubtedly, a good understanding

of these Constitutions presupposes serious reflection on Christology and ecclesiology, as well as the Holy Spirit. A purely devotional approach is no longer sufficient.

3.2.3. A dialogic dynamic

88 In the three sections dedicated respectively to the experience of Fr Dehon; our baptismal faith and our SCJ religious life, the description follows two parallel paths:

- Art. 2-3, 10-12, 19-21, which describe initiation, encounter, discovery of Jesus Christ, who is call and vocation.
- Art. 4-5/6-7, 13-14, 17-18/ 22-24/26-39, which describe the spiritual and apostolic response in which, for Fr Dehon and us, our prophetic charism is exercised and our ecclesial mission is accomplished.

89 There is a sort of movement or dialogic dynamic, which, according to J. Mouroux, is essentially the dynamic of Christian spiritual experience. This is “an act or a combination of acts by which man experiences a relationship with God” or more precisely “the act of a person making himself available to God who calls him”. Religious experience is “the consciousness of this answer to God’s call, the experience of this contact through giving, the discovery of the divine presence in the ‘yes’ that brings us into it” (Mouroux, J., *L’expérience chrétienne*, p. 26). This definition will help us understand the dynamic of our text and also its literary structure.

90 At this point it would be useful to consider what exactly is meant by faith experience, Christian spiritual experience, or at least single out the elements of a theology of experience: its nature, its possibility, the awareness one has of it, the great examples of spiritual experience in the scriptures and the lives of the saints, the structural lines of such an experience, and so forth. They are very important matters for a sound idea and also for authenticity of a life of faith and love. In addition to Mouroux’s book, *L’expérience chrétienne. Introduction a une théologie* (coll. Théologie 26), see Dictionnaire de

Spiritualité IV, col. 2004-2026, and Urs von Balthasar, *La gloire et la croix*, I Apparition, pp. 185-360 (Théologie 61).

3.2.4. Eschatological perspective

91 In many subjects treated in the text we find formulas of an eschatological nature.

– Thus, regarding Christ’s mission: “... when in Jesus God will be all in all” (n. 10). This is echoed by the two Pauline citations that follow: Rm 8,22-23, 1Cor 15,28.

– And particularly regarding our life of love and reparation: “... will be fully manifest when all will be brought together in Christ” (n. 20); “... through our sharing in the work of reconciliation, bring healing to humanity, gather it together in the body of Christ” (n. 25); “... the fullness of the Kingdom” (n. 29); “... the coming to the new humanity in Jesus Christ” (n. 39).

92 The seventh chapter of *Lumen Gentium* deals explicitly with “the eschatological nature of the pilgrim church and its union with the heavenly church”, as the horizon of the whole life of the church and of the religious life in particular. The text of our Constitutions follows this line. This is typical of the proposed renewal we were striving after; in fact the eschatological dimension, which is essentially ecclesial, apostolic and prophetic, was hardly present in the congregation’s official documents and other texts dealing with our spirituality. Even in the Directory, reference to the Holy Spirit and the church is rather rare.

93 In some way we are invited to live our spiritual and apostolic life in a new theological context in which the words and notions of union, oblation, abandonment and reparation take on their full meaning, as also adoration, our ministries and especially reference and devotion to the Heart of Jesus Christ.

4. Conclusion

94 I have put forward these observations not as matters of literary interest, but because they concern the foundation, the intentions and the inspiration of the new Constitutions. Some important themes or rather great theological realities – Christ, the church, the Spirit, eschatology – form general reference points for particular themes regarding our experience and our SCJ religious life, according to a renewal adapted to the life of the church in such fields as the biblical, dogmatic, pastoral, etc., in harmony with the third criterion set down in PC 2.

95 Further, there is a generous intermingling of quotations and explicit references which give the text its atmosphere (cf. 10, 12, 16, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 29, 38, 39), an atmosphere of Paul's captivity epistles and particularly Colossians and Ephesians, including the famous hymns of Col 1,12-20 and Eph 1,3-14.

96 The hymn from Ephesians would be a good opening meditation – like that of the “Principium et Fundamentum” at the beginning of the Exercises of Ignatius Loyola – to enter the atmosphere of renewal and adaptation, which is that of our new Constitutions. Fr Dehon himself would undoubtedly like this way of penetrating his spirit, a way that harmonizes well with “his temperament and grace” (cf. his reflection on the Exercises, NHV IV, 125).