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The man of renewal

PAGES OF HISTORY



Biography of Fr. Albert Bourgeois, scj
January 30, 1921 - November 21, 1992

“I entrust myself to you, my Lord and Master, for all that you want to ask of me or impose upon me, be they internal or external trials, for all that concerns my future and my apostolate, my duties, my responsibilities, my ministry, that I humbly accept, without undue emphasis on my personal inability, unless it is obvious.”

A childhood of deprivation

Father Albert Bourgeois was born on January 30, 1921 in Jandelaincourt, near Nancy, France. He was seven when his father died of tuberculosis; and only three years later he also lost his mother.

As a child he therefore knew very early on the suffering and difficulties of a poor working-class family.

In 1931 he began secondary school at the San Clemente Institute, an apostolic school (minor seminary) in Fayet near San Quentin, which Father Dehon founded in 1882. The school was then transferred to Viry-Châtillon, near Paris. In this school at the age of 16 he made the decision to enter the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The years of preparation and responsibility

He made his first religious profession in Amiens on September 29, 1938. After studying philosophy and theology in Dijon, Uriage and Lyon, he was ordained a priest on July 6, 1947. Let's look at a text from his personal diary, a page that he wrote at the beginning of his retreat for priestly ordination (June 29 – July 6 1947):

"The grace of being a Priest of the Sacred Heart.
Retreat before priestly ordination. Enter into the retreat as into a sanctuary where great things take place. Alone, and yet surrounded by presences. Collected and yet the soul open to this flow, to this feeling of silence. Unsure, and yet happy, open and aware of my personal weakness, yet strong in the power of the Lord. A deep feeling: astonishment; something that is hard to believe: me, a priest? One certainty: the importance of this retreat, and on the other hand, it's futility, if I do not perceive of myself as a priest, at every moment, essentially a priest. It is a question of fidelity, of happiness, of utility, but above all of love. The sole grace to ask for is: to be a priest of the Sacred Heart; not just any priest, not just in any case, but to the point of being totally possessed and immolated at every moment. Here is all: Christ, God and souls, ideal and reality; everything of which the love of God is made of."

After obtaining a degree in literature, for ten years he devoted himself entirely to the mission of educator and professor. The first years of his priestly activity were dedicated to Dehonian formation, first as a teacher and then as rector of the seminary. In 1960 he became Provincial Superior of the French Province of the Congregation in a period of notable flowering in the life of the Congregation. He was Superior of the SCJ Scholasticate of Lyon when, on June 6, 1967, he was elected to the office of Superior General. On June 8, after his acceptance, he was officially declared Superior General, succeeding Father Joseph Antony De Palma and assuming the office of president of the Chapter.

It was as president of the second session of the XV Chapter that Father Bourgeois began his service as Superior General of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This responsibility brought him many difficulties, above all because of the often divergent options for proposals for updating the Congregation. Father Bourgeois suffered from it,

“but by his balance, by his spirit of faith and love for the Church and for the Congregation, he was able to find proper solutions for the good of the whole”.

In the address at the end of the XV Chapter he already affirmed his faith in the vitality of the Congregation, called to bear witness in the Church to a true and consistent love:

“The Heart of Jesus is the gateway to the mystery of the Church, for us as for Fr. Dehon. If, after Vatican II, we perhaps have a clearer and broader conception of the dimension of this mystery than that which Fr. Dehon could have after Vatican I, it is the same dynamic movement which leads us from Heart of Jesus to the Church and continually brings us back from the Church to a better appreciation of the call that Christ addresses to us”.

**“ - a renewal of the conception of religious life and of the characteristic features of our spirituality as a function of both consecration and mission;
- a renewal of our forms of community life and organization, according to a more evangelical conception of human relationships and the nature and function of authority.
- a renewed awareness of the demands of our apostolic objectives, and above all the inspiration which should animate all our activities.
These are the three main points of our Chapter reflection, which must inform the appropriate renewal of the Institute”.**

The Council had just ended, and a delicate period began for religious congregations to update their charism and their expressions of life and apostolate. Father Bourgeois carried out this task for twelve years with a responsibility and breadth of vision that distinguished him. They were difficult years for society and for the Church, and moreover, they were years dedicated to updating the Constitutions according to Vatican Council's new guidelines.

In 1973, the XVI Chapter re-elected Father Albert Bourgeois for a new six-year term, and he finished his mandate as Superior General on June 6, 1979.

During this long period, he did everything possible to inspire his action towards the “great axes” already proposed by Chapter XV and then, even more clearly and consciously, by the XVI Chapter. This was certainly a very heavy task, but it was precisely in this way that he was able to maintain the Congregation in a clear and consistent fidelity to the charism of the Founder. At the same time, he was very open to the action of the Spirit and to the signs of the times.

Therefore, he said in his opening address of the XVI Chapter, that

“We need the power of God, the mind and the wisdom or rather the foolishness of Christ. For us Priests of the Sacred Heart, it is folly of the heart. We cannot allow this ‘folly’ of love and imitation of Our Lord to be banished from among us. From the Heart of Christ to the Heart of the world, from the Heart of the world to the Heart of Christ, the paths may be different, but the ultimate reference can only be one, and this is what matters above all, provided it be authentic, authentically wanted and sought after”.

From here came the urgency to reflect on the challenges and expectations of the times and to discern the line of a dynamic fidelity that would allow the Congregation to remain, in the history of the Church, “a living reality”.

Father Bourgeois wrote very simple circular letters, solely for the purpose of maintaining relationships of communion and friendship with the communities of the Congregation, especially letters written on the occasion of the feasts of Christmas or the Sacred Heart. But he did not hesitate to also write letters on topics of capital importance for the spirit and life of the Congregation. It can truly be said that almost all the burning post conciliar issues were addressed by Father Albert Bourgeois in the circulars.

In letter 35, published in 1977, on the occasion of the centennial of the Congregation (1877-1977), Father Bourgeois writes that an opportunity to look at our past and admire its development and growth continues:

“One hundred years, historians and sociologists tell us, is often for institutions – and especially religious institutions – a crucial age. For individuals, a ‘critical age’, according to the good old popular expression. The lines of development are altered, changes occur in the tissues, and slowly a new rhythm of life is imposed. Biological comparisons, however, have only relative value when it comes to spiritual life, and the institutions themselves reveal resources for renewal and rejuvenation that neither flesh, blood, bones, nor nerves manifest. It is, in any case, it is certainly not up to biologists, historians or sociologists, to optimists, pessimists or ‘realists’ – that we will ask for the last word on the present and the future of our hundred year old Congregation. But it is to the Holy Spirit that our Rule of Life refers us; He who was in the beginning (n.1), always remains the point of reference for our history and for our fidelity (nn.47-48), because we are ‘certain of the unfailing fidelity of God’: because we want to be ‘rooted in the love of Christ’; and in ‘openness of heart and of attitude to welcome the «today» (this day) of God.’ (n.57)”.

A simple and wise man

At the end of his mandate, Father Albert Bourgeois remained in Rome. He continued to make his valuable contribution to updating Dehonian life and committed himself even more to studying the writings and charism of Father Dehon, as well as the history and spirituality of the Congregation. In this way, in the last period of his life (1979-1992) he

managed to publish several studies on the results of his research.

A simple man, tending towards goodness and modesty, a tireless and methodical worker, an example of a life of prayer. The Congregation of Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus will remember him with affection and gratitude, giving him the credit for the success in the updating he pushed firmly, with wisdom and dynamic fidelity. A witness says of him:

"It is while thinking of the years spent together, in Neussargues, in Lyon, in Rome and in Paris, that I say these few words of testimony; above all to nourish our prayer, and confirm our thanksgiving, in this celebration of the Eucharist. What I want to emphasize above all about our friend, our brother, is the deep unity, consistency and transparency of his life. His very rich human qualities, a rich and cultivated intelligence, an indefatigable zeal for work, an extreme discretion especially in circumstances of difficult responsibility, his simplicity, his joy, and the ability to communicate it (his laughter was well known to us, we expected it!), and his uprightness and serious approach to all that was entrusted to him. Our brother constantly invested these precious human qualities, and with what generosity, in the service of the One who had called him from his youth to religious and priestly life. Through his many and varied tasks, as a much-loved teacher and true educator, as superior of the province and then of the Congregation, we have known in all this a Father Bourgeois always present and fervent, open-minded and deeply faithful. Above all, he was the religious, the providential superior for our Congregation, at a delicate moment in our journey. He was able to emphasize the essential: our vocation as a loving response to Love. He vigorously helped us to rediscover joy and dynamism around the grace of our origins here in Saint-Quentin. And he gave a lot of himself: tireless, always at work, studying, writing, preaching, meditating and helping us to meditate with competence and enthusiasm on Father Dehon's faith experience, and through that faith, the unfathomable richness of the Heart of Christ. Yes all of this cost him

Dehon. It is joy and gratitude that prevails in the presence of our brother. Thank you Father Bourgeois. And with you, we thank the Lord for all that He has filled us with through you”.

On the afternoon of Saturday November 21, 1992, Father Albert Bourgeois, the sixth Superior General, died in Paris after a long illness. He was buried in Saint-Quentin.

His writings

Among his numerous publications, certainly in the first place we must mention the voluminous commentary on the Constitutions: Notre Règle de Vie. Un Itinéraire, Studia Dehoniana series n. 15, in three volumes.

Also in the Studia Dehoniana series, Father Bourgeois again published:

n. 13: The Constitutions of the Priests of the Sacred Heart; Reader's Guide (nn. 1-39), 1985;

n. 14: Les Notes Quotidiennes du P-Dehon- Avant propos à une édition, 1985;

n. 16: Pour une théologie de la charité et de la vie d'amour, 1990;

n. 23: L'expérience spirituelle du Père Dehon, 1990;

n. 25.1: Le Père Dehon and the Règne du Coeur de Jésus, 1990;

n. 31: A propos des Constitutions. Digressions. 1992.

And also: Léon Dehon: Correspondance 1864-1871, Ed. Dehoniane, Rome 1992.

Finally we have a posthumous work: Le Père Dehon et le Règne du Coeur de Jésus, Studia Dehoniana 25.2, 1994.

In addition to all these more or less voluminous publications by Father Bourgeois, are the articles published in Dehoniana and numerous other texts still in manuscript such as homilies, annotations of readings made, personal reflections, etc.

We end this little biography with the prayer written by Father Albert Bourgeois in preparation for Major Orders on March 8, 1947:

“Lord, I do not know what to say to you. I do not have any brilliant ideas, but I know and I feel that I want to love you. I suffer too much from my mediocrity, while my temperament pushes me toward wholeness. Do not allow me to delude myself in this but allow me to realize it in the small virtues and the little gestures. Give me purity, humility, generosity, faithful attention. What do beautiful sentences and beautiful thoughts matter if my life is trivial, mediocre, if it is not led in everything by the passion of your love “.