



GENERAL SUPERIOR
CONGREGATION OF THE
PRIESTS OF THE SACRED HEART
Dehonians

Prot. N. 0072/2018

Rome, March 1, 2018

To all the members of the Dehonian Family

Christ, refuge of the afflicted and sinners

*Letter for March 14,
on the 175th anniversary of the birth of Fr. Leo John Dehon*

On March 14, 2018, we celebrate the 175th anniversary of the birth of Fr. Leo John Dehon, Founder of our Congregation. We want to invite all of us to turn to him as we interpret the realities of today.

The numerous situations of exclusion in which people live today lead us to revisit the work of spiritual mercy found in consoling the afflicted. Many of our contemporaries lead a life on the margins, exiled in and outside of their homeland. We think of refugees fleeing their countries or regions because of difficult conditions caused by wars or natural disasters; we think of prisoners, victims of injustices of all kinds whose rights are violated; we think also of sinners afflicted by the weight of their sins... It is worth noting that the world is increasingly controlled by the rich and powerful who are not sensitive to the cry of the “damned of the earth”.¹

Turning our eyes towards our God, who, in Jesus Christ, shows his wounded heart and enters into solidarity with all the suffering, we can find a spiritual answer for the afflicted, excluded and rejected people of our time.

God is not indifferent to the situation of people

In the Gospel we see that God identifies with the afflicted people: “My heart is moved with pity for the crowd” (Mt 15:32); “I was in prison” (Mt 25:36.43); “Jesus wept” (Jn 11:35); “What you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me” (Mt 25:45). These expressions of Christ guide our proposal and tell us that the meaning of our life is not found in suffering in itself, but in the love that we commit ourselves to give. This is the Christian life that can be felt

¹ Title of the book of the Martinican writer Frantz Fanon, *The damned of the earth*, Maspero, Paris 1961.

as a reasonable possibility for our contemporaries. Our task is not only to question why there are tears and afflictions, but to reduce the tears that need comfort.

“My heart is moved with pity for the crowd” (Mt 15:32)

Something that marked, in a strong way, the action of Jesus was found in crowds. He had compassion for seeing the flock without a shepherd. Today we face the situation of people in our world who live on the margins, in the fringes. They are also like sheep without a shepherd, losing all hope that their reality will improve. They feel excluded from happiness and prosperity, convinced that nothing can change their destiny.

Many of those who are excluded from the enjoyment of goods are convinced that nothing will change their fate. Their presence in the world seems to be only a complement to others. Resignation to suffering allows bitterness to set in their hearts, prompting pessimistic thoughts and sometimes even violence.

The crowds, to whom Jesus has compassion, live as exiles and strangers in their country;² like those who are condemned to death awaiting execution (Blaise Pascal), like lambs taken to the slaughterhouse (Is 53:7). Others are like sheep in the midst of wolves (Mt 10:16), experiencing only the fury and ruthless face of their executioners. There are children, abused by adults or old people scattered on street corners, signals of misery and mourning.³ Jesus identified with them when he experienced suffering in Gethsemane and on Golgotha. But, he does not limit himself to pity them, he shares their suffering and takes them with him. He brings the lost sheep on his shoulders (Lk 15:7; Ez 34:12), he takes care of the wounded (Ez 34:16). In this perspective, Father Dehon wrote:

“The Heart of Jesus is overflowing with tenderness and compassion for all those who suffer, those who endure hardships, those who go hungry, and for the sick and the infirm. His is the Heart of a Father, the Heart of a Mother, the Heart of a Shepherd. His is a priestly Heart which suffers with us when we are suffering, beyond what St Paul can say: ‘Who is weak, and I am not weak?’ (2Cor 11:29)”. (Le Cœur sacerdotal de Jésus, CSJ 126).

“I was in prison” (Mt 25,36.43)

Jesus also identified himself with the prisoners. During his passion he lived the fate reserved for prisoners. Accused, dragged before the Sanhedrin (Lk 22:66-71), to Pilate and Herod (Lk 23:1-12), he was judged, sentenced to death and hanged on the cross like a criminal. He knew how the prisoner suffered: his freedom was taken away; he was whipped, humiliated, mocked, degraded, betrayed and abandoned; he felt the indifference of people to whom he had done good deeds, those whom he had healed and defended:

² See, Benedict XVI, Homily at Ahmadou Ahidjo Stadium, Yaoundé, March 19th, 2008.

³ See, Emile Zola, *Germinal*, Book IV, chapter 7.

“to fulfill what had been said by Isaiah the prophet: He took away our infirmities and bore our diseases” (Mt 8:17).

Christ suffered in our place, like a prisoner. Thanks to him, we have benefited from the grace of God, which is like an amnesty or clemency that a king grants to his subjects.⁴ It is also true that the poor are a sign of the world’s sin, of the injustice that reigns on earth. In our attitude toward them we measure our ability to live in the world as the body of Christ. When we see the oppressed, we should be able to interpret the situation as the fruit of injustice for which we are responsible. From this awareness will then arise a willingness to be close to those who suffer, to fight against that which brings them anguish. When we work to eliminate injustice, the prisoner becomes for us the sacrament of Christ, even if perhaps we will discover it only at the end of time.

“Jesus wept” (Jn 11:35)

Despite so much suffering, in Jesus we find a merciful heart, he sees the misery of men. He is not indifferent, he is compassionate. He measures the weight of our suffering and understands our despair.

In assuming the condition of humanity, he savored all of man’s misery and he humbled himself, *“becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross”* (Phil 2:8). By accepting his passion and his death, he was in solidarity with the suffering of humanity. It was his heart overflowing with love that led to this acceptance. Jesus is not only compassionate, but wants to heal the suffering of man. He continues to tell people who are victims of exclusion, misery and a dark future:

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light” (Mt 11:28-30).

The yoke relieves burdens because it promotes the union of forces or the sharing of pain. Jesus calls those who suffer to take his yoke because he wants to be in solidarity with their suffering, helping them to carry their weight. His yoke is the humility and the sweetness of the heart. To be humble means to be willing to take the yoke that crucifies pride, selfishness and the impulse of excess that degrades humanity.

How wonderful that Christ opens hearts hardened by sin. He demonstrated it with the Samaritan woman locked up in tribal, cultural and religious prejudices (Jn 4:5-30), with Martha seized by unrest, accusing her sister Mary of indifference (Lk 10:38-42), with a doctor of the law who wanted to show him what he knew (Lk 10:25-37), with Zacchaeus hardened in sin (Lk 19:1-10), with the adulterous woman who did not hope to come out of the clutches of her accusers (Jn 8:1-11) ... These texts show us that the heart of Jesus is the true refuge of sinners and the despised.

⁴ Cf. Bishop Albert Ndongmo, *The Salvation of God according to Paul*, Editions Paulines, Montreal, 1978, p. 103.

All who have accepted the openness of the Heart of Jesus make radical conversion choices. The Samaritan woman becomes a missionary of Christ for her people, having rejected the tribal, cultural and cultic prejudices that hardened her heart and made her reluctant to dialogue with Christ. Mary finds peace of heart when the Lord defends her from the agitations of her sister Martha. The Lawyer is inspired by Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, to have an open heart to everyone in need, regardless of background; whatever the circumstances and situation. Zacchaeus is the one who benefits most from the gifts of the Heart of Christ and shows that “the one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven” (Lk 7, 43).

Dealing with those in difficulty makes it possible to discover the strength of intimacy. Consolation is not a matter of mass, but one lived in proximity. It needs discretion, the emotional and real proximity of another. In closeness, human helplessness is shared with joy, and all that appeals to the depths of the human heart. Intimacy is a place, something that is both physical and spiritual, spontaneously emerging and looking for a time where great distances and separations can be united. Intimacy is a time where we can re-enter into human relationships with others.

“What you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me” (Mt 25:45)

If the intimate relationship with those in pain is so important, as the actions of Jesus Christ reveal to us, we cannot remain indifferent to the misery of the little ones, the poor and the marginalized. Vatican II invites Christians and the whole Church to follow the example:

*“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts... That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds”.*⁵

To be in solidarity with humanity, we must follow the same logic of Christ, that is, knowing how to renounce our prerogatives, to become poor with the poor. We must reach the peripheries and not just talk about poverty. In this perspective, we should not be afraid to go to the margins and suburbs, to the places where people suffer: prisons, hospitals, refugee camps, construction sites, roads, families, places of mourning, disaster areas, shantytowns... Our work is not just compassion, but also offering presence in the places where decisions are made, in order to make the voice of Christ resonate in favor of the marginalized, even if often it is suffocated. Fr. Dehon reminds us that before every action comes the life that has been given:

“It is to the goodness of our God to multiply in his Church the priestly souls who, animated and lived by the dispositions of the Heart of Jesus, Apostle and Pontiff, are first apostles through prayer, interior immolation, the ardor of love for consolation, and then (only later) for the external works of zeal! Without this internal fire, all the activity of zeal would be nothing but smoke (Fr. Giraud)”. (Le Cœur sacerdotal de Jésus, CSJ 210).

⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

Pedagogy for the liberation of the poor requires abandoning the categorical imperatives and the beautiful theories developed in laboratories. The truth must be spoken to the poor and to those who create or promote poverty to free the marginalized from the peripheries.

Being aware of ourselves as fellow human beings, and not as a “boss” or one who has power over others, we have a responsibility to help each other and take care for humanity. Only by cooperation and compassion to each other’s needs can we help people out of the trap of human ignorance and a refusal to empathize. The poor man, whose humanity is humiliated by the weight of deprivation and indifference, begins to feel welcomed when I begin to feel his humiliation and his shame as mine.

As sons of Father Dehon, we must not be indifferent to people, we must take on the “wounded heart”⁶

To be fully human, we need to receive the “wounded heart” of Christ in order to unite with those who have a wounded heart and lighten their yoke, in other words, give them rest.

As we can see in our Constitutions, our spirituality has two concepts that lead us to follow Christ in alleviating the suffering of the afflicted: love and reparation:

*“From his religious, Father Dehon expects them to be prophets of love and servants of reconciliation of people and of the world in Christ (2Cor 5:18). In this way, working with him, to make up for sin, care for the Church and the world which is in lack of love, makes himself in all His life, prayers, labours, sufferings and joys, the love and reparation that his heart desires (see NQ XXV, 5)”.*⁷

The drama of Calvary is explained in light of the pierced Heart of the Redeemer. The act of piercing Christ's heart (side), was to prove that he really died, and was also the final gesture with which humanity rejected the salvation brought by the incarnated son of God. God transformed the hardness of the human heart into a channel of grace, to receive redemption, through the grace of the priesthood, in the heart of Christ for all mankind. Reparation to the Heart of Jesus must first be inspired by the mystery of the Father's love who in Christ reconciled the world. His love was a reparation in the name of the humanity, which in turn, together with him, allows for communion with the Father and all.

From this perspective, we can understand what the reparative vocation is. To repair is to contribute to establishing the kingdom of justice and Christian charity in the world;⁸ it is to determine, according to time and place, the concrete commitments which, in the local Church, correspond to these apostolic orientations.⁹

⁶ Including those whose are called “the new wounded” today (see Cathérine Malabou, *Les nouveaux blessés: De Freud à la neurologie, penser les traumatismes*, PUF, Paris, 2007). It will be important for us not only to think about them, but to take care of them.

⁷ The Rule of Life, n. 7.

⁸ The Rule of Life, n. 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*

To repair is to search with local Churches for the modalities of our insertion in the ecclesial mission that allows us to develop the riches of our vocation.¹⁰ It is sharing the torment of today's world in its effort for liberation, including liberation from all that hurts man's dignity and threatens the realization of his deepest aspirations: truth, justice, love, freedom.¹¹ There is a willingness that makes us servants not to the logic of mercy, but to the actuality of mercy. We deserve to be called "blessed" when we make ourselves poor by loving and serving the poor.

The announcement of the year of the "Wounded Heart"

The theme of consolation is profoundly Dehonian, to give depth to this aspect we begin in the Congregation, on March 14, 2018, the year of the "Wounded Heart", which will end with the celebration of the Sacred Heart in 2019. For us, the "Wounded Heart" is the icon of the 21st century, transmitting a message that goes beyond the word. This symbol is capable of accepting the feelings of women and men of this world. The icon of the "Wounded Heart" can reveal the inner and intimate life of desires and expectations, frustrations and sufferings. It refers to the feelings of many people, brings to life their anguishes and tears, their torture and suffering in the blood. All that is close to man bears the sign of the wound.

Around this icon, we want to bring together current initiatives and those which will be undertaken in different Entities. We want to promote creativity, both at the theological and philosophical level, to undertake commitments in various services, at the level of art and music to give expression to suffering and propose remedies to reverse the situations marked by affliction and those placed at the margins of common living.

It is a *kairós*, the right moment for us, sons of Father Dehon, who in his spiritual testament tells us: "I leave you the most marvelous of treasures, the heart of Christ", "for him I live, for him I die". It is therefore a favorable moment to address this treasure and discover the innumerable riches that it reserves for our apostolate and our mission.

In this year we wish to make the "Wounded Heart" of our Lord the refuge of people overwhelmed by suffering, injustice and exclusion. Personally and communally, we are invited to create, initiate and implement projects that aim to mark this concern in our ministries, prayers and devotions... It is about enhancing our charism to be prophets of love to work to create situations that eliminate any "germ" capable of generating exclusions. We wish to think about how we can have a long-term vision, observe the signs of the times to develop our charism as servants of reconciliation, going to the peripheries, like Christ, and fighting with and for victims, using as our weapons the works of mercy inspired by the merciful Heart of the Lord.

¹⁰ The Rule of Life, n. 34.

¹¹ The Rule of Life, n. 36.

Dear members of the Dehonian Family, let us nurture our compassion to the Heart of Jesus to make our love for every wounded person possible, urgent and fruitful.

P. Heinrich Wilmer, scj
Superior General
and Council