

SACRED HEART DEVOTION IN FR. DEHON'S CONTEXT AND IN OUR CONTEXT

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After working in the diocese of Haarlem for 25 years, I was at a deanery meeting where there was grumbling about the religious. I said, "Gentlemen, just bear in mind that I am a religious, too." But they all cried out, "You? No, you are one of us." It was meant as a compliment, but I thought a funny compliment that after 25 years they have not realized yet that someone is a religious. They could not see it easily, though.

For instance, my prayer life was not much different from theirs. Then I thought, I'm going to use my old Thesaurus of Prayers again, and I discovered that I could no longer pray those prayers. The pious exercises of the Sacred Heart devotion had become totally strange to me. I felt bad about it, for I have always wanted to be very loyal to the Congregation. When I started to read about it, it appeared that the reason was that everything had changed: the world, the image of the Church, and the image of God.

Fr. Dehon's Image of the World, of the Church, and of God

The 19th century religious Congregations in France all look alike in organization, in activities, as well as in spirituality. A post-revolution romanticism colored all piety in those days. French Catholics saw in the French Revolution the end of Christian civilization. God, who sent the revolution as a punishment over France, demands atonement and reparation. This avenging God will relent because of the practice of [preferably perpetual] adoration and the devotion to the Sacred Heart.

Advocates of the Sacred Heart devotion were anti-revolutionaries; they wanted the restoration of Throne and Altar, the return of the *Ancien Régime*. The French king and Christ the King should be rehabilitated. It says much for Fr. Dehon's realism that he soon relinquished his monarchist ideals.

The Church in the 19th century wanted to re-evangelize the masses. Church attendance had fallen off dramatically, religious ignorance was very great, the youth was left to their fate. There was great religious indifference. Founders of Congregations who wished to save the faith and the Church chose the Sacred Heart devotion as their source of inspiration. They all wanted apostolate, but also adoration to make reparation for all the outrages committed against the

Blessed Sacrament. This is what Fr. Dehon did, but he was not alone. There are hundreds of Sacred Heart Congregations in France and elsewhere.

The Sacred Heart devotion was being combined with Romanticism, which sprung up after the drabness of the 18th century: a romantic view of the life of interiorization and of a sometimes exaggerated culture of emotions. The spirit of the age and Christian piety were going hand in hand.

All those founders and foundresses of Congregations sought their identity in a spirituality of their own. By spirituality we mean a purposeful and methodical seeking contact with the divine reality behind the visible things. Beside this great common goal—seeking God and living the gospel—they chose a partial aspect, a secondary element of the Christ-mystery or the veneration of the saints to give themselves an identity of their own.

And after the French Revolution, they turned especially to the devotion to the Sacred Heart, with the stress on giving consolation and reparation on account of the indignity offered to Jesus' love, particularly in the Blessed Sacrament. Moreover, they reverted to pre-revolution monastic ideals.

So, too, did Fr. Dehon. From the tradition, he brought in elements of the active and the contemplative religious life. Both action and contemplation needed to be a hundred percent; and all of us have grown up with the dilemma which of these weighed more heavily in our life: adoration and spiritual exercises or the apostolate. There was much discussion about this in our Congregation, for sooner or later the principal accent had to be put somewhere.

I remember the quarrels in our houses about our confreres, who from early in the morning till late at night were occupied in the apostolate with their people in the working-class quarters, and then were told that they were second-rate figures because they were not present at adoration every day.

Now it has been embedded in our Ratio Formationis of Brussels that we are an apostolic Institute, and that our community life and our prayer life are in the service of, and therefore have to be geared to, our apostolate. I have never yet seen it formulated so clearly.

In the first half of the 20th century, one clung tenaciously to the 19th century forms of spirituality and devotion. Not the slightest deviation that had been introduced from the once fixed *Constitutions* and customs was allowed. Everything that had been fixed received the halo of imperishableness and had been canonized by heaven. Spirituality became static.

But this rigidity did not hinder a fruitful apostolate. What religious in the past century and in this century have accomplished in the area of pastoral work, mission, education, and *diaconia* is little short of heroic. Because of this vitality, there arose a certain triumphalism. The

Congregation prospered so much and was clearly so blessed that criticism of the tradition was odious.

The Church of the Sacred Heart was—certainly after Vatican I—a mighty Church with a strong pope and great attachment to the pope. The Church stood as a spiritual bastion in a world alienated from God, and she alone was able to save that world. This Church also brought about an enormous missionary expansion, and produced great mass movements, like Catholic Action in the service of the hierarchy, and powerful charitable and political organizations.

However, this charity was often benevolent and condescending. When Leo XIII told Fr. Dehon, “Preach my encyclicals,” he was probably not alluding to what he wrote as late as 1882 in the encyclical about Francis of Assisi [*Auspicato concessum*]: “The question of the relationship between rich and poor, which troubles economists so much, will be settled completely by clearly affirming and proving that poverty does not lack dignity; that the rich ought to be compassionate and generous, and the poor satisfied with their lot and their labor, because neither the rich nor the poor were born for these perishable goods, and the poor have to merit heaven through patience, and the rich through generosity.”

So, it was in this atmosphere that young Leo Dehon was brought up. It is amazing that a short time later, in 1891, Leo XIII had come to other insights and with *Rerum Novarum* began to pay attention to the social question, began to take the Church out of her isolation of world renunciation, and was looking for openings to bring her up to date. He did not receive any thanks for it and most French bishops dropped *Rerum Novarum* in the wastepaper basket. But Fr. Dehon placed himself squarely behind the pope. By then he had come to know the reality of the proletariat and that was not romantic.

Already then, he agreed with what John XXIII and John Paul II were to write in their social encyclicals, that the structures which keep humanity divided into rich and poor are sinful. They come from sin and lead to sin. They come from idol-worship, namely from making temporal gain an absolute. And just as in idol-worship, countless people are sacrificed to these demons.

When John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council with the message that the Church wished to be especially the Church of the poor, many old certainties, old images of God and of human beings were affected by this.

The Present-Day Image of Church, World, and God

After Vatican II, religious Congregations were in trouble. They had dedicated three quarters of a century to strengthening the stability and the preservation of the 19th century mentality. And now, suddenly, the Council told them to adapt and renew, to go back to their roots, to reflect on the gospel and on the original inspiration of their founders.

From where this demand for adaptation? What was going on meanwhile? The exact sciences, technology, and the new means of communication had changed the face of the earth; and those innovations also penetrated into the religious houses. The harmonious world-image in which God occupied the central position was being disturbed. Since the industrial, cultural, and political evolutions, human beings came to be at the center. Humanity was emancipating and coming of age. The self-realization of the individual became the central value of our culture, and this fact made the old monasteries shake on their foundations.

When philosophers and theologians declared God dead, this was not only an interesting or not interesting theory, but also a reality experienced by many, because they were losing their old image of God. Now we say that whoever wants to know God should do as he does: restore the outcast to their place, give justice to those denied justice, allow displaced persons a place. Thus, God comes to life. The old God, who sat on his throne, now says that he can be found in the people who are in need. He has identified himself with them to such an extent that nobody notices him anymore. And with that, we are back to Matthew, Chapter 25.

Although in the person of Fr. Dehon, this social engagement with the poor was intensely present for a long time—in fact he devoted himself to “The Reign of the Heart of Jesus in Souls and in Society,”—this did not penetrate into his Sacred Heart devotion. His prayers to the Sacred Heart kept the old atmosphere, which we now describe as maudlin, dolorous, sentimental, and tearful. “Would that we were able to atone for all these outrages even to the shedding of our blood!” Those outrages were “the neglect of holydays, the hateful blasphemies that are hurled against Thee and Thy saints, the reproaches uttered against Thy Vicar on earth and all the priestly order.”

We found ourselves in another world, secularized, governed by science and technical knowledge, pluriform in culture, religion, and ethical thinking, a world with global problems such as pollution of the environment, the arms trade with in its wake wars and streams of refugees, massive unemployment, and the increasing contrast of rich and poor, South and North. Nor is the Church any longer the exclusive resort of justice and salvation ever since Vatican II recognized the rightful autonomy of earthly realities.

The theologians set about restoring the link between spirituality and the pursuit of contemporary theology. There was reflection on the theological and biblical foundations of mysticism and asceticism. Theology and biblical studies turned into new paths, and the 19th century monastic spirituality was not able to stand up against it. Our feeling that the old forms of spirituality had had their time was confirmed.

The emphasis was now on *diaconia*, more than on meditation and asceticism. The spirituality proper to the Congregation which had been so strongly defended, became relative in the frantic search for the biblical and theological translations of the fundamental values of religious

life. The sugary kitsch and the pious ideal of sanctity of the Romantic period has served its turn in our countries, although it is still thriving in southern countries.

It was especially the Vatican II decree, *Perfectae caritatis*, that speeded things up in reflecting on the nature and the mission of religious life. The *Constitutions* had to be revised. Obsolete structures and manners of life had to disappear in order to enable the religious to realize their mission in the present-day world. The word, “charism,” came into vogue in a new meaning: what has the Congregation, under the inspiration of God’s spirit, received from the Founder and from its history, in order to be able to carry out its mission in Church and world now? The former isolation was being lifted and new connections of religious cooperation arose.

The Chapters of Renewal toiled at all this, while since the 60s the development in our Congregation proceeded. Our own apostolates disappeared. A new Jesus-devotion pushed the old Sacred Heart devotion into the background. There came a splintering of forces. Our own schools were closed. Our specific observance of morning and evening prayers, adoration, spiritual exercises were replaced by moments of liturgical and biblical prayer. Our own religious habit disappeared. Many left the Congregation, also very good confreres. When you visit our Polish Province, where all that disappeared here is still in existence, you realize how much we have changed.

The image of the Church changed dramatically. Church became “the People of God on the way,” assisted by charismatic leaders and theologians. A dynamic, moving, enthusiastic Church that is happening at the basis is there where people celebrate and live the gospel of the Lord.

Norbertine Abbot Ton Baeten says, “A Church that cares for people and, inviting, stands in the midst of society, makes its own institutions relative, because it realizes that, with all its structures and rules, it is only a means and not an end in itself. The people are for the Church the end, because it is among people that the Kingdom of God on earth has to be realized.”

Religious, freed for the Kingdom of God, find new inspiration in this vision. But it does bring them into a new tension with a more hierarchic view of the Church, certainly now that in Rome restorative tendencies are prevalent. But for someone who knows the history of the Church, this tension is not new. Religious and hierarchy, charism and institution must maintain this tension.

What Has Happened to the Sacred Heart?

Vatican II does not mention the “devotion to the Sacred Heart,” and there are some who conclude from that that this tradition of spirituality has little to offer to the modern Church. But the term, “heart,” occurs 119 times in the Council documents—5 times referring to the Heart of Christ; 114 times referring to our heart. The challenge to build a civilization of love is more relevant than ever. The urgent need of our world and the necessity of the love of neighbor require this. The most important aspect of “aggiornamento” is the renewal of our

heart. Church structures, liturgy, and religious life need to be adapted so that we renew our heart. “Everyone of us should have a change of heart as we regard the entire world and those tasks which we can perform in unison for the betterment of our race... ‘Behold now is the acceptable time’ for a change of heart; ‘behold, now is the day of salvation!’” [*Gaudium et Spes* 82].

When God wills a new heaven and a new earth, and when he wants to give us a new heart, then the Heart of Jesus remains our great example. *Fac cor nostrum secundum cor tuum* [“Make our heart like your Heart”].

Building a new world is a work of reparation. So said Pope John Paul II in 1986 in Paray-le-Monial: “This is the genuine reparation that the Lord asked for, to build on the ruins of hatred and violence the civilization of the Heart of Christ.”

The brothers Hugo and Karl Rahner, SJ, had been pointing in this direction already for a long time. They said, the Sacred Heart is not only a symbol, but also the personal core of the Lord, a hidden reality which we come to know by personal contact.

In this, the traditional devotional practices are not important; they are time-bound. The trinitarian context was not evident in them. We should see Jesus’ Heart as the source of the Spirit, who makes us love as Jesus loves. He makes us pray, “Abba” and moves us to love for our brothers and sisters. With and through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, such is our religion.

Karl Rahner also supposes that with reparation it is not so much a matter of atonement or satisfaction or consolation, but of sharing in the redemptive passion of Jesus. The social dimension is for him more important, the disinterested *diaconia* to our neighbor and taking part in the struggle for justice in the world.

Our General Conference of Brusque took over this notion, as you know. For a long time, we had not known anymore how we had to console Jesus, who is risen and therefore completely happy. Jesus is not sad, we said, but Fr. Dehon is sad because of all the injustice he sees. It is true that Jesus had identified himself with his people, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Therefore, Irenaeus had said at the time, “*Honor Dei est solus hominum*” [“God’s honor is the salvation of people”].

What has remained of Sacred Heart devotion, at least for me, is this:

- the experience of God’s merciful and all-embracing love, and Jesus’ opened heart is a revelation of it;
- the Eucharist as the central event in our community life;
- the attention to the little and the poor, because their honor, which is God’s honor, must be restored;

- the “Ecce venio” and “abandonment” as the availability for the Kingdom of God and the acceptance of whatever happens to me in my life, be it good or bad, for of this attitude Fr. Dehon gave us a shining example;
- last but not least, our own atmosphere, the “nest odor” of the Congregation, which no matter where you travel in the world recalls a great bond and brotherhood.

And whether this is a specific spirituality of our own, different from all other Congregations, does not interest me.

It is a question of evangelical values, which we together are trying to put into practice. And Jesus’ Heart remains for us the model, on the one hand of warmth and safety; on the other hand, to give the many broken hearts healing and encouragement. The renewal of our hearts, which Vatican II insists on so much, is found by many nowadays in New-Age-Thinking. Advocates of this New-Age-Thinking appear to have especially a Catholic or Reformed background. They have experienced the Church as dogmatic, immovable, cool, and not free. They claim that because of the authoritarian and moralizing way of speaking of the Church, they themselves have never arrived at a religious experience. The “new awareness” now gives them that coveted warmth, rest, and safety.

Now, then, it is just these elements that we know from the Sacred Heart devotion. Knowing oneself safe in God’s love is an essential part of our religious experience. For that, we do not need the “Promises of the Sacred Heart;” for a long time, its automatism and its, “I give so that you may give” character had not suited us. On the other hand, the present emphasis on doing justice does not seem to mean very much to the New-Age-Thinkers—everybody just should do what he or she feels is necessary.

The Sacred Heart devotion as Fr. Dehon has presented it to us in his life and work certainly contains this demand for social action, and that as a religious experience. For the honor of God must be restored by removing conditions that degrade human beings.

A religious life in which the Heart of God and human hearts are central and in which one knows oneself called, in imitation of Jesus, to heal broken hearts, might very well be the answer to the search of people of our time.