



GENERAL SUPERIOR
CONGREGATION OF THE
PRIESTS OF THE SACRED HEART
Dehonians

Prot. N. 0041/2016

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Letter for March 14, the commemoration of the birth of Fr. Leo Dehon
The Other – The Trace of Mercy

To: *Members of the Congregation*
All the Members of the Dehonian Family

Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Dehonian Family,

As we established in the general administration's planning letter for the next several years, the occasion of Fr. Dehon's birthday shall be devoted to the spiritual works of mercy. "To support those who are troublesome or challenging" is the spiritual reference for this first letter. For our lives, it can be very healing to take a new and deeper look at the people around us from a tender and merciful point of view. To be able to know the good that each person offers, to acknowledge, value, and praise the same leads to fidelity and promotes positive stimulus to action that ends in trust.

In his *Souvenirs*, Fr. Dehon clearly stated: "I beg you, as did St. John, let there not be divisions among you. Let us let pass everything in order to remain united. Let us endure offences and disagreements. We love all nations. In heaven, nations will no longer exist."¹ The year was 1912 and World War I (1914-1918) had not yet exploded among the European powers of the time that no longer sustained each other. Here is our call, a path to walk, and our future – barely hinted at on the world stage yet seized. And the leaven is still with us, his project continues, and the challenge is ours.

1. The Jubilee Year of Mercy

This Jubilee Year reminds us that mercy is an evangelical beatitude (Matt. 5:7) that is born in divine *charitas*. The incarnation of the Son expresses the offering made by God that in the passion of the Lord will become a gift of endurance. Fr. Dehon, in his classical style of using language, synthesized this manner of conduct by reminding us "to abandon ourselves to the Sacred Heart in the spirit of victimhood, to endure patiently and joyfully the crosses that providence sends us."² God in his Son has placed himself in union with us, has made his richness and lavishness the basis for taking on our poverty and transforming it (cf. 2 Cor 8:9;

¹ LCC 8090139; from the Italian; Leo G. Dehon (1954): *Lettere circolari*, Bologna: Editrice Dehoniana, n. 406.

² In DSP 476 one can view the original words. The Italian used here [as basis for the English] is taken from Leo DEHON (1983): *Direttorio Spirituale dei Sacerdoti del Sacro Cuore*, Milano: Curia Provinciale SCJ, n. 277.

Phil. 2:5-11). After this first initiative on His part God expects our own response in love, where mercy draws its vigor and power.

The Lord Jesus is God's way of overcoming deficiencies, the opportunity for shortening distance, the production of communion that overcomes and reconciles opposites. Thus, to believe and contemplate the incarnate God implies turning our neighbor into a part of ourselves: "*ut unum sint sicut nos unum sumus*" says St. John 17:22. "God has mercy on us because he loves us and he loves us as part of himself" as St. Thomas Aquinas says.³ In this fashion the other becomes the center and we come to learn that the basis of existence is relationships, acceptance of difference, support, attention toward the other in an unambiguous option on his/her behalf. This manner of existence frees us from solitude and the deadly silence proceeding from egotism and lack of love. The virtue of mercy is achieved by walking a path:

- that arises from our feelings, even a sad and sorrowful resonance that touches our hearts when we feel the sufferings of another;
- that becomes virtue when we become the goodness that bows before misery;
- that undergoes an evolution because it is not the situation that makes us bow, but the person!
- that becomes a perfect work, a beautiful shape, the concretization of love for our neighbor.

Mercy is thus a way, a manifestation of fraternal love; it is truly and properly the way of following the Lord (cf. Cst. 29 and 43).

We walk between certain feelings of sentiment and virtue but we do so with company. Nevertheless there is a "Cain feeling," the "one who is filled with himself experiences no feeling for anyone else;"⁴ does not witness the indifference, the denial of human and evangelical fraternity, confronted by the misfortune of the other, he stays blind, deaf... and unmoved, like a heart of stone. Here's how Fr. Dehon explains it: "It is a hardness of heart that arises out of a disordered love of self, since this kind of love naturally renders us attentive to our own interests, allows nothing to move us except what affects us, permits us to witness offenses against God without tears and the miseries of our neighbor without compassion, leads us to avoid inconveniences that entail when we might help others, making us intolerant of the defects of others and overly sensitive for the slightest reasons. We hold on to sentiments of bitterness and vendetta, hatred and antipathy toward them in our hearts."⁵ Such hardness of heart leads us to pass severe judgment on our neighbor and, worse, to condemn him without mercy. This kind of hardness of heart, found even among religious, can easily lead to dislike which distances, divides, and closes off, leading us to avoid any kind of encounter, fleeing his/her company, liking the distance... if not actually going further and giving into malevolence and hatred.

³ The reference from the gospel is in Latin to indicate the presence of *sint unum*; the one from St. Thomas is found in S.Th. II-II, q. 30, a.2 ad 1 and says: "*Ad primum ergo dicendum quod Deus non miseretur nisi propter amorem, in quantum amat nos tamquam aliquid sui.*"

⁴ The words of Bishop Benigne Bossuet, intellectual and writer, and often read by Fr. Dehon: "*Plein et occupé de soi-même, on ne sent rien pour les autres, on ne leur témoigne que froideur et insensibilité*" Bossuet (1941), "*Pensées chrétiennes et morales*" in *Oeuvres de Bossuet* IV, Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 769.

⁵ The original is in ASC 5/191. The Italian text [on which this English translation is based] can be found on the Dehondocs International website. Another interesting ext of Fr. Dehon on this topic is in VAM 542.

Faced with these challenges, “how can we really understand Christ’s love for us, if not in loving as He did, in truth and in deed?” (Cst. 18). A beautiful work, inspired by God and capable of being our salvation seeks entry: mercy found in works, the works of mercy.

2. An Invitation to Rediscover the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy

At this time Pope Francis urgently invites us to “re-discover” the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. He does so for three reasons:

- “to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty” (relearn how to “see”);
- “to enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God’s mercy” (relearn how to “judge”);
- “to know whether or not we are living as his disciples” (relearn how to “act”) because we cannot escape the Lord’s words; and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged.”⁶

The works of mercy have been retrieved by Peter’s successor as keys to the holy door, the essence of the Gospel, that lead toward God through our neighbor. The history of the Gospel reveals to us that the Gospel alone is Good News for the poor; the Holy Spirit is for the poor (cf. Cst. 52).

The drive to “go out” and to experience what we do not have us is the result of the gift in us of the “instinct” of the Holy Spirit.”⁷ This divine “prompting” renews us and becomes the key to a spiritual life; it is the dynamism of *charitas* that enables us to “see-judge-act” wherever we are found doing the tasks that the problems of today urgently call for. Our response as religious is certainly personal but socially achieved as if in a body common to all; as a congregation we are called to provide solutions “*in solidum*” (cf. cst. 63). We need to have this awareness: today’s emergencies will never recur again as they present themselves today, and, above all, those who suffer today will never return (cf. cst. 35-39). That spiritual “prompting” makes us available for these visits from God who transforms “this Day of God” into a *kairós* moment, into a time of saving grace. This spiritual “prompting” alone has the capacity to confront us with the demands of daily life and put us at the service of the Kingdom of God in all its urgent reality.

This confident thrust generates a new kind of “logic of the heart” and turns what we do into merciful and constructive action as we open up toward those who lack something. Fr. Dehon offers us a clear example in St. Vincent de Paul, whose “charity was truly all-embracing and whose heart was fully open to all the works of mercy”⁸ The experience of being loved by the Lord leads us to a desire to serve the totality of humanity in mercy (cf. Cst. 50). Let us “re-discover” the corporal works of mercy and let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy because “we are called to serve Jesus crucified in every marginalized person, to touch the

⁶ Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus* n. 15

⁷ An expression taken from S.Th 1-2, q. 68, a.2, ad 2 where the Angelic Doctor writes: “Ad secundum dicendum quod per virtutes theologicas et morales non ita perficitur homo in ordine ad ultimum finem, quin semper indigeat moveri quodam superiori *instinctu spiritus sancti*, ratione iam dicta;” the emphasis is ours.

⁸ The words are found in his *Panegyric on St. Vincent de Paul*: DIS 9050034/4

flesh of Christ in whomever is excluded, hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, ill, out-of-work, persecuted, or expatriated. There we find our God; there we touch the Lord.”⁹

3. A Work of Spiritual Mercy: Support the Troublesome Patiently

We turn now to the spiritual work of mercy that says: support the troublesome or challenging people patiently or, in the words of the founder: “have perfect charity toward our neighbor to support his defects and a great love for Jesus Christ so as to carry one’s own cross.”¹⁰ Someone may ask, why go back to this as the first such work? Fr. Dehon answers: “Our mission in the Church is very beautiful but we respond very weakly. Our Lord has provided no greater act of mercy than to support us.”¹¹ Someone is troublesome who provokes suffering, weariness, tiresome trouble, one who seems to be requiring us “to endure even more.” In this sense a troublesome person can be a member of our community or a lay associate involved in one of our works. We ourselves can be troublesome; the poor who pester us can be troublesome like the widow in the Gospel (cf. Luke 14:13). Knowing the effects that people spontaneously provoke in us, we face a two-fold challenge: to take people as they are and, at the same time, come to know ourselves more deeply. Thus, we should not exclude another reality: we may be irksome or troublesome to other people!

Beginning here may not be a bad thing. Being irritating or troublesome may affect us as an inconvenience or as a real cross. It has several roots: temperament, meddlesomeness, lack of tact, arrogance....

Fr. Dehon adds: “What are these crosses? We find them in every state, in the cloister and in the family, wherever there is work to be done, rules to observe, diverse personal characteristics to endure.”¹² For us, this work of mercy is called for, naturally, by our community life, the purpose of which is to “form a milieu which is favorable to the spiritual progress of each one” (Cst. 64). Thus we always walk the road with others, in reciprocity, where “charity must be an active hope for what others can become with the help of our fraternal support” (Cst. 64). Community life thus becomes a school of mercy in which our primary task is to accept “others as they are with their personalities, their duties, their initiatives and their limits and that each one allow himself to be called in question by his brothers” (Cst. 66). Our first lesson is this: to learn over and again to control our feelings which can lead us to rebel, to grumble, to go silent, or the opposite, to react with violent aggression; our feelings can equally lead us to be supportive as “the basis of a true dialog, in mutual respect, fraternal love, solidarity and co-responsibility” (Cst. 67).

In Sacred Scripture the one who is patient is God (cf. Num 14:27; Matt 17:17; Rom 9:22-23). In bearing with us, God reveals a history of patience, faithful perseverance along with a breath of passion, of love that accepts suffering while awaiting conversion with greatness of heart (cf. 2 Pet 3:15). Jesus gives us a model of resistance, endurance, and acceptance of reality in his surrender to the cross. In his presence we need to decide whether to accept that God is

⁹ Francis (2016): *Il nome di Dio è misericordia* [English: *The Name of God is Mercy*]. Plemme, 108.

¹⁰ *Vue prophétiques diverses relative à l’apostolat religieux dans les derniers temps de l’Église*: NTD 9130017/22.

¹¹ Letter of Fr. Dehon to the future Fr. Héberlé dated May 6, 1912: B20/13, inv. 330.05

¹² The original is found in ASC 3/308. The Italian text [on which the English is based] comes from *L’Anno con il Sacro Cuore* found on the Dehondocs international website.

God and... trust (here is original faith) or make ourselves the “be all and end all” of existence (here is original sin). God’s greatness is that he sees beyond the very moment that we are intolerable and knows what we can become in Christ. For this reason he permits the cross. God agrees to “carry the load”, to “suffer” our incompleteness and inadequacy taking on himself those moments in which we choose sin (what is irksome to God) in the knowledge that it is the road for resetting the snares of truth, communion, kingdom.... All play out on the field of fraternity, in social relationships. In Christ we find the attitude of bravery before adversity and pain; he gives us the ability to suffer and resist with firmness... The patience of Christ is an expression of God and his sacrament: “love is patient” (I Cor 13:4), “endures all” (I Cor 13:7). The life of Fr. Dehon witnesses “Dehonian endurance and patience” coming from a patient love.¹³

4. With Patience and Gentleness

“If you come up against some opposition, support it with patience and kindness.”¹⁴ God’s patience is love directed to man. For this reason it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22) that for us turns into the art of living with the incompleteness that we find in others, in ourselves, in reality, and in God himself. Patience, therefore, is not weakness, nor complicity in evil perpetrated (cf. Jer 44:21-22), or the absence of anger, least of all to allow domination. God’s patience, instead, in giving us support exposes him to the risk of not being taken seriously, of not being useful (cf. Rom 2:4). This is all possible due to the logic that flows from his nature: love, love even for one’s enemies, love even unto death, love that gives meaning and approval to endurance. We stand before the triumph over weakness and fragileness by daily love. This is the challenge that awaits us.

It all begins in the knowledge that we are supported. When I come away irritated I am shown my limits which, when supported, means love. To be supported means to be loved! Therefore mutual support is a manifestation of the charity that is intended to preserve unity and peace in our communities (Cst. 8; cf. Gal 6:2). Patient endurance is the virtue that does not permit us to act compulsively but allows us the possibility of being able to build upon, to triumph over human cruelty. On the other hand, the lack of patience is the individualistic exaltation of self over other; it cancels out otherness and any proper rapport between us and God and others. Now, there certainly does exist an impatience that is virtuous, which knows how to say “no” to abuse, violence, tyranny, and exploitation. We experience impatience when we reject a life monopolized by pushy people, jealousy, all-encompassing and all that forces us to act against perversions that make earth a hell. In imitation of God, taking on ourselves the burden of our brothers, we avoid the mechanisms that lead to provocation, choosing not to respond to evil with evil; our enemy is known solely as different, as a way to God (cf. Eph 4:1-3; Col 3:12-13).

Supporting and enduring troublesome people patiently is a work of mercy that, insofar as it is actively and fruitfully enriched by the *charitas* of God, permits us to grow in appreciation for the fact that love for one’s enemies opens a window to the future for the other, is a confirmation of our trust in him, allows us to fight alongside him, all for his sake, but not

¹³ On this matter, see: Letter to Fr. Dehon dated Jan. 1, 1920: B 18/6.9, inv. 211.00; Ledure, Y, *Leone Dehon: un prete con la penna in mano*, Bologna, EDB, 192-195. Letter of Dec 6, 1905: B 83/1, inv. 584.28; LCC 8090139/40 and NQT 19/114.

¹⁴ Letter of Fr. Dehon to Fr. van Hommerich dated March 14, 1918 (B19/7a.23, inv. 266.25).

against him. Freely enduring our neighbor, patiently, with charity, despite his contradictions and negative side, puts us on God's side. Voilà, here is the first trace in us of a merciful God.

We wish all the members of the Dehonian Family a joyful remembrance of the birth of Fr. Leo Dehon.

In Corde Jesu,



Heinrich Wilmer scj
Fr. Heinrich Wilmer, scj
Superior General
and his council