

Reflection for alumni reunion: June, 2019

Some years ago the Donaldson class of 1955 gathered for the 50th anniversary of our graduation. Several of the wives of our classmates said that they wanted to be there and share those moments because, as they indicated to us, they were very aware of how the lives of their husbands had been affected by their association with the Priests of the Sacred Heart. So one of the things we wanted to happen as we gathered for this reunion was to have us reflect on how SCJ spirituality has helped shape who we are and to share that with one another. I was asked to share how I see that going on in my life to kind of prime the pump and let what I have to share serve as an invitation and opening for all of us to get more in touch with how SCJ spirituality has contributed to our becoming the persons we are and to talk with one another about that.

I attended Cor Divinum (Sacred Heart Seminary in Donaldson, Indiana) from September, 1951 to May 1955. I almost did not make it to Donaldson. My family did not have a car so we asked a friend of the family to drive me there. We were somewhere in Ohio or Indiana on old highway six when the driver pulled out to pass a car. He misjudged the distance of an on-coming vehicle and he had to pull onto the left shoulder of the highway to avoid a head-on collision. I should have taken that as a good sign that God wanted me to at least get to Donaldson.

As I look back on my life, I recall a very significant experience that I had in my last year at the minor seminary. In my senior year I was the house senior. At that time it was customary for the house senior to lead the student body out of the chapel to the study hall or dining room--whatever was scheduled after the prayer we had just had in the chapel. The house senior would wrap on the pew in front of him and the whole student body stood up. Then he would wrap again and the guys all genuflected, stood up and followed the house senior out of the chapel. On one of those occasions, as I walked out of the chapel and looked out the front doors of the seminary, I had a profound realization that I was INSIDE. This is where I belonged. That realization has just deepened in me as the years went on. I tell people that I don't know where being John Czyzynski ends and where being an SCJ begins. I am one of those guys they call "lifers." I left home two weeks before I turned 14 and now I am 81 years old and have been a professed SCJ for almost 63 years. I left home to become a priest and I have grown into being a religious, a Priest of the Sacred Heart. Through the years the men I met who taught me or were somehow a part of my growing up helped me to get to know the God they were committed to: the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I could relate to Jesus as I came to know Him with the Priests of the Sacred Heart. And that must be true for all of you who are here. That is why you are here today. The spirituality that we were taught and saw lived out somehow grabbed us.

There are several key passages in Sacred Scripture that are significant in the spirituality, the charism, which we received from Fr. Dehon and I will talk about them later, but it wasn't until I had been on my journey as an SCJ for quite a while that another less talked about passage was brought to my attention. That passage is Gal. 2: 20. It reads like this: "I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me." Our Constitution number 2 calls this Fr. Dehon's "faith experience." At some point as Fr. Dehon meditated and prayed over that passage, it just came alive and filled him. They were no longer just words on a

page, but a powerful statement of the profound truth of God's tremendous love for him, for us. That realization and faith conviction energized him and impelled him to live differently and to gather around him others who would be fired by that same conviction of God's love for us incarnate in Jesus and symbolized by the pierced Heart of Jesus.

Each one of us has to come to that same deep realization as Fr. Dehon did. I know that on my journey I believed that God loved me. That is what I kept hearing all around me with the SCJs. But for the longest time, even after I had been ordained a priest for a few years that was mostly an intellectual conviction that I carried personally and shared with others in my ministry. Then I made a retreat with a sister named Deborah Conley. She was a dear friend of Fr Michael Noonan, SCJ, the priest who had been my prefect of discipline in Donaldson, my novice master in Sainte Marie and eventually our provincial. I remember telling Deb that if for one moment I felt in my heart that God loved me, it shall have been a great retreat. About the third day of the retreat, Deb asked me to pray over Romans 8: 31-39. I remember sitting in the back yard of the convent and praying over that passage and I began to weep joyful tears with the realization in the depths of my heart that nothing could separate me from God's love for me.

The gift of that experience carries me. But being the thick headed Pollock that I am, I need periodic reminders of God's abundant, freely given love for me. There is a part of me that believes I need to earn everything I get. The truth is: God's love can never be earned. God lavishes us with love. I had a dream once that hammered home for me the marvelous truth that God's magnanimous love for us is always total gift. I play golf. To call myself a "golfer" would be an oxymoron or stretching the meaning of the word. Anyway, in my dream I was sitting in front of a pro shop at a golf course. I didn't have time to play a round, so I decided to go in the shop and buy myself something. I walked in and behind the counter was a man who I knew in my dream was a God-figure. I chose the things I wanted to purchase and brought them to "the man" so I could pay for them. He wanted to just give me what I had chosen, but there were others standing around and I could not have them see me getting something for nothing. I insisted on paying. So to create a kind of diversion so others would not notice that I wasn't paying for the items, "the man" leaned back into the shelves behind him and everything came crashing to the floor. In the confusion that followed he tried to sneak the items to me, but I pulled out my credit card and handed it to him. He got this sad look on his face. Took the card and went to the cash register to ring me up. He handed the items to me. I took them and walked outside. Once outside I looked at the receipt and the charge read: \$0.00 and inside a book I had chosen was a brand new crisp \$50.00 dollar bill. When I want to give some a monetary gift, I get a new 50 dollar bill from the bank. The message hit me like a ton of bricks. God's love for us is all gift. We could never earn it and it saddens God when we refuse the gift God is literally dying to give us.

That is what Fr. Dehon's meditation on Gal. 2: 20 brought to life in his heart and what he devoted his life to passing on to others, eventually on to us. In my estimation Fr. Dehon took the heart of the gospel and made it the core of SCJ spirituality. He taught us that God loves us tremendously and all that God wants in return is that we love back the One who first loves us. For Fr. Dehon the way to return that love is to live a life of total availability for what God asks of us. He gathered others around him and passed on to them the fruits of that deep

faith experience of his. He founded our religious community: the Priests of the Sacred Heart. We know that that was not the original title of the community. Our original name was: The Oblates of the Sacred Heart. That word has fallen out of use in our day, but it carried the essence of what Fr. Dehon wanted to characterize the lives of his sons. When I try to find a word that we could use today to name that concept, I call it "total availability."

There are two passages in Scripture that carried that ideal for Fr. Dehon: 1) Behold, I come to do your will. (Heb. 10: 7 quoting Ps. 40: 6-8) and 2) Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word." (Luke 1: 38). We so often refer to these two passages using the words that begin the phrases in the Latin language: ECCE VENIO and ECCE ANCILLA.

That first passage is the author of the letter to the Hebrews' attempt to capture the disposition of Jesus upon coming into the world as one of us. Jesus never said those words but in the letter the author places those words on the lips of Jesus. The words boldly proclaim that what Jesus' life is going to be about is doing the will of His beloved ABBA. No external sacrifices, offerings of things outside of Himself. Instead he says. "you have given me a body and I give it back totally in loving obedience to you."

Then we have Mary's words. They are her response to the invitation to play the tremendous role of being the Mother of the Son of God and all that that would entail. She has no idea of what lies ahead but she surrenders completely to whatever God asks of her.

As I reflect on these two passages that Fr. Dehon placed at the heart of SCJ spirituality, it seems to me that they carry two related, but different aspects of what it means to be an oblate, to live a life of total availability to what ABBA wants of us. The words "Behold I come to do your will" name an agent, the person who is going to do whatever God wants him or her to do. The initiative is always God's. The person as an individual or in union with his or her community discerns what God is asking of them and then with the grace of God is able to say: "Behold I come to do your will." The words convey my/our desire TO DO whatever we discern personally or in community that God wants of us. I declare that I am going to do this. I feel a certain amount of control and I commit to doing something. On the other hand the words of Mary are associated with something quite different that is going on. The person who says: "let it be done to me" is not the one who commits to performing some action in response to the movement of God's grace. The person who says: "let it be done to me" is one who receives/accepts the action placed on them by someone else. That person acknowledges radically that they are not in charge. They surrender to what is done to them or asked of them by another. I have always felt that it is easier to say: Behold I come to do your will than it is to say: Let it be done to me as you will. Those words speak of total surrender to another. We cannot do that unless we trust and believe in the other's love for us, that the other will never hurt us. Every morning when I get up, the first thing I do is kneel beside my bed and I ask God to help me believe and trust how much God loves me so that I can live with Jesus and Mary's attitudes: Behold I come to do your will and Let it be done to me according to your word. I say: "you know me, loving God. I got a plan for today. Please don't let my plan get in the way of what you want me to do today."

We know and believe that God loves us. We have a theological certainty about that, but we need to have a faith experience similar to Fr. Dehon's so that we can say those words and mean them. I believe that God sends us assurances of God's love so that our trust in God's love for us keeps growing. We need to be attentive to those little signs/graces/gifts God sends our way.

I had a delightful experience of that one day in the dining room at Sacred Heart Monastery/Seminary and School of Theology. I came into the dining room late for lunch one day. Brother Longinus was seated at a table by himself. (Did you know Longinus? He was one of the first SCJs to come here from Germany to found the US province. He was a Master Stone Mason. He built altars in Honesdale and here too I think. He also ran the farms we used to have until old age side-lined him.) Anyway, he was sitting there and I plopped down my tray and he looked up at me and barked: "what do you want??" I bent down to get closer to his face and said: "all the love in your heart, Longinus." He said: "you don't have to ask for that." Blew me away. As I sat with that experience, it strikes me that that is precisely the way God is with us. We want God to love us. But God is already pouring out God's love for us. We don't have to ask for it. God keeps giving it. We just need to take it in. When that happens we can say: Behold I come to do your will and let it be done to be according to your word.

So that is what I was taught and learned along the way, namely that being an SCJ, our spirituality, called us to live that kind of life of oblation in response to God's tremendous love for us. We are to be available to do what God asks of us and we do that in a spirit of love and reparation. That's what my life is supposed to be about. In my first years with the SCJs, the way we talked about reparation, I always felt that that meant we are going to be making up for the sins of others. Other folks might let Jesus down, but not us. That always felt kind of elitist and I wasn't comfortable with that. It reminded me of Peter telling Jesus that everyone else might desert Him but he would not. We know what happened there.

That is why I felt so good about what we received from our General Chapter that revised and renewed our Constitutions. Number 23 of our revised constitutions gave us another way to understand the concept of reparation. This is the way it reads: "This is how we understand reparation (and you could add the word NOW):

As a welcome of the Spirit

As a response to Christ's love for us

As a communion in His love for the Father and

As a collaboration in His work of redemption in the midst of the world."

That is a rather brief statement but it is loaded. Let me unpack it and share with you what it means for me and how it excites me that we have this new and wonderful way of understanding living out reparation.

First of all it is a welcome of the Spirit. Reparation is not something I can do on my own. God, as always, takes the initiative in me, in you. God sends us the Spirit, moves us to make reparation. Let me tell a story that makes this point. It seems that there was a salesman

who was travelling in the south. He stopped for breakfast at a little restaurant in a small town. He ordered bacon, eggs and toast. The waiter brought him his plate. The salesman looked at the plate and saw the bacon and eggs and a pile of something he had not ordered. He looked at the waiter and asked: "what's that?" The waiter said: "That's grits." The salesman said: "I didn't order grits." The waiter said: "nobody orders grits. Grits just comes." That is the way the gift of the Spirit comes about in our lives. We don't control that. It's always GIFT that God bestows. We are free to accept or reject. Making reparation is first of all our choice to welcome God's spirit who moves us to make reparation.

The Spirit moves us "to respond to Christ's love for us." The most sublime and most excellent expression we have of God's love for us is in Jesus. The letter to the Hebrews begins by saying: "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, God spoke to us through a son...." All through the ages God has been saying "I love you" to us. We didn't always get it. Finally, God's "I love you" took flesh in Jesus. Jesus' life, death and resurrection proclaims God's love for us. So a key part of making reparation that the Spirit calls us to, is to respond to God's love for us that we experience in Jesus. You and I know God's love for us through Jesus' love for us and the Spirit impels us to return God's love for us by responding to Jesus' love for us.

The Spirit then stirs up in us another aspect of reparation and that is: "a communion in Jesus' love for the Father." Reparation is all about returning love to ABBA, our Father. On our own we are incapable of returning the love to God that God deserves. That is why we need to join with Jesus, be in communion with Jesus, in His love for the Father. We do that best at the Eucharist. We unite ourselves with Jesus in His complete and perfect oblation (offering) of Himself at the Sacrifice of the Mass which commemorates and makes present again His offering of Himself on the cross, the complete surrender of Himself in loving obedience to His Father. At Mass, when I or the presider (if I happen to be concelebrating) elevate/s the consecrated bread, I look at it and say in my heart: "Jesus, I unite myself to you and your offering of Yourself to our Father." Then after the priest says: "do this in memory of me" and elevates the chalice, I say: "Jesus, you don't want us to just keep doing this ritual. You want us to love as you did. Help me to do that. May this Eucharist help me to love as you love."

The final aspect of reparation which the Spirit stirs up in us is "a collaboration with Jesus in His work of redemption." This flows naturally from what I just said. Another favorite passage of Fr. Dehon was Jesus' prayer at the last supper "that all be one." Reparation cannot stop at being a "me and Jesus" kind of thing. The Spirit that we welcome drives us to help others to be united with one another and with God. That is what Jesus prayed for at the Last Supper. His final prayer with His disciples was that they be one, that they be one with one another and one with the Father. That is what Jesus spent His life doing and living reparation calls us to collaborate with Jesus and continue His mission on this earth. We strive to be part of the answer to Jesus' prayer at the last supper, that we all be one (Sint Unum). I dedicate my life to helping people be united to one another and to God.

So that is the way we SCJs understand reparation today. When we think about it that way, I really like the word that Fr. P. J. McGuire liked to use in talking about reparation. It is a Latin

word so please bear with me. The word is "REDAMATIO." That word really gets at what reparation is supposed to be about. When you hear the word "reparation" it evokes the concept of "repairing" something that is broken. "Redamatio" gets at loving back and that is truly the way we understand and talk about reparation today. I don't repair something that is broken. I give back love that has been given to me in the first place.

When Fr. Dehon founded our congregation, he did not give us a particular ministry that would characterize us. He asked us to be open to whatever we discerned God was calling us to and to throw ourselves into that ministry in the spirit that he handed on to us, namely an attitude of oblation, an attitude of total availability lived out in a spirit of love and reparation. Although he did not give us a particular ministry he did hand on to us what our Constitution nos. 30 and 31 call some "apostolic orientations." They are: 1) "Eucharistic adoration as an authentic service of the Church" 2) "ministry to the lowly and the humble, the workers and the poor" 3) "with (that) ministry in mind, (which is a significant qualifying phrase) Fr Dehon gave great importance to the formation of priests and religious" and 4) "for him missionary activity was a privileged form of apostolic service." We live out giving love back to the God who first loves us by being involved in these "apostolic orientations." We give love back to God by our participation in Eucharistic adoration and by a genuine love and service of our brothers and sisters, especially "the lowly, they humble, the workers and the poor," those whose condition in life can at times make it difficult for them to believe in God's love for them. We, as Jesus did, incarnate God's love for them by our love for them. And they return the favor in spades!! Big time!!

It is to living out that spirituality that I have devoted my life. I have been a professed SCJ religious for almost 63 years and an ordained priest for almost 56 years. I have been involved in very little of what we call "external ministry," namely ministry to people outside the SCJ communities—parishes, domestic and foreign missions and so forth. Most of my life has been involved in the internal ministry of spiritual formation. My life has been devoted to the formation of those seeking to become fellow SCJs or to those seeking to be involved in ordained ministry as diocesan priests or priests in other religious communities. Whether those men were seeking to become SCJs or diocesan priests or priests in other communities, I taught them SCJ spirituality. That is all I know and I think it is the best way to be a priest, a religious, any disciple of the way Jesus taught us to live. I am just one person, but I believe my ministry is spread and extended by all those with whom I journeyed as they prepared for their ministry in the Church. I may have spent many years of my life within the confines of the seminary, but I believe I somehow touched the lives of so many others through the ministry of those whose lives I touched during their years of formation.

I am supposed to be retired now but as my spiritual director says: "I am actively retired." A good number of diocesan seminarians and some of our own students still come to me for spiritual direction. I continue to share with them our SCJ spirituality. Something else that has become a more significant part of my life as I get older is my involvement in the work of social justice. In my early days with the SCJs we never heard much about Fr. Dehon's work in that area. It wasn't until later on that I learned that Pope Leo XIII who wrote the first social justice encyclical asked him to "preach his encyclical" and Dehon was a kind of spokesman for the Pope. He was a featured speaker at social justice congresses and wrote a

manual that was used in seminaries to help future priests be prepared to deal with such matters. When I was younger, I never wrote to or called our legislators. I do so now. I am following Fr. Dehon's lead. He knew that if you want to help "the lowly, the humble, the workers, the poor," you have to be a voice for those who have none. You have to speak for them to those who have power. That is what I try to do.

Tomorrow morning you will be joining the professed SCJs and novices and all those in formation who are gathered for our annual assembly. We are going to be talking to one another about how our SCJ spirituality affects what we value and how we live. That is what I have endeavored to do with you by what I have shared.

I invite you to take some of the time that we have this morning to reflect on that same question. What did you learn about God, about Jesus, about life during your time with the SCJs and how has that had an influence on how you live your life, on what you truly value? How does it show in the way you interact with others, in the way you relate to them?

So now we want to give you some time now to reflect. Grounds and chapels available. Please return at 11:15. We will have a chance to talk to one another about what came to our minds and hearts.

Thank you for being here with us and may God bless you.