



GENERAL SUPERIOR  
CONGREGATION OF THE  
PRIESTS OF THE SACRED HEART  
Dehonians

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Prot. N. P0066/2014

Rome, March 1, 2014

## Letter of March 14: the Birthday of Fr. Dehon

Dear Confreres,

March 14 is a day on which we remember not only the birth of our founder, Léon Dehon, but also the birth of our vocation. In doing so, we pray that this vocation will live on in others, and are reminded to help others — from all walks of life, in the many places we serve — to find the vocation that is alive within them.

For us, March 14 is our vocation day.

For many visitors to Rome, part of their pilgrimage includes a stop at the church of *San*



*Luigi dei Francesi*. It is known for the three paintings of Caravaggio. In his interview with Antonio Spadaro, Pope Francis made a reference to the most famous of the three paintings: *The Calling of Saint Matthew*. For those who do not know the painting, Matthew and his helpers are sitting at the publican's table counting money. In the doorway stands Peter and Jesus. Behind them is a light that falls upon Matthew and upon what he is doing. Matthew's gaze, as well as of two youngsters sitting at the table with him, is fixed in the direction of Jesus. Jesus points

with his finger in the direction of Matthew and Matthew in unbelief points his own finger to his breast with the obvious question: "Who? Me?" Matthew is drawn into the light. It was his future.

It is sometimes said that callings are intrusive, even violent. None of this is evident in the painting. Jesus points at Matthew, but looking at the pointing hand one sees the index finger

not straight and imperious but curved downwards, much like the finger of the Creator in Michelangelo's creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel. The finger questions Matthew. Matthew is presented with an enigma, which is clearly shown on his face. "Yes, even you Matthew, with a table of grubby tax money before you. Yes, you! Come, follow me." The Gospel text tells of no hesitation: "And he got up and followed him." (Mt. 9.9)



We, who have experienced it, know the feeling of the calling. The notion of vocation or call has not only generated interest among religious but also among philosophers. There is a rather wide body of literature that has studied the phenomenology of the call: what happens when someone is "called." These reflections go to the core of what in human existence occurs when confronted with the call. There is no clear voice – nothing that indicates a caller. The caller remains anonymous, indefinable. I do not control it. It does not come from me. It comes from elsewhere – perhaps, in something beautiful – and I know it to be important because it feels life-determining. The Jewish philosopher Levinas called it "a provocation from God<sup>1</sup>." It provokes me to give a certain direction to my life.

As with the call of Jesus to his disciples, a call impels one to leave one's "home", to get off the couch. The French philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien says that to be called is to be "required." There is a certain urgency attached to a call, a feeling "required" to take a certain direction in life. In following the early life of Léon Dehon, one reads frequently about the disturbance caused by his vocation: "I am forever preoccupied with my religious vocation..." he wrote in 1875 (NHV XI,152); he spoke of what he perceived of "the way God guides me in life » (NQ XLIV 30), of his "suffering" (NHV XI,177). Most of us have followed this internal urge, listened to its impulse and sought to follow where it led us. Our vocation became our mission. The call also made us go in search of the One who called us, to befriend the origin from which the call came. That has been our life.

On March 14<sup>th</sup> we recall this search and its resolution. We need to bring ourselves back from time to time to our own experience of the vocational call. What happened to me? What did it require of me? Where has it taken me? For Dehon his call was clear from age twelve onward. He never doubted it. We may not have experienced it in a straight way – perhaps only a constantly-returning appeal to be true. On March 14<sup>th</sup> let us celebrate it. Fr. Dehon described it as a faith journey with God's love.

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<sup>1</sup> Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel, *The call in the thought of Lévinas, Marion and Chrétien*, *Aisthesis – Rivista Online di Estetica*, 2/2011

The day also invites us to speak to others about their call; how has it been experienced in the lives of others? A call is very individual, but also a shared experience. We might understand and appreciate our own call better by sharing it with others, and hearing their stories.

In 1914 at table Fr. Dehon asked a young person why he wanted to become a priest. He told the founder “St. John was the apostle who loved, then love the Lord – that is the basis of a vocation.” (Position II, 408) Love is a good place to start. For Dehon, without it we could do nothing. And so let us take it up in our prayers when we talk with the one who first impelled us. It is probably the most important appeal or invitation made in my life.

In Corde Jesu

Fr. José Ornelas Carvalho, scj  
Superior General  
and his Council

**14 March 2014**

## **Diversity of Vocations within the same Charism**

The month of March is especially important for the spiritual children of Fr. Dehon because it recalls two significant events, the birthday of Fr. Dehon (March 14 at La Capelle) and the day on which he was baptized (March 24, with the names Gustave and Leo, so well loved by his mother,).

These two dates (birth and baptism) provide us with the theme we present for your reflection and prayer: Fr. Dehon and the laity. For the coming Feast of the Sacred Heart our letter will focus on the Dehonian Family.

### **1. The Laity**

Up to St. Clement's letter to the Corinthians there is no mention of laity or the lay state in Christian writing and that includes the New Testament. The New Testament speaks of a holy people, an elect people, a people set apart (*kleros*; cf. 1 Cor; Heb) which is invited to offer a pure and holy sacrifice (cf. Rom 12: 1-3). Spiritual gifts are given to the people for the common good and the building up of the Christian community (cf 1 Cor 12; 14:4-5, 12; Rom 12:4-8). Designated for the building up of the community, certain functions are listed in the New Testament and are designated as ministries or services: the Twelve, the apostles, the elders, the priests, deacons, and prophets (cf. 1 Cor 12:27-30; Phil 1:1; Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:11). The Fathers indicate that these functions are not just honorific titles but true services offered to the ecclesial community. One should not lose sight of the full, entire church as a holy, elect, and co-responsible people. In the church, everyone is responsible for her according to his/her specific function.

Thus, in the Letter of St. Clement of Rome to the Corinthians the term "lay" (*laicos*), to mean the faithful and the people, appears for the first time. This term will become common a century later through Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian.

St. Clement declares that "each of us, my brothers and sisters, is pleasing to God when we live in dignity, with a good conscience, and do not transgress the laws that pertain to us" (Letter to the Corinthians, ch. 41).

St. Clement helps us understand the laity in such a way that one can say that all the baptized are called to the responsibility to be church without discrimination or distinction and to express in their lives an aspect of service whenever each person observes the design God has in mind for him/her. Each person is therefore called to make a unique and irreplaceable contribution.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Carta de S. Clemente Romano aos Coríntios*. (1984). Petrópolis:Vozes.

The great reference point is the relationship of each one with Christ in spiritual encounter (experience) and in duty (mission). It is from these that the dignity and responsibility of each individual and of all together arise according to their function in building up the church (St. Clement of Rome).

For many centuries from the Fourth Century onwards, the laity became more like standbys than participants due to an excessive assessment of the clergy and of religious who assumed lay ministries.<sup>3</sup> A grasp of the vocation and role of the laity in the church was most definitely recovered at Vatican Council II.

## 2. The Word “Lay Person” during the Time of Fr. Dehon

At the time of Fr. Dehon, when the background was the French Revolution with everything it implied for relations between church and the French state, the word “lay person” (*laïc*) had a negative sense and was synonymous with the anti-religious and anti-clerical. Accordingly, one spoke of lay schools, i.e., schools where religion was not taught or was disparaged. Fr. Dehon makes reference to this situation in his end-of-the-year addresses at Collège St. Jean in St. Quentin. Already in the XIX Century, the word “lay person” began to have for our context a different, more positive meaning – a synonym for one who proclaimed and confessed the faith but was not a priest, nor ordained, nor a member of an order or a religious congregation.

From 1870 on, Fr. Dehon used the word “lay person” and associated it with the lay apostolate; he cited the letter of St. Paul to the Philippians (Phil 1:3-7) in which the apostle thanked the community at Philippi for its collaboration in the spread, defense, and confession of the gospel. At this time in France, therefore, the term “lay person” began to be used in the sense of a pastoral cooperator and collaborator. In his book *Nos Congrès* (Our Congresses) published in 1897, Fr. Dehon explained the rationale for lay people in the church:

“The lay apostolate has developed during this past century particularly. There are fewer priests. Providence gives us the assistance of lay apostles. The lay apostolate is nothing less than the expression of Christian charity. The Holy Father desires this activity to be shared by the lay person and the priest.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Fr. Dehon, the more lay persons working in the apostolate, the easier it will be to have true Christian families.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The term *Lay person* has various meanings in Romance languages. In ecclesial parlance, it can mean someone who has not received the sacrament of orders or who does not belong to a Order or Religious Congregation. From a politico-civil perspective on the other hand, it means that the State is separate from churches or from religions. In this latter sense, a *lay person* is someone who professes a separation from the State and religion; sometimes these lay persons take on dispositions that are offensive to religion and especially to Christian churches.

<sup>4</sup> *Oeuvres Sociales II*, p. 370.

<sup>5</sup> In the homilies Fr. Dehon gave at the weddings of his relatives, one can find well stated proposals by which lay people can live their proper Christian faith (cf. 1.er Cahier Sermons 1869-1871: 18-19, 49-51).

### 3. The First “Lay Persons” in the Parish of St. Quentin

When Fr. Dehon began his pastoral activity in the parish of St. Quentin in November, 1871, he found an existing group of lay St. Vincent de Paul workers.<sup>6</sup> M. Julien, who was an administrator of a housing residence, was a generous, active man. Throughout his entire life he was a enthusiastic servant of the poor.

M. Guillaume, who ran a mortgage bank, came from Auxerre. He was a modest, gentle and simple man who had received a good education. He was always involved with works, doing good intelligently and without creating problems.<sup>7</sup> M. Black, a cement producer, was a strong and original personality. From a modest background, he was a complete Catholic. On the doorframe of his house he had the following words inscribed: “My God, my king, my law.”

M. Vilfort was a carpenter and a former student of the school at Chalons. His brother was head of the Third Order [of St. Francis]. He was so preoccupied with good works it led to some neglect of his own work and his family.

M. Jules Lehout, industrialist, came from a family from St. Quentin. He maintained something of the arrogant tone of the greats but had a lively faith and no prejudices as he attended church.

M. Basquin, a producer of lace, was a *nouveau riche* with great good will and talent, but died young and was not able to exercise his apostolate to great extent.

M. Charles Lecot was a friend of Dom Mathieu and a supporter of the work of Fr. Dehon.

There were also M. Alfred Santerre, merchant, M. Filachet, city engineer, and M. André, an official of the Bank of France.<sup>8</sup>

These men were the first lay people Fr. Dehon encountered in the parish of St. Quentin that worked together with him. Over time, Fr. Dehon came to know other people like M. Pluszanski, the Arrachart family, and others who assisted him in his work.

Fr Dehon knew how to value, love, listen to, and maintain awareness of the laity. He did not treat them arrogantly. Many of them became his close friends. At the congresses held at Liesse, St. Quentin, and Soissons, Fr. Dehon was accompanied by some of his lay associates who actively participated at these meetings.

He considered the apostolate as something proper to lay people, but at the same time, the primary task of the laity was their own family. He would not allow them to forget it.

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<sup>6</sup> Egídio Driedonkx. “The first lay people with whom Fr. Dehon worked.” *Dehoniana* 2000/2, 63-74.

<sup>7</sup> All this is what Fr. Dehon puts in his Diary *Notes sur l’Histoire de ma Vie* (NHV, 5, IX, 90-92, French edition of Centro Studi, Rome 1979).

<sup>8</sup> Egídio Driedonkx. “Alfred Santerre: A Precursor of the Lay Dehonians.” *Studia Dehoniana*, 1993, n. 35, pp 169-188, NHV, 7, XIII, 90-91.

The laity thus found in Fr. Dehon an upright man and from him learned to apply all their efforts to the apostolate enthusiastically.

#### 4. Lay Dehonians at the Time of Fr. Dehon

Fr. Dehon always had in mind a tendency to associate lay people with his projects and plans to allow them an opportunity of sharing in the spirituality of his institute.<sup>9</sup> It was in this sense that the Association of Reparation began in 1878, comprising aggregates and associates. From the very beginnings of the Congregation, Fr. Dehon spoke before diocesan priests and lay associates. The associates devoted themselves principally to works (charitable works and the press). The aggregates concentrated on prayer and sacrifice. In the entry rite, the aggregates received a cross adorned with a heart like the religious did. An act of consecration was part of the ceremony. Later on two acts appeared: one for feast days and the other for every day. All wore a scapular and a medal of the Sacred Heart.<sup>10</sup>

The first person to be named as an aggregate in our archival documents was M. Lecot who also belonged to the St. Vincent de Paul society of the chief parish of St. Quentin. In his memoirs (*Notes sur l'Histoire de ma Vie*), Fr. Dehon notes that M. Lecot on Friday, April 11, 1880 obtained a garden connected with the Mother House for his group.<sup>11</sup> As an aggregate he took the name Joseph of Arimathea. We also find on the list of the earliest aggregates, among others, the name of M. Vilfort, member of the St. Vincent de Paul society attached to the basilica of St. Quentin.<sup>12</sup>

Among the women aggregates, in addition to the mother of Fr. Dehon who supported the strenuous efforts of her son, we also find two relatives: Juliette Vandelet, his aunt and baptismal sponsor, and the wife of Felix Penant – also the mother of a priest – of whom Fr. Dehon says of her that she was very devout and had great energy.<sup>13</sup> There was also Mme. Herr, mother of two future SCJ priests, Ernest and Leo, as well a Mme. Lecot and Mme. Demont-Buffy.

Fr. Dehon had great appreciation for the pastoral dynamism of all these lay people. These persons saw how God had accepted the offering of Fr. Dehon's life in the crosses that Divine Providence sent him.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Umberto Chiarello. "Association of Reparation: A History and Spirituality." *Dehoniana*, 2000/2, 75-84.

<sup>10</sup> Egídio Driedonkx. "History of the Association of Reparation during the Life of Fr. Dehon." *Dehoniana*, 2001/1, 53-62.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. NHV, 7, XIV, 191.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. NHV, 7, XIV, 221-222.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. NHV, I, 4r-4v.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. NHV. 7, XIV, 222.

## 5. Lay Dehonians Today

Vatican Council II lists three elements in the definition of a lay person: the lay person is, before all else, a baptized Christian and incorporated into Christ in the church and a participant in its mission; the lay person is distinct from priests and religious because he/she does not receive the sacrament of Orders or the state of religious life; the lay person is someone who has responsibility for the world and for engaging in secular affairs and for ordering both to the Kingdom of God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 31a).

According to the document *Lay Dehonians: A Proposal*<sup>15</sup> a lay person, man or woman, is above all a member of the church who, faithful to Christ, seeks to build the kingdom of God in the temporal order; this person is one who after cognizance of his/her baptismal vocation and mission as lay person lives by the experience of the living faith of Fr. Dehon through his/her personal vocation and recognizes in Fr. Dehon and his charism approved by the church a basis for the spiritual life by coming close to Christ in the mystery and solidarity of his open Heart and united to his reparatory oblation.<sup>16</sup>

In this fashion, the lay Dehonian is animated by the Spirit, lives entirely in the world, thinks and feels with the church, and shares the church's passion for the gospel and the world as a prophet of love and Christian hope (Ch L n° 14).

Lay Dehonians are Christians who, according to Sacred Scripture, live their faith in the church by receiving inspiration from the Dehonian charism to try to exercise in their daily lives, as family, professionals, or in social or ecclesial groups, all the spiritual richness that derives from the charism Fr. Dehon left us for the edification and enrichment of the church (*Constitutions* 1).

Each person receives a task or responsibility according to God's will in accord and in cooperation with the church to build up society in such a way that no one is excluded from the service he/she can offer to everyone. May the divine sacrifice of the Incarnate Word – *Behold I come to do thy will* – (Heb. 10: 5-10) and the human sacrifice of Mary – *Behold the handmaid of the Lord* – (Luke 1:38) make of Christ the heart of the world and make us ever more human, Christian, Dehonian, in the oblation of ourselves to God and our neighbor.

Fr. Adérito Gomes Barbosa

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<sup>15</sup> *Circular Letter to the Dehonian Family*. Prot. 263/2001, Text 2.

<sup>16</sup> Umberto Chiarello. "Profile of a Lay Dehonian". *Dehoniana*, 200/2, 85-92.