

## **Charism and Devotions:**

### **North American response: The Surplus of Charity**

The North American response to *Charism and Devotions* consists of three parts:

- A. The survey questions and the spiritual landscape of devotion in North America
- B. Fr. Dehon and the devotional
- C. Toward an aesthetic and practical theology of the Spirituality of the Heart of Christ

#### **A. The survey questions and the spiritual landscape of devotion in North America**

The research was initiated with the questionnaire which was sent out using Monkey Survey to gather the answers. Of the possible 113 members, 46 responded, a 40% response rate. The majority of the responses (69%) were from respondents 65 years of age and older. The response from the younger members (20 -35) was almost none existent and so we chose to hold a special session with the younger members.

The results of the survey were then read through the results of a social analysis framework of religion in North America. For this we used the works of Charles Taylor, Robert Bellah, Wade Clark Roof and others. We did this in order to differentiate the North American findings from other cultural areas. The paper makes seven points to delineate the North American framework for devotional life.

1. A general characteristic of devotions is that they are personal, even though they may be communally celebrated. That was the presumption even of the questionnaire. Devotions display a person's interiority, his or her personal connection with God. In the North American culture one is expected to respect this interior devotion of one's fellow religious and not to question the other about his personal practices.
2. To establish communal devotions, a second dimension of the questionnaire, is a difficult enterprise. In the current cultural context a community will be restricted in its ability to introduce new devotions. A good example of this is the introduction of *Lectio divina* as a practice in the Congregation, despite the efforts of the last General Chapters. To become communal they must at the same time be personal.
3. The only exception to this rule are the devotional practices that are identity markers for the community. Dehonians have a number of these identity markers which the majority in the community do not question because they create their bond with the others. As such the paper identifies the prayer of oblation, and adoration. The Congregation had some other practices such as the corona, the private vow of immolation, the Thursday before the first Friday of the month, etc., but these gradually were dropped as practices.

4. This brings me to a fourth point. Culturally devotions, since the time of the Enlightenment with its gradual secularization of areas previously pertaining to the religious sphere and since the era of romanticism, belong not so much to religion as to spirituality. In this bifurcation of religion and spirituality, spirituality is religion in the sphere of freedom, and religion pertains to the authoritative. This is clearly a Western phenomenon which is probably felt differently in other parts of the world.
5. But this bifurcation between religion and spirituality is also felt differently in North America and Europe. Charles Taylor demonstrates this difference, using the analysis of European history by Durkheim. For many parts of Western Europe the break occasioned by the Enlightenment created a momentous struggle between the old order and the new. This was particularly true for France where the old order, known as the *ancient regime*, was being stripped away more violently than in other quarters. Because of the resistance of Catholics, in particular, to accept the new order, represented by *laïcité*, secularization or the enlightenment was perceived as a violent stripping away from public life all remnants of religion. This makes religion in these countries to be seen or experienced as anti-modern. There is a greater tolerance for religion – and hence for devotions - in North America where the *ancient regime* plays no significant role.
6. Furthermore, there is a different interplay, particularly in the United States, between family, religion and the state, which still functions for the older members of the community: “the family was the matrix in which the young were brought up to be good citizens and believing worshippers; religion was the source of the values that animated both family and society; and the state was the realization and the bulwark of the values central to both family and churches.” (Taylor, p. 506) This triangle has broken down for younger members. In the interview with them, they showed a much greater attachment, however, to visible, tangible identity markers.

## B. Fr. Dehon and the devotional

In the second part of the paper, we asked what are the conditions for creative fidelity to Father Dehon in the context of devotional life in the Congregation? The presumption on our part was not to push for an originalist position. Yet, on the other hand, we also felt compelled to remain faithful to Dehon. This fidelity to Fr. Dehon, we maintain, demanded an examination of two aspects of Dehon’s devotional life.

### 1. The configuration of the Sacred Heart Devotion for Dehon

In order to be faithful to Dehon, we wanted to know what role the Sacred Heart devotion, the primary component of Dehonian devotional life, played in Dehon. Although Dehon frequently refers to Margaret Mary Alacoque, the Sacred Heart devotion in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century played a much different religious, political and social role than in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The devotion had changed from its anti-Jansenistic context of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the highly charged polemic between Catholics and laïcist Republicans in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. The Sacred Heart

devotion represented a restorationist desire of Catholics to return to the social and political construct of the pre-revolutionary *ancient regime*. On this score, the context in which the Sacred Heart devotion finds its cultural, social or political impulse has changed. Much of what bound people to the devotion only a century ago has evaporated. The devotion lacks an affective and practical context today. It is a partial reason for the decline of the devotion in North America. It will need a new context to have it regain adherence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The paper outlines the sources of Dehon's devotion to the Sacred Heart and the practices that he attached to the devotion in the first constitutions. To the extent that subsequent documents, particularly the *Rule of Life* did not consider these practices of Dehon as essential for Dehonian life, creative fidelity to Dehon means that Dehonians today need to discover new ways of expressing the devotion to the Sacred Heart.

## **2. The theological foundation of the devotion in Dehon's writings**

In order to be dynamically faithful to Fr. Dehon, we felt it was also appropriate that we seek to ascertain the theological foundation of the devotion to the Sacred Heart in Dehon. We noted that Dehon presented his understanding of the devotion to the Sacred Heart in the form of meditations. It is in meditations on the Sacred Heart that Dehon shares his trinitarian understanding of the devotion. Foundational for him is the eternal mystery of God's love in the mission of Jesus in the incarnation. All his series of meditations on the Sacred Heart reflect that this devotion starts in the bosom of the Father. His *La retraite du Sacré-Coeur* starts with a meditation on "God is charity." His subsequent books of meditations on the Sacred Heart assume a similar pattern. After the first meditations on the trinitarian origin, Dehon regularly passes from Jesus' hidden life, to his public life, from there to his passion and Christ's presence in the Eucharist. While these meditations have all the character traits of the school of French spirituality, they open up a possibility to connect with a more contemporary understanding of the devotion to the Sacred Heart, which is

- in tune with today's trinitarian theology of God's love
- able to understand the piercing of the side of Jesus as a fulfilment of the scriptures
- able to incorporate a theology of the resurrection
- less bound to a staurocentric Christology

We think that these themes require greater development and appreciation as we seek to find a more contemporary theology of the Heart of Christ.

### 3. **Toward an aesthetic and practical theology of the spirituality of the Heart of Christ**

Instead of doing straightforward theological reflection on devotions and their practical aggiornamento, the North American paper in this third part first of all acknowledges the continuing importance of the devotion to the Heart of Christ and then asks where do we go from here as a Congregation. The paper decided not to explore devotional practices but to ask the methodological question. What are the methodological foundations for a renewed devotional life? The paper takes three steps. First of all, it asks what the previous theological seminar in Taubate in 2014 proposed to the Congregation on this score; secondly, in line with what was proposed by Marcello Neri in 2014, the paper looks at the aesthetic moment of devotions; thirdly, since devotions are also practices, the paper asks what is the practical moment of the devotion to the love of God?

- **The results of *Anthropologia cordis***

The paper draws on three experiences and perspectives of the previous theological seminar “*Anthropologia cordis*” of 2014 which we think can help this seminar.

1. The first perspective came from Gianni Colzani’s major paper on “*Anthropologia cordis*” which argued that in order to pump new life into the devotion to the Heart of Christ, there needs to emerge a new anthropology in the West as an antidote to its excessive concentration on the ego. Colzani pointed to the notion of alterity of Levinas as one possible remedy. In that context, I pointed to my own pre-seminar paper, entitled *The Self as Witness*, in which such an alternative anthropology from the viewpoint of the French Philosopher Paul Ricoeur is proposed. This anthropology is not a theoretical construct, but a practical one in which the self is a project or capacity determined not from within but by another. If such an anthropology takes root, devotions would receive another context in which to flourish.
2. The second perspective came from a reaction from the African participants at the seminar. They indicated that Colzani’s paper was culturally determined. Other parts of the world, they argued, have not gone through the same process of doubt and uncertainty. It means that the way forward for the Congregation is to allow all voices to be heard, not only the European one.
3. A third impulse came from the presentation of Marcello Neri: *Uno stile per la Spirito*. Neri sought to gauge the viability of Dehon’s spirituality for our time with its dramatically different self understanding. He insisted that only an aesthetic approach can provide the minimal grammar for the enfleshing of the divine

*agape* today. We too have found this to be an important feature which requires further exploration. He noted that the manner in which Dehon approached the devotion was primarily aesthetic. The North American paper explores how such an aesthetic or affective approach might help the Congregation at this time.

- **The aesthetic moment of the devotion to the Heart of Christ**

In his *Method in Theology*, Bernard Lonergan insists that there are four cognitional operations in theology: the intellectual, practical, aesthetic and decision. While the cognitional operations of each are distinct, there is a similar underlying recurrent pattern to the different operations. Underlying the intellectual, practical, aesthetic and decisional operations there is a similar pattern. Each has a recurrent pattern of experience, understanding and judgment. If Dehon clearly approaches the Sacred Heart devotion, by way of meditations, that is, first of all as an aesthetic operation, the paper explores how underlying the Sacred Heart devotion we must be able to locate an experience, a mode of representing this experience (understanding) and a judgment.

1. **The aesthetic experience: the presence of God as the beautiful**

The Sacred Heart devotion as an aesthetic experience is first of all a deeply bodily experience, or a deeply-felt relation or attentiveness of the body to the world and in this case of the *agape* of God. It is an act of recognition by the body of what this devotion stands for as beautiful, as a deep affect. For Dehon this took place early in life, as evidenced in his intense Christmas experience in Hazebrouck in 1855. He inherited this aesthetic view of the devotion from his mother. What that meant on the practical side, became apparent in his attention to a ministry to workers, the child laborers, the education of youth. Dehon had a highly sensate relation to his environment. He was deeply a *prêtre religieux à Dieu*.

2. **Dehon's way of understanding this aesthetic experience: a world awakened to the Heart of Christ**

How then did Dehon bring this aesthetic experience to language? How did this originary experience of Dehon's faith develop into a more articulate devotion to the Sacred Heart. This began through his contact with the Soeurs Servants in Saint-Quentin starting in 1873. The search to understand what he had sensed in his first attraction to the Heart of Christ came later when in 1887 he begins his meditations on the Heart of Christ, and in 1889 when he expands this understanding in the periodical *Le règne*.

3. **Dehon's aesthetic judgment as a deep affection for the love of God for him.**

In his meditations on the Heart of Christ, it is manifest that Dehon had a deep awareness of the mystical presence of God's *agape*, of which the incarnated physical heart of Jesus was the symbol or image. That is why these meditations seek to enter into the life and passion of Jesus and in the Eucharist as a way of entering into union with Christ. As Dehon said, "By these means you will arrive, without effort, at the point of spending your life in his Heart, for he will be the sole object of your thoughts, your preoccupations, your memory, your affections." (VAM 314) What he sought was *confidence*, a deep sense of security in God's love, and a deep consciousness of what blocks this love. Clearly, for Dehon, this was how he judged the world, how he was attached to the world, how things affected him. That was how Dehon was attached to the world around him.

- **The praxis of the heart: the practical side of the devotion to the Heart of Christ**

It is clear that for Dehon beside the aesthetic there needs to be also a practical operation. Dehon asks us to look beyond the aesthetic. As he wrote, "The sign by which one recognizes the value of true sentiment is the good works which it inspires ... I ask for an affection which inspires action, an action sustained by affection. Such should be the character of the faithful and of the religious consecrated to my heart." (VAM 492) So what might then be the operations of human agency?

1. **The practical experience: an experience of contrast**

The practical experience, at first unconscious, for Dehon must be sought in his awareness of his capacity to effect change in the world. Dehon had a highly developed practical sense which often begins in an awareness in an experience of failure or anguish of not getting my way, or an experience that the world is not as it ought to be. Dehon's initial experience of pastoral ministry in the parish as detestable is a good example, as is his experience of the *Consummation est*. For Dehon these experiences did not lead to despair but to looking for ways to overcome these experiences.

2. **Dehon's practical understanding**

In the Congregation, there exists a well-developed understanding of Dehon's self-perception as someone who could change the world. It was a highly developed sense of his own capacity. It showed in his early ministry in Saint-Quentin, the erection of Collège Saint Jean, the establishment of the Congregation, and his engagement of the world of work. It is perhaps not customary to see these intense activities as part of Dehon's practical understanding of the Heart of

Christ. However, we know now that this was central to his *Le règne* project: it was Dehon's practical response to the Heart of Christ.

### 3. **Dehon's practical judgment**

This is perhaps the most complex part of Dehon's practical devotion. The paper's title of "the surplus of charity" touches on this. Dehon understood this surplus, but perhaps expected too much from this practical devotion. It is about this failure to properly understand it that became to the final part of the paper. What is clearly the saturation of charity, that is, the excess of charity as a human praxis, in as much as charity, *agapé*, of first of all of God, does not seem to be fully grasped by Dehon. For Dehon, *amour pur* is presented as a human do-able. Dehon made it into an ethical project. Marcello Neri has called this the "aporia invincibile" of Dehon. We have approached this as a confusion of the aesthetic and the practical. The question of the paper became: what ought we do with Dehon's *amour pur*? It is this point that brought us to a conclusion of the paper. For what does it teach us?

## **Conclusion**

We want to draw three conclusions:

1. The aesthetic question: Dehon's charism functions primarily at the aesthetic level. Dehon had an aesthetic experience of *amour pur* of God which he saw revealed in the incarnation, life and passion of Christ and present to us in the Eucharist. As Dehonians we celebrate this saturation of creation and life with God's *agape*. Traditionally, this was translated into our devotional life by the Act of Oblation and the Eucharistic adoration. An *aggionamento* of this requires on the one hand an insertion of resurrection into Dehon's understanding of the mystery of Christ, and, on the other hand, a less passive, "presential" understanding of Eucharist.
2. At the praxis level, Dehon's *amour pur* does not translate well into an ethical framework. The witness to *amour pur*, through our love and reparation, must give better expression to the surplus or excess of this love in the face of our human limitations or finitude. Here Dehon often confuses the aesthetic experience of God's love and the capacity of human praxis. If our actions are to give a human witness to the divine excess of love, the human praxis of love, oblation, reparation, immolation as devotional practices must respect the infinite distance between the divine and the human. *Amour pur* cannot lead to an ethical imperative. Here a greater attentiveness to the eschatological language of the scriptures would greatly benefit the practical living out of the charism. After the indefinite postponement of the Founder's beatification, we might be more careful in recognizing that Dehon's call for an *amour pur* in the social reign of the Sacred Heart clearly failed to pass the test of the Church. This is a warning to us to be more circumspect with our language and proposals for praxis.

3. If our passion is God's excessive love, this surplus of mercy that saturates cosmic and human reality, the study of God's love, *agape*, the study, contemplation and praxis of God's love ought to be the major pre-occupation of the Congregation. The Constitutions urge us to be prophets of love. It means that we should assume as our mission to "proclaim his love that surpasses all understanding." (#17) We can do no better than to let our every fibre, our total devotion, be given to seek to grasp and be grasped by this love. If we seek a Dehonian identity, we could do no better than to be recognized for our passion to study and put into social practice the *amour pur* of God.