



GENERAL SUPERIOR
CONGREGATION OF THE
PRIESTS OF THE SACRED HEART
Dehonians

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A new passion and creativity for vocation ministry: more radical, more consistent, more “Jesus-like”

Dear confreres,

He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. (John 1.39)

I am happy to be in touch with all the confreres in the world to speak to you about youth ministry and the vocation apostolate.

In presenting the preparatory process for the 2018 Synodal Assembly on the theme of “*Youth, faith and vocational discernment*”, Pope Francis has given a new perspective to the whole Church so that she may take up with joy and enthusiasm the theme of youth and vocations. For us, it is an important opportunity to participate in this moment of reflection which will surely ask for new commitments of our young people.

A new mindfulness

This challenge was perhaps initiated during the 2016 World Youth Day in Krakow when the Pope told young people: “The Church today looks to you, the world today looks to you and wants to learn from you.”¹

Young people not only are the Church of the future, but they are also the Church of today and it is today that we must act with them to keep alive the flame and joy of evangelization.²

¹ Pope Francis, *Discorso del Santo Padre alla cerimonia di accoglienza dei giovani*. XXXI Giornata Mondiale della Gioventù (Cracovia 27-31 luglio 2016), in: www.vatican.va.

² Leo Dehon in: CHR 1893/4 [Chronique Janvier 1892] « C’est aux jeunes gens chrétiens qu’appartient la mission de guider la génération présente dans cette recherche de la vérité.

La jeunesse catholique ne doit pas se borner à pratiquer la religion, elle doit la faire aimer. Elle doit résolument se lancer dans la mêlée de la vie publique, pour éclairer ceux qui, moins heureux qu’elle, recherchent encore la voie où ils rencontreront la vérité. Un autre rôle lui incombe encore.

The Congregation has made great strides in this pastoral field, engaging many people and resources. There are many who have and continue to work with passion and generosity toward youth and the development of vocations. However, it is not enough to have a person in-charge; we need people who have time to be with young people.

We can be credible and in tune with young people if we pay special attention and listen to them. For this reason, as Pope Francis said, we must know how “to waste time”³ so that we may have a sense of their dreams, their difficulties, their problems, their successes. We must come to learn from them. Pastoral ministry to youth with no attention given to vocations risks becoming just about the youth; on the other hand, vocational ministry not connected to youth ministry can easily become too narrow and restricted. We must also remain alert and open to a vocational ministry which stays in touch with searching adults. The vocation to consecrated life is very close to our heart; in this context we want to give our full heart not only to religious who wish to become presbyters, but also to those who want to commit their lives to be brothers. It seems to me that in the past decades the vocation of brother has been overlooked. It would be a gift if it was given new attention.

A new creativity

Youth ministry and the pastoral care of vocations are permanent missions of the Church, so we must not forget the close relationship between this mission and the world of young people and future vocations.⁴ With great clarity and foresight, Father Leo Dehon urged the Congregation from the outset to go to the missions; however, he also said to continue to look for local vocations to keep the mission sustainable. Today as well we must choose to be open to the world of young people and help them in their vocational path.⁵

What do we want? We would like to invite our congregation to a bold action of “vocational pastoral ministry”. In this action, our focus is on young people and adults.

Basically, it is a proposal that we, the sons of Father Dehon, give space and time to the young. A community which does not find space and time to listen to young people has no future. In many places in the world we work for children, teenagers, young people and young adults. Often we work hard. But do we listen to them? Do we really let young people into our lives? Do we open our Hearts to their questions? Do we listen to them with our lives?

With this I would like to say: do we listen to them in such a way that their questions and their needs, their ideas and reflections can change our own lives? This is not easy; it is often uncomfortable and embarrassing. However, in his rule Saint Benedict already exhorted the abbot to listen to the youngest.⁶

Nous sommes à l'aurore d'une transformation sociale dont personne ne peut calculer l'étendue. Que sera la nouvelle société? C'est le secret de Dieu. Que doit-elle être? Elle doit être chrétienne. C'est aux jeunes gens à l'y préparer ».

³ Pope Francis, *Discorso ai partecipanti al convegno promosso dall'Ufficio Nazionale per la pastorale delle vocazioni della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI)*, 3 January 2017.

⁴ “...The problems that assail them must awaken in everyone the concern to offer them to know and live with zeal and intelligence the evangelical ideal”. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* n. 72.

⁵ In the *Program of the General Administration 2015-2021*, n.3.7 it is asked to “Define in all continental areas common lines of action for the vocational ministry.”

⁶ *Rule of Saint Benedict*, chapter 3, n.3.

Against this background, my dear confreres, I propose three points.

1. Accompaniment

Each Province, every District, every Dehonian presence, every community should ask itself: where are we present to young people, where do we listen to them? Where do we accompany them in their thirst for life, their hunger for justice, their desire for love, appreciation and to feel welcomed? How do we accompany them in their yearning to lose their life in order to receive it in full? This is not just a task for the youngest Dehonians; no, here I see also the involvement of the elderly among us. As in a family, grandparents play an important role in the lives of the grandchildren.

For this reason the following question pertains to all confreres, the young as well as the elderly: where can we waste even more (!) space and time with young people?⁷ How and where can we best share the joy of the Gospel with young people? We welcome candidates who will be ready and able to learn. Readiness and ability to learn are the criteria for suitable candidates. But I wonder if our communities are really capable of learning, being curious, to be surprised? Are our communities attractive to the service of the largess, the generosity of life?

To accompany another person it is necessary to experience in one's own skin the movements which shape the lives of young people.⁸ Personal accompaniment requires that you constantly refine your own sensitivity and discover in the personal traits of young people a resource and a richness.⁹

It is about fostering the relationship between the person and the Lord, working together to remove what obscures it. It is about helping to make life choices, feeling the choices the young person wants to make, allowing young people to understand the different possibilities around them and to welcome those which are most suitable to their lifestyle. Don't be afraid to point them toward the person of the Lord and to prepare the path for an encounter with him, for the daily effort of creating one's own story through searching, so that one can make sense of his life.

We open our facilities, our homes, our communities for young people! Let us create new opportunities to be among young people. Let us be creative! Let us invite young people and share space and time with them.

2. Leadership

I propose that you invite young people (and young adults) to participate in your decision-making. Invite believers and non-believers, the pious and the skeptical, those fervently practicing and the equally fervently critical. Let them participate in your decision-making processes. It is

⁷ Cf. Mark 14.3-5, the waste of the anointing at Bethany ought to become the style of the pastoral action with young people.

⁸ Cf. V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops: *Discípulos y Misioneros de Jesucristo para que nuestros pueblos en Él tengan vida "Yo soy el Camino, la Verdad y la Vida" (Jn 16,4)*, Aparecida, 13-31 de mayo de 2017, n. 329: "En realidad, la cultura, para ser educativa, debe insertarse en los problemas del tiempo en el que se desarrolla la vida del joven".

⁹ Number 175 of *Evangelii Gaudium* which insists that one speak their language in order to be understood.

not necessary that they have the last word. Obviously! The last word belongs to the leaders of the community. However, young people (and young adults) should at least be heard in the process leading to decisions, as Benedict of Norcia foresaw.

To achieve this, hold meetings and create working groups where young people (and young adults) will be involved in the procedures of your decisions. Ask them what they need. What makes them suffer? What do they really need for their lives?¹⁰

And on the other hand, dear confreres, what can you give to the young person? Invite young people (and young adults) to the assemblies of your Provinces, at least to a part of your Assembly. Ask them: how would you change our Province? And as to the underlying spirituality of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, ask them: Where would you put the focus? How would you develop Father Dehon's charism in the current social context? What should we, Dehonians, do in our Province, so that you can work with us with passion?

Invite young people and adults to go with you to visit the poor and the sick. Invite young people and adults to go with you to meet migrants and refugees. Invite young people and adults to fight with you for justice and peace. Invite young people and adults to design together with you the missionary projects to proclaim the Gospel. Tell them: we need you. We want you to work with us.¹¹

Ask them: What should we change? How should we — in your opinion — change ourselves? How can we become allies in bringing the joy of the Gospel to the world, more consistently, more radically, more “Jesus-like”?

3. Prayer

Closeness, listening, co-responsibility, and planning are actions which will push us to take hold of this pastoral area with hope and prophecy.

At the center of all this there must be prayer. Prayer brings us to new horizons, to the horizon of God's will. The vocation “cannot be produced”.¹² That is why we believe in prayer for young people (and young adults). I ask for the prayers of the confreres, co-workers, friends, benefactors and of young people for young people. Pray for the young! Let us carry them in our hearts. And let us bring these hearts to God.

In this context, we pray for vocations, even for vocations to our Congregation. Let us pray regularly.

I invite you all to celebrate more strongly and passionately the first Thursday of the month and to pray on that day for vocations. This should be clearly expressed in the liturgy. I also invite all confreres to pray daily for vocations. Every day! Even a brief prayer touches the heart of

¹⁰ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* n. 41: “... the Church has been entrusted to reveal the mystery of God ... must at the same time open up to humans the meaning of their own existence, that is, the innermost truth about themselves”.

¹¹ Leo Dehon, in: NTD 9130040/4 : « Dans nos collèges, les œuvres d’apostolat et de piété où l’on donne de l’initiative aux jeunes gens suscitent des vocations. L’apostolat obtient à ces jeunes gens la vocation des apôtres. Il faut donc multiplier l’initiative dans les œuvres et associations, y établir des conseils, des fonctions qui ne soient pas trop tenues en laisse... » - In his discourse to youth in the stadium of Pacaembu, at São Paulo, pope Benedict XVI asked for “a greater commitment in the more diverse areas of action ».

¹² Cf. John 15.16: “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

God and keeps us vigilant. We invite you to use known prayers, or formulate new prayers. I propose, if they do not yet exist, to establish prayer groups for vocations. I think of prayer groups as places where everyone is welcome, including young people, and which are organized also by young people or young adults.

As you can see from these remarks, this is something that is very close to my heart. Moving forward in honesty can produce pleasing surprises for the future of the congregation. I encourage, therefore, the leadership of the Provinces, Regions and Districts to begin dialogue and discernment that leads to a new passion and creativity for vocation ministry.

To those who are in-charge of vocation ministry I ask that you not see this letter as a simple exhortation, but as an opportunity for new initiatives. Of all I ask that you discuss this in your communities and think of ways to make concrete some of what is suggested, perhaps inventing new things that are more suited to your context.

I thank you for everything you are doing in this privileged area, and I am grateful for everything you can do in the future. I invite you to live the process already under way for the synod of 2018.¹³ Our faith is sustained by the strength and permanent action of the Holy Spirit, who guides us and makes us witnesses of the gift received in our vocation. The first sign of testimony is joy and the happiness of following with freedom and gratitude Christ Jesus who called us by name and made us fall in love with God and his plan.

Following in the footsteps of the beloved disciple, we commit ourselves to a more genuine focus on the world of young people. The pathway of growing faith from the first call to commitment to witness, helps us to grasp the vocational experience as a progressive process of inner discernment and maturing of faith.

In the Heart of Jesus, we, together with young people, put all our efforts together in order to realize these new paths. May Mary, our Mother in heaven, who after listening to the angel Gabriel, said "fiat", encourage us to walk on this new and courageous path. May Father Leo Dehon intercede with God so that we may be faithful to the joy of the Gospel.



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¹³ You can find in the website youth.synod2018.va the preparatory document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the theme: "Young people, faith and vocational discernment". You can also find there the questionnaire which will help in the elaboration of the *Instrumentum Laboris*.