

THE *SINT UNUM*
IN THE WRITINGS AND APOSTOLATE OF FATHER DEHON¹

Sint Unum [that they may all be one] (Jn 17:21).

Ecce Venio [Behold, I come to do your will] (Heb 10:7).

Adveniat Regnum tuum [your kingdom come] (Mt 6:17).

These three expressions are at the core of the charismatic patrimony of the SCJ and the Dehonian family. We can say that they are like milestones in our spiritual journey that guide us to discover the treasures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, according to the faith experience of Father Dehon.

For this reason, it is very common to see these expressions on posters, articles or retreats linked to the Dehonian family.

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Today, we will reflect on the *Sint Unum*. This expression appears in the gospel of John 17:21 and translates Jesus' desire and supplication to the Father so that everyone can achieve their deepest vocation, communion with God and humanity:

***“As you, Father, are in me, and I in you,
may they also be one in us,
so that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn 17:21).***

Since the Second Vatican Council, the understanding of a Church that is communion at the service of communion has developed; in fact, this ecclesiology is the basis of the synodal process we are living today, in which *Participation, Communion, and Mission* are the keywords².

Therefore, within the framework of the synodal journey, our goal is to reflect on *Sint Unum* with a particular approach: from the writings and apostolate of Father Dehon. Why is the expression quoted so often? What does this mean for Father Dehon? How does it give a sense of belonging to the Dehonian family?

¹ The text is part of study held at “Collegio Internazionale” on the December 2022, led by Emerson Ruiz (BSP) and José Gregorio González Benítez (VEN) about “Sint Unum and Synodality”.

² SINODO EPISCOPORUM, *Per una Chiesa sinodale: comunione, partecipazione e missione: Documento Preparatorio*, 2019.

In the **Rule of Life** of SCJs, the expression *Sint Unum* appears explicitly three times³. For example, we can read at number 8: “*As members of Christ, faithful to His pressing invitation Sint Unum, they [SCJs] fraternally bear one another’s burdens in one same common life*” (Cst 8).

However, it is necessary to remember that although the expression appears explicitly only three times, implicitly, it pervades the entire structure of the text and is one of the cornerstones of our *Rule of Life*.

Therefore, today we will not study the “Rule”, but the founder’s texts. So, we will explore the founder’s various texts - books, diaries, letters, etc. - and extract some concepts or images about *Sint Unum*. How and when does this expression appear in the texts? We know that the expression is quoted hundreds of times, but what does this mean for him and what relationship does the *Sint unum* have with our Christian life inspired by Sacred Heart spirituality? The central question is: how does Father Dehon understand *Sint Unum* in his writings and in his apostolate?

Our journey is organized in two parts: in the first, we will present *Sint Unum* in Father Dehon’s writings. In the second part, we will present *Sint Unum* in his apostolate.

In the first part, which is a little longer, we take a chronological journey that will allow us to see the development of the understanding of *Sint Unum*. It is organized into three sections:

We will begin by presenting *Sint Unum* as the source of a fruitful and ecclesial communion (1). In the second section, we will contemplate the corporeality of *Sint Unum* from the icon of the vine (2). The third section will present the Trinity as the “supreme model” of *Sint Unum* (3).

Of course, there are many other elements but today we will focus on these three topics: apostolate, the vineyard, and the Trinity.

In the second part, we will look at the relationship between *Sint Unum* and the Kingdom of the Heart of Jesus. Here we will deal with the pastoral nature of *Sint Unum*: “*so that the world may believe*”.

In the conclusion, we will briefly indicate how *Sint Unum* was received by Father Dehon’s disciples.

I believe that as well as helping us to understand elements of the synodal journey, this expression also prepares us for the themes of the next General Chapter of the Dehonians,

³ Cf. Cst 8, 63, 95.

in July 2024, whose theme is: “Called to be one in a changing world: “so that they may believe” (Jn 17:21)”.

PART ONE

SINT UNUM IN THE WRITINGS OF FATHER DEHON

1. *Sint Unum* as source of ecclesial communion

Sint Unum is often used by Father Dehon to express fraternal communion, as it appears in John’s Gospel (cf. Jn 17:11, 21), a life of communion that springs from communion with God⁴.

However, there are several nuances that call for attention and discernment and I would like to quote two passages from the beginning of Father Dehon’s ministry.

The first text is from August 23, 1873: Father Dehon sent a letter to Claude-François Julien⁵ - Father Dehon’s great collaborator at the Saint Joseph Patronage, at *Saint Quentin* - to share his impressions of the Sixth Social Congress that was taking place in Nantes. We remember that the Patronage was the first social work started by Father Dehon and dedicated to young people. Father Dehon wrote as follows:

“I cannot express to you all the joy I feel at having come to this congress. I have not participated in such a noble and sacred assembly since the Council [Vatican I]. How good it is to see these eight hundred working men, gathered on the soil of Catholic Brittany, priests, men of the world, magistrates, industrialists, army officers, all full of the spirit of charity and zeal, all friends of the young and of the workers! There is truly one heart and one soul here, as there should be among Christ’s disciples, and we fulfill our motto to perfection: ‘that they may be one’”⁶.

There are some relevant points in the passage.

⁴ It is necessary to highlight a lexical issue: in Father Dehon’s texts, it is possible to find the experience of *Sint Unum* expressed in different ways: ‘*Sint Unum*’, ‘ut unum sint’, ‘ut omnes unum sint’, ‘Cor unum’ or the translations of these Latin expressions: ‘All be one’, ‘One heart and one soul’ or ‘union of hearts’ etc. Thus, understanding the term requires attention to an experience that is not limited solely to the expression “*Sint Unum*”.

⁵ Mr. Claude-François Julien was the president of the Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul and a great collaborator of the Patronage Saint Joseph.

⁶ 1LD 45007/1.

Firstly, the young Father Dehon compares the expression of unity and communion at the Sixty Congress of Social Works in Nantes with what he experienced at the First Vatican Council. They were very different events: an ecumenical council (at which Father Dehon worked) and a social works congress. There were certainly differences in these meetings, but Father Dehon's heart vibrates and is moved by these events of communion because they express a common journey of the Church, and they are the answer to the prayer of Jesus. In this sense, ecclesial communion can be understood as reparation. In other words, it is the response of faith to the division that offends God's heart.

Secondly, the reference to the communion proper to Christ's disciples is already visible at the beginning of his apostolate⁷. The expression *Sint Unum* is used five years before the foundation of the Congregation, and this shows how this expression was a spiritual compass that accompanied much of Father Dehon's life⁸. The *Sint Unum* was a kind of compass for interpreting ecclesial communion.

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The second text is **from 1877**, the year he founded St. John's College and the Congregation. During a retreat for teachers on mutual charity, he spoke to them about the importance of *Sint Unum*: "*A condition for the fruitful exercise of the apostolate... A good example: 'Ut Sint Unum sicut et nos'*"⁹.

Sint Unum is for him fraternal charity, mutual care, and the condition for a fruitful apostolate. This link between *Sint Unum* and the apostolate calls for constant reflection because this expression forms a cornerstone that sustains and gives identity to the apostolate with a SCJ accent. An apostolate that is not collaborative, communitarian and supportive has traces of sterility. In the witness of communion, friendship, and fraternal bonds, we have a fruitful apostolate that leads to faith: "*so that they may believe*"!

It is surprising to see how the beginnings of Father Dehon's projects - the Patronage or the College - are marked by *Sint Unum*, a vital and fruitful attitude for any plan of communion. Ecclesial projects are a response of unity to the desire of the Heart of Jesus. In this way, *Sint Unum* distinguishes the fruitful initiative of the Heart of Christ, the cornerstone

⁷ What "point of unity" (*notre*) is Father Dehon referring to in this text? What was the common activity or spirituality to use the expression "our motto"? The Society of St. Vincent de Paul? The Patronage of St. Joseph? We believe he is referring to the Patronage of St. Joseph.

⁸ Without making a broader analysis, it is fair to recall that the first mention of *Sint Unum* occurs in a text from 1868 (Dehon was 25 years old): the "Regulations of the Association of Seminarians of St. Clare of Rome" (cf. NTD 9130076)

⁹ RET 9170001/6; cf. NHV 13/8.

that supports the entire architecture of communion. He is the vine that unites and intertwines all of humanity.

2. *Sint Unum* and the icon of the vine: corporeality in Jesus

The image of the vine is very present in Dehon's writings to express this mystery of communion in God. In this sense, the vine is like an icon of *Sint Unum*, and this appears in many writings.

Father Dehon tells us about his experience on **St. John's Day 1887**:

"Our Lord makes me feel his goodness in the morning. At midday, various failures of respect and obedience on the part of several priests leave me discouraged and sad... Aren't there a lot of dead branches in the [Congregation]? Hasn't the "Ecce Venio" (Heb 10:7), the "Sint Unum" (Jn 17:11) of our vocation been forgotten? We must constantly cry out to Our Lord to give us back our life"¹⁰.

We would like to emphasize two points.

Firstly, this short passage clearly presents *Ecce Venio* and *Sint Unum* as constitutive elements of our vocation, realities that identify us as a Dehonian family. *Ecce Venio* and *Sint Unum* articulate and support each other because any communion (*Sint Unum*) is impossible without a personal exodus, that is, an openness (*Ecce Venio*) to divine love that leads to self-offering. But, according to Fr. Dehon, some brothers have forgotten something that is vital to our communion and identity.

Secondly, Father Dehon uses the icon of the vine and the branches (cf. Jn 15) to talk about *Sint Unum*. Staying away from communion, careless about respect and obedience, according to the image used by Dehon, means to resemble withered and bare branches, in other words, not to be part of the vine that is Jesus. Thus, *Sint Unum* translates this dimension of corporeality in Jesus.

For Father Dehon, there is no true communion among us if we are not united and inserted into Jesus. In this sense, we present an excerpt from the book of *Crowns of Love*¹¹, from 1905:

"Every time we carry out an act of our own will, we destroy in ourselves something of the life of the Heart of Jesus, we diminish the Heart of Jesus, for He is the vine of which we

¹⁰ NQT 4/46.

¹¹ *Couronnes d'amour au Sacré Cœur*, 3 voll., Casterman, Tournai, 1905, pp. 633 [CAM].

are the branches, for He is the head of the mystical body of which we are members; we take away a branch of that vine, a branch of that body, a fiber of that Heart. Yes, each of our hearts must be a fiber of the Heart of Jesus and have only one pulse under the impulse of the beats of the Heart of Jesus”¹².

Sint Unum is the call to form one body in Jesus. Every time we obstruct communion with each other because of acts of our selfish will, we also break communion with the Heart of Christ. *Sint Unum* is to attune ourselves to the Heart of Jesus, to form one heart with Him, to feel with Him (to have the same beat). To the extent that we live in harmony with one another in God, we expand our communion until the Heart of Christ is the heart of the world.

Thus, for Father Dehon, *Sint Unum* is not just a motto, but a spiritual journey, an insertion into the Heart of Jesus through communion with others.

The vine (Jn 15) translates Jesus’ prayer into images: “Ut unum sint” (Jn 17:21). Remaining in Jesus is a condition for ecclesial communion and especially for the Congregation that Father Dehon had founded. The *sint unum* is realized through a fruitful union that leads to common projects, joyful belonging, and missionary progress. *Sint Unum* is never static, but a capacity to embrace discarded realities, to advance to new borders and new peripheries.

3. The Trinity, supreme model of *Sint Unum*

Another passage that broadens our understanding of *Sint Unum* can be found in *The Year with the Sacred Heart* - also published in 1919 - in which Father Dehon insists on fraternal union and presents the Trinity as the supreme model of all communions:

*“Peace is to be found in the union with our brothers, which Our Lord recommended to us so much. This union has as its supreme type of the divine unity in the Most Holy Trinity! When our Lord was praying for us, he said to his Father: ‘Make them one as we are one; make them one in us’ [cf. Jn 17:21]”*¹³.

Ecclesial communion is nothing other than immersion in Trinitarian union, a dynamic communion that nourishes the Church’s common journey, our journey together. Believing in the Trinity leads us to a mature faith of inclusion, of acceptance and availability so that all may be one. This is not a fragmented or partial union, but a communion that

¹² CAM 1/163

¹³ *L’Année avec le Sacré Cœur*, 2 voll., Casterman, Tournai, 1919, pp. 698 + 591 [ASC].

involves and embraces. This moment in Father Dehon's life, after the war, coincides with a continuous and "thanksgiving" remembrance of various people who passed through his life.

Gradually, Father Dehon's life became an intense and involving experience of Trinitarian love. In *Notes Quotidiennes*, he wrote:

*"I am learning to know and savor the Holy Trinity better and to live in the Heart of Jesus. [...] Now this devotion seems very simple to me, it speaks to the heart. It is the persons who must be considered distinctly. The Father is my Creator, Author, and Preserver of life. The Word [...] became man in order to be my brother even more intimately [...] The Holy Spirit is my divine director, my comforter"*¹⁴.

Sint Unum is less a search for and more an abandonment to divine communion, the paradigm and source of all human fulfillment. In the Trinity, he finds the supreme model of *Sint Unum*, true communion, unity in the diversity of persons.

Father Dehon wrote several texts on the Trinity, but this theme appears above all in the last years of his life. It was an abandonment to the Trinity, to a more intense communion with God, lived with fewer pastoral activities, but with a constant intercessory remembrance of the people who had passed through his life.

Concluding the first part, it is possible to see that the chronological journey of *Sint Unum* through Father Dehon's writings reveals a development in his understanding: starting from *Sint Unum* as communion and fruitfulness in Jesus, we arrive at the contemplation of the Trinity, the highest expression of communion.

PART TWO

***SINT UNUM* IN THE APOSTOLATE OF FATHER DEHON**

Sint Unum is Jesus' prayer to the Father that the world may believe. As a call to awaken faith through our witness to communion, it is at the same time a call for the world to believe that universal fraternity and communion are possible. The Dehonian family is called to be "*witnesses of communion*" (Cst 59) and of hope. Believing means entering into this dynamic of Trinitarian love and communion among people, "*where we are all brothers and sisters, where there is room for every person discarded by our societies, where justice and peace shine forth*", as Pope Francis reminds us in the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*¹⁵. Our

¹⁴ NQT 40/80-83.

¹⁵ *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 278.

vocation is to bear witness to this persistent hope of social friendship and fraternal hospitality.

For Father Dehon, fraternity, equality, and freedom are only possible through the Kingdom of the Heart of Jesus and the communion given by Jesus. Only communion in the body of Christ allows for true solidarity, a sense of community and perseverance in reconciliation¹⁶. Our prayer imploring the coming of the Kingdom - *Adveniat Regnum Tuum* - blends with Jesus' prayer imploring the communion of the disciples.

Inserted in the heart opened at the cross, we realize our deepest vocation: children (sons) in the Son, we are brothers of all. That is, the true fraternity. *Sint Unum* is an experience of communion that grows progressively; in other words, union with our Lord is a personal experience that leads us to communion with others.

The *Sint Unum* has an apostolic and open dimension: “so that the world may believe.” The expression “*Kingdom of the Heart of Jesus in souls and societies*”, which translates a movement of communion that starts from personal experience, passes through communion with others and reaches a broader communion in universal society.

An example of the extension of *Sint Unum* and its confluence with the *Kingdom of the Heart of Jesus* can be found in his social work, in which Father Dehon was never a man of the trenches (or ideological bubbles, to use a current expression). We can say that the understanding that unity was a gift from God prevented Father Dehon from falling into ideological discourses about social unity. Father Dehon did not hide in a comfortable political position, but always fought for political and social agreement: there is no unity without going outside oneself. In this sense, there is no *Sint Unum* without a *Ecce Venio*.

In the so-called social years (1893-1903), Father Dehon sought - as far as possible - to conciliate French Catholics in the world of politics. According to the Founder, France should turn to the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII to move towards social and political reconciliation, the first step towards a united Christian Europe. It was necessary to overcome the horizontal and ideological divisions of Catholics, but also to overcome the temptation of the vertical division of the “class conflict”.

Still in the political sphere, a particular expression of *Sint Unum* was the defense of small corporations, trade unions, local social projects, etc. This idea originated in *Rerum*

¹⁶ Recently, in the Letter of the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to the People of God, this relationship was clearly stressed: “*In fact, the cross is the only cathedra of the One who, having given himself for the salvation of the world, entrusted His disciples to His Father, so that “they may all be one” (John 17:21)*” (Letter of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to the People of God. October 2023).

Novarum, but Father Dehon gives a new meaning to this principle in some texts and articles that show that Jesus' wish was fulfilled in these initiatives. The response of faith is the union of hearts through social projects, the articulation of the small cells of the mystical body of Christ in view of the renewal of the world.

The influences of *Sint Unum* on Father Dehon's social and ecclesial activity extend to many different moments and realities. At this point in the synod's journey, we can also recall his relationship with the laity. According to Fr. Marcial Maçaneiro, a SCJ theologian from Brazil:

"[...] once again, our charismatic heritage reveals its value when we recall the role that Father Dehon reserved for the laity in the social apostolate, in education and in the Adveniat Regnum Tuum Association. In fact, many lay people took part in social projects alongside Father Dehon, with his competence and leadership. An admirable fact for the Church of the 19th century"¹⁷.

Indeed, the synodal journey and the celebration of the next general chapter will be milestones in the greater participation of lay people in the Dehonian family, as was already highlighted in the last general conference, celebrated in February 2022.

Conclusion

Let's conclude by talking quickly about the reception of *Sint Unum* in the Dehonian family.

In 1926, almost a year after Father Dehon's death, Fr. Philippe¹⁸ - the new general superior - wrote a circular letter to the entire Congregation at the end of the IX General Chapter, reporting his impressions of the Chapter. He wrote:

"Truly Jesus was among us with his grace and blessing, supplicated with fervent prayers and adoration, for long months, here and in every house. Jesus was present with his evangelical spirit of concord and perfect union to bring about the Sint Unum, to which our venerable founder urged us unceasingly"¹⁹.

¹⁷ Marcial MAÇANEIRO, *Espressioni dehoniane della sinodalità*, 2022 [inedit].

¹⁸ Joseph Laurent PHILIPPE (1877-1956) entered the Institute in 1895 and made his profession in 1897. He was a teacher at the Apostolic School of Fayet for four years (1896-1900) and continued his studies in Paris and Rome, where he was ordained a priest in 1904. He then taught exegesis and hermeneutics at the Luxembourg Scholasticate, before being appointed General Secretary of the Congregation (1911). Elected General Assistant and Counselor (1919), he succeeded the Founder in 1926. In 1935, he was appointed Coadjutor Bishop of Luxembourg, assuming the chair in the same year, where he remained until his death (1956).

¹⁹ Joseph PHILIPPE, *Lettera Circolare "Molti di voi" (Storia del IX Capitolo Generale)*, 20.05.1926 (*Lettre circulaire "En vrais prêtres"*, 20.05.1926).

Fr. Philippe mentions Father Dehon's incessant exhortation to the Congregation to live the *Sint Unum*, that is, the spirit of concord and unity, of which the Chapter and its preparation represented a fruitful image. It seems that without this charismatic unity among us, the charism would lack a backbone, because the *Sint Unum* in Father Dehon is a spiritual and social journey, matured throughout his life, with the Trinity as the supreme model of communion.

Sint Unum, in Father Dehon's writings, expresses the communion between us in God, the union among us is realized through insertion in Jesus. *Sint Unum* is living this dimension of corporeality in Jesus. *Sint Unum* is born from union with our Lord, which is our prophetic charism: "To make union with Christ, in his love for the Father and for men, the principle and center of our life" (Cst 17).

Today, the synodal journey and the next General Chapter are an impulse to excavate new dimensions of our charismatic heritage, searching for the deep roots of *Sint Unum*. The paschal fruitfulness of *Sint Unum* impels us to push the boundaries of charity through care for our common home and ecumenical and interreligious dialog.

For all Dehonian family, the *Sint Unum* synthesizes this dynamic union with Christ's oblation, where vocation and mission are intertwined: the invitation to be "one in God" becomes a missionary sending to "be witnesses [...] of communion" (Cst. 59), because life and witness are the privileged channels through which the gospel reaches the heart of the world.

Recently Pope Francis noted that "the Lord did not command that His disciples be united. No, He prayed to the Father for us"²⁰. So, I would like to invite you to conclude this reflection by saying together the prayer for unity, which can be found at *Fratelli Tutti*.

*O God, Trinity of love,
from the profound communion of your divine life,
pour out upon us a torrent of fraternal love.
[...]
Come, Holy Spirit, show us your beauty,
reflected in all the peoples of the earth,
so that we may discover anew
that all are important and all are necessary,
different faces of the one humanity
that God so loves. Amen.*

²⁰ FRANCIS, Audience 20.01.2021.