A Conversation around Couronnes d'amour

What happens when we read Dehon not just to understand his ideas, but to let them shape our lives? At our November 6 book club meeting, SCJs in North America explored the North American Dehonian Theological Commission's contribution to the most recent theological seminar in Taubaté. We invited the Commission's chairperson, John van den Hengel, to summarize the contribution and guide our discussion.

We discussed the Commission's paper, *The Implied Author and Reader of Couronnes d'amour*, alongside the European Theological Commission's response. Together, these texts ask how Dehon's meditations on the Sacred Heart seek to transform the reader—and what this means for Dehonians today. The following summary draws on John's presentation and the results of the conversation between John and the participants who attended in person in the Provincialate boardroom and on Zoom.

The North American contribution

The North American paper reads *Couronnes d'amour* through the concepts of the "implied author" and "implied reader": the authorial voice that emerges from the text and the reader it seeks to form. Rather than focusing primarily on the historical Dehon, it presents the work as a **spiritual exercise composed of meditations**, not primarily a theological treatise. The reader becomes a meditant, contemplating the mysteries of Christ in the Incarnation, Passion and Eucharist and gradually moving toward union with Christ and what Dehon calls "pure love."

The paper places this spiritual journey within the French School of Spirituality, especially Pierre de Bérulle, and connects Dehon's understanding of the interior life with Francis de Sales. Through contemplation, the reader is invited to make Christ's dispositions and love his or her own. The Pauline expression, **"I live now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20),** captures this movement. The Sacred Heart is thus more than an object of devotion: it is a way of entering into Christ's self-giving love. This journey culminates in Eucharistic union with Christ.

What the European Commission appreciates

The European Commission's response welcomes the paper's attention to Dehon's later spiritual writings and his relationship with the French School and Francis de Sales. It also values the recognition that his meditations are **meant to be practiced and to transform the reader**. Its questions build on these strengths.

Its main concern is methodological: does the paper follow through on its approach? Although it begins with the implied author and implied reader, much of the analysis shifts toward a history of theological and spiritual ideas. The European Commission calls for

closer attention to **how the text itself constructs its author and reader.** It also questions the use of Dehon's private diaries, *Notes quotidiennes*, to interpret *Couronnes d'amour*: if the approach distinguishes the implied author from the historical Dehon, how should those diaries inform the reading?

The response also asks who the **implied reader** is. Must this reader be a member of Dehon's Congregation, or might the readership be wider? It calls for a closer examination of the spiritual attitudes, assumptions and expectations that *Couronnes d'amour* cultivates in its reader.

Why this conversation matters today

These questions reach beyond academic method. The European response asks how Dehon's mystical spirituality connects with his social commitment—and how *Couronnes d'amour* might be used today in pastoral ministry, religious formation and spiritual accompaniment.

At the heart of this conversation is a simple question:

What kind of person does Dehon want his reader to become?

If *Couronnes d'amour* is a transformative spiritual exercise, reading it means more than understanding Dehon's theology. It means allowing the meditations to shape how we love, pray and live.

For Dehonians today, this offers a way to reconnect **contemplation and action, union with Christ and engagement with the world.** The European response identifies this integration of the mystical and the social as an important contemporary challenge.

Questions for discussion

Three questions can help us take this reflection further:

1. **What kind of reader does *Couronnes d'amour* seek to form?**
2. **How do its meditations bring about that transformation?**
3. **How might Dehonians live this "pure love" today, connecting interior life with social engagement?**

Together, these questions shift our attention from "What did Dehon say?" to **"What is his text asking us to become?"**

Our sincere thanks to John van den Hengel for guiding this conversation on reading Dehon today. A video of John's presentation will be available soon.