



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE FATHERS OF THE SACRED HEART**

Friday, 30 May 1997

Dear Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus,

1. I welcome you to this meeting which is taking place on the occasion of the 20th Ordinary General Chapter of your congregation. I cordially thank the Superior General, Fr Virginio Bressanelli, for his words expressing the sentiments of all and illustrating the theme and objectives of these days of prayer, reflection and discernment.

I was pleased to learn that today your institute is present on four continents with about 2,400 religious and is therefore a richly diversified ecclesial reality. During your Chapter, your aim has been to work out some guidelines for the congregation's progress and activity in the various Provinces, in order to make the most of the members and gifts belonging to your religious family, in service to the Church and the Gospel.

In this intention, you certainly find support in the Communion of Saints from your venerable father founder, Léon Jean Dehon, the decree of whose heroic virtues I have had the joy of promulgating. I know that this is an important moment of grace for your congregation, a reason for renewed fervour, and I rejoice with you all.

Christian life, and even more the consecrated life, is a life of self-giving love (cf. *Vita consecrata*, n. 75). Fr Dehon was thoroughly convinced of this: while still a young priest, he felt called to respond to the love of the Heart of Christ with a consecration of missionary and reparatory love.

Dear brothers, continue generously on this path, aware that to be faithful to the founder's charism, it is first necessary to foster in yourselves that docility to the Holy Spirit which enabled him to

adhere fully to divine inspiration. The vitality of your religious family depends precisely on the intensity of your spiritual life, expressed primarily in prayer. The *Heart of Jesus*, dear friends, is the focal point of your consecration. That Jesus, on whom the whole Church fixes her gaze especially this year, the first phase of the three-year preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000, shows contemporary man his Heart, the source of life and holiness. King and centre of all hearts, Christ asks consecrated persons not only to contemplate him, but to enter into his Heart, to be able to live and work in constant communion with his sentiments.

The radicalism of following Christ, fidelity to your vows, brotherhood, apostolic service, ecclesial communion: everything derives from this inexhaustible source of grace.

2. The priority objectives of your Chapter rightly included a suitable *formation*, continual and adapted to the various phases of the life of the candidate and consecrated person. In my Post-Synodal Exhortation *Vita consecrata* I wrote: "Within the consecrated life there is a need for a renewed and loving commitment to the intellectual life, for dedication to study as a means of integral formation and as a path of asceticism which is extraordinarily timely, in the face of present-day cultural diversity. A lessened commitment to study can have grave consequences for the apostolate, by giving rise to a sense of marginalization and inferiority, or encouraging superficiality and rash initiatives" (n. 98).

Therefore an integral part of initial and continuing formation is study, *deep study of theology*, indispensable both for the quality of one's personal life and for serving the encounter between the Gospel and cultures. A fervent spiritual and intellectual life, in harmony with the Church's Tradition and the teachings of the Magisterium, will enable you to overcome the possible temptations of halting and retreating from goals already reached, significant though they may be.

Dear sons of Fr Dehon, faithful to your founder, *love the Church and her Pastors*. People are impressed by the bonds of esteem, even of friendship, which linked Fr Dehon to the Roman Pontiffs throughout his long life. Leo XIII, for example, considered him an excellent interpreter of his Magisterium. Benedict XV was his personal friend and entrusted him with building the Basilica of Christ the King in Rome. Make sure that your attitudes and projects are always marked by active collaboration with the Church's hierarchy, especially in the delicate task of forming and enlightening the consciences of the faithful, who are frequently disoriented and confused.

I repeat to you what I wrote to all consecrated persons: "You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also *a great history still to be accomplished!* Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 110). Fr Dehon's charism is a fruitful gift for building the civilization of love, since the soul of the new evangelization is the witness of divine charity: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." (Jn 3:16).

3. Keep your missionary ardour ever alive! *One hundred years ago the first missionaries* of your institute set out for the Congo, led by Fr Gabriel Grison, who spent his life among the peoples in the region of Kisangani, of which he became Vicar Apostolic. I am pleased to recall that I knelt at his grave during my first Apostolic Visit to Africa in May 1980. With deep admiration I learned that you have not left any of your missions in Congo-Zaire, accepting all the risks of the present time. God will certainly bless your courageous witness of love for Christ and for the local populations so sorely tried. Together with you, dear friends, I would like once again to commend to the Lord in prayer the sons and daughters of those tortured regions on the African continent, so that they may find the way to reconciliation and development.

Dear brothers, I am also pleased to see that you intend to enliven every aspect and activity of your *congregation* with a missionary spirit. In fact, everything in the Church is directed to the proclamation of Christ. My cordial hope is that you may always be able to combine in fruitful harmony fraternal communion and apostolic commitment, your outreach in the world and full harmony with the legitimate Pastors, attention to your confrères, especially those who are elderly, sick or in difficulty, and appreciation of the value of each individual for the common mission.

May this apostolic desire also imbue the other “branches” of the *Family* which follows Fr Dehon’s spirituality, that is, the branch of consecrated persons in secular life and the lay Dehonians.

4. Dear brothers, in a few days’ time we will be celebrating the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart: the Church’s liturgy offers you the richest source of inspiration for your Chapter. I pray that the Lord, through the intercession of Mary most holy, will fill each one of you with his wisdom, so that your assembly may produce the fruits for which you hope. To this end, I cordially impart to you and to all the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus a special Apostolic Blessing, which I willingly extend to the whole Dehonian Family.

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