

A Symbol in decline: The Sacred Heart

A Reflection on the Book of Marcello Neri *Giustizia della Misericordia*¹

In 2016 Marcello Neri who teaches Catholic theology at the German University of Flensburg, published a book that may come as a surprise to most Dehonians, perhaps most to those Dehonians to whom it is directly addressed: the European Dehonians. The book is an expansion of a paper Neri read at the Seminario teologico SCJ, held at Taubaté, Brazil between February 2 – 8, 2014. The conference was entitled, “Uno stile per lo Spirito: Temi antropologici negli scritti spirituali de L. Dehon”² (A Style for the Spirit: Anthropological Themes in the Spiritual Writings of L. Dehon). This book, published in 2016, is a clarion call for Dehonians, especially those in Europe, to have a new look at their spirituality as a possible response to the dechristianization of Europe and the devastating process of globalization and technicization of European culture.

If the article was an exploration of themes in Dehon’s writings, the book goes much further. Neri believes that the Dehonian spirituality has an important contribution to make in the current transcultural and globalized context of Europe in which the Gospel is to be lived today. What is significant is that as the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart is in serious decline in Europe, as is the devotion of the Sacred Heart, Neri is convinced that the devotion to the Sacred Heart and the spirituality of Leo Dehon has an important message to give to the spiritual crisis of Europe. A key guideline in the book is derived from the ministry of Pope Francis which at the time of the theological seminar in Taubaté in 2014 had barely begun to show its pastoral contours. The book dares to ask whether such a revamped approach to the devotion of the Sacred Heart and the foundational charism of Leo Dehon can inject new life into the Congregation in Europe as well as to European culture as center of gravity of the Dehonian congregation has shifted from Europe to Asia and Africa?

For a community dedicated to the Sacred Heart, a devotion that has experienced a notable decline of adherence in the Catholic Church in Europe since the middle of the 20th century, a proposal to inject new energy into the living of the devotion in the 21st century should rouse particular interest.

What is at the heart of this counter-intuitive yet intriguing proposal? `

- It is a time-bound, contingent proposal. It situates itself in 21st century Europe where the process of modernity it inherited from the 17th century is coming to its dramatic conclusion in the process of globalization and of the era known as modernity. It also

¹ Marcello Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia: Europa, cristianesimo e spirituale dehoniana*, Bologna: Edizione Dehonane Bologna, 2016, 136 pages.

² *Anthropologia Cordis: Seminario teologico SCJ (Taubaté, Brazil) 2-8 Febbraio 2014*, Roma: Studia Dehoniana, # 3, 2016, p. 293 – 344.

situates itself in a time in which the devotion to the Sacred Heart has been in serious decline for half a century, and must re-invent itself in order to engage its primordial message. It situates itself in a time in which the Catholic Church and the way it images itself and presents itself in Europe is in crisis. For Neri the catholic church must free itself from the stranglehold of the imagery of itself as a separate or alternative reality in the world. He situates Christianity as a movement which in this particular time is reconfiguring itself by finding anew energy outside of Europe. This epochal shift will be ending the overwhelming influence of Europe upon the understanding of the Gospel since the Middle Ages. Neri marks the moment of the demission of Pope Benedict and the new ministry of Pope Francis in 2013 as a marker in this epochal shift for the church. He credits the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* as a landmark document, inaugurating this new era. For this new interpretation, Neri turns to the devotion to the Sacred Heart, as evoked by Pope Francis and as articulated in the spiritual writings of Leo Dehon, as the new spiritual architecture for this era. It contains in nuce a new articulation of our faith experience for humanity in today's moment of history. It is, in short, a proposal to the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart when its foundational devotion is in serious danger of the extinction in Europe, to reinvent itself in a new mode of living its faith.

- At the core of this proposal lies a revival of the devotion-in-decline of the Sacred Heart as a symbol of a living faith in the proposed style of living in the contemporary world by Pope Francis. It is focussed on a faith lived as *agape*, or as a restated outgrowth of Dehon's faith experience (in Dehon's terms, as pure love). Within this vision the Congregation is to act as a signpost of this faith lived as love through the practice of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. Here an important role is given to Leo Dehon's seminal devotional words of oblation, expiation, reparation and victim.

This succinct presentation of Neri's dense thesis requires to be unpacked in order to grasp its full message and to give ourselves a moment to evaluate it. We start with Neri's interpretation of the European situation.

Europe at the end of the era of modernity

1. The proposal of Neri is not to be universalized. It is precisely situated in a Europe which finds itself at the end of an era, characterized as modernity, that has profoundly changed Europe's self-image. It is an era that now finds itself in an impasse. Modernity's excessive search for certainty and security, its focus on the self as the origin of meaning, and its capitalism and its technological self-realization has exhausted its original promise. It did not deliver the proclaimed freedom, equality and fraternity. It has led to a crisis in the search for meaning and a decline in the institutional forms of religion. As a consequence, there has been, what Neri calls, "a radically changed topography of the religious relation with God, making a direct relation with God more and more

impossible.”³ Notions such as transcendence, the absolute, heaven, beyond have lost their meaning and have become ambiguous. Europe has, for this reason, become at the end of modernity a sort of laboratory for a new relationship with God that is no longer based on space but on time, in the sense of a hope for some sort of utopian future as opposed to an expectation for immediate results. Neri calls for a rediscovery that is not dependent on nature or culture but one that takes place in the cracks of time, something that Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* has called the new exodus.⁴

2. In the changed topography of the relationship with God in Europe, the older traditional, institutional forms of religion are losing their capacity to bind people. This traditional mode consisted in viewing the Church as an alternative or a separated reality in relation to the world. The moment in which the impasse of Church as a separate reality became palpable happened in the demission of Pope Benedict XVI and the innovative mission of his successor, Pope Francis, as Bishop of Rome. Ratzinger’s vision of Church had imploded because of his anti-modern sentiment and because his dogmatic vision could not encompass the social expansion of the Christian logos. It had become impracticable and incredible.⁵ It cultivated an idea of Church immune from ordinary living but also blind to its own defects (mostly symbolized by the sexual abuse scandals). Its structural form had become inauthentic and lost credibility. According to Neri, this form of being church has been overtaken by history. It has reached a point of no return. The church is desperately in need of a new configuration.

3. The new style of living the faith after the break away from modernity in its European form became visible in the election of Bergoglio as Bishop of Rome and his choice of the name Francis. One of the first acts in which he showed the break with the past was in the publication, within the first year, of a programmatic Apostolic Exhortation which pointed the Church away from the highly intellectualized vision of Benedict to the rudiments of the faith found in *Evangelii gaudium*. In the Exhortation, Pope Francis defined his way of being a Christian today. Coming so soon after the epochal crisis of Benedict’s demission, it came as a surprise that Francis pointed to the future with new hope by going back to the origins of faith in the gospel of Jesus. Francis proposed a new style of faith away from the modernity of the 19th and 20th centuries. Its attraction lay in its appeal to all, not only to those who have the traditional care for others in faith, but to all humans. Here no one is exempt and no one is above another. What Francis proposed was a way of living the Gospel in a church that is not a separate reality but open to all. He had called it a way of moving to the peripheries, his way of being “out of

³ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 18,

⁴ Pope Francis, The Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*, # 222-223.

⁵ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 29. This way of being church showed in the attempts to have a separate education, a separate press alongside the civic forms. It makes the church to be “the last great orphan of modernity.” P. 30.

the sacristy”, to use the language of Dehon. For Neri, that shift could only have come from the Holy Spirit.⁶ Believers today interact within a much greater variety of networks and systems than they did previously. The voice of believers is not a lone voice outside of these networks. Hence, faith is no longer the unique catalyst, the only voice that speaks of justice and truth. Today we must interact with a multiplicity of other factors and elements.⁷ The church must learn to live within these new parameters.

The role of the Devotion to the Sacred Heart

1. Within the Apostolic Exhortation and in the practices of Pope Francis, Neri sought to find a point of reference to articulate the shift. What he found was something that was missed by most commentators. It was the retaking of the devotion to the Sacred Heart by Pope Francis. It is no secret that the devotion seems more like a relic of another era. The devotion has clearly gone into a decline since the middle of the 20th century and has become marginal even for the Congregations of religious whose spirituality was inspired by the devotion. The devotion seems irreconcilable with the present. For those within these congregations, it is a spirituality in search of itself. Historically the devotion bears all the marks of the reaction of ordinary Catholics during the era of rationalism between the 17th to the 20th centuries – the age of modernity – to set up an popular alternative, quite often bearing the religious face of the Middle Ages. Now, with the ending of modernity, the devotion to the Sacred Heart in the traditional form has lost its capacity to capture the spiritual desire of people. And yet, Pope Francis has invoked the devotion in a new context during his trip to Ecuador. Ecuador was the first country in 1874 to consecrated itself to the Sacred Heart. During his visit to Ecuador in 2015, in a moment of personal prayer, Francis recalled the consecration: “I think I must tell you , it came as a message of Jesus.”⁸ For Pope Francis this was not a return to the traditional devotion to the Sacred Heart, but the Sacred Heart in a new form. For Pope Francis, it was a realization, a deeply spiritual insight in a moment of prayer.
2. This evocation of the devotion to the Sacred Heart was not to reinstall, what Neri calls, “a catholic occupation of a public space”, an introducing of an antiquated catholicity into a colonial context, but “a particular mode of the being of faith.”⁹ As he interprets Pope Francis, he understands this devotion to the Sacred Heart primarily as a bringing into the present of the bodily manifestation of the love and mercy of God. What drew Neri’s attention in the message of Pope Francis was the “link he made between the imagery of the Sacred Heart and the notion of mercy: the gesture of God’s being with us.”¹⁰ His devotion to the Sacred Heart is a spirituality that goes from the theme of the

⁶ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 27-28.

⁷ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 30

⁸ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 34.

⁹ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 35.

¹⁰ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 35.

love to God's mode of being and appearing among us, that is, to God's mercy. The core of this current devotion to the Sacred Heart, according to Pope Francis, touches on what is to give humanity the ultimate reason why they ought to love God or why it is just to love God. That reason for Neri is God's mercy – hence the title of Neri's book: *The Justice of Mercy*.¹¹ To him that is the core of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. It is the ultimate reason why God is so lovable. It is to be found in the treasure of God's mercy. And that core is worth preserving and being maintained in the present situation of the world. That is also the point at which Neri introduces Dehonian spirituality.

Dehonian spirituality in a post-modern world

1. The proclamation of God's love and mercy in the current globalized and technological world Neri assigns to the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart. He sees here a clear line from the spirituality of Leo Dehon. The Priests of the Sacred Heart are to act as the guardians of the message and practice of the devotion to Sacred Heart in its modern dress, as delineated by Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium*. It is not an easy mission because it will have to be fulfilled in the face of the historic decline of the devotion in the Church but also within the Congregation itself. The Congregation would have to undertake the role to help restore the devotion, not in its 19th and early 20th century form but in its new configuration, as outlined by Pope Francis. It would mean that the Congregation would proclaim the devotion as integral to a lived faith – grounded in practices - in a church no longer separated from the world. It is to this world in all its diversity and dispersion that the devotion of the Sacred Heart has much to offer. Here are some of the nuggets of Neri's thoughts about the Sacred Heart, Dehonians and the modern world.
 - a. In his analysis of the Church Neri is much impressed by the position of Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* that the church is in need of a restoration of a spiritual understanding of humanity in all its fragility and precariousness. There is much in the glad tidings of the God of Jesus that is highly appealing to a globalized world, especially its joy.¹² This appeal of the Gospel of the God of Jesus is summarized in the Devotion of the Sacred Heart. Neri sees this way of being with God at the core of Pope Francis message about the Gospel of the God of Jesus. But he also sees it Fr. Dehon's passion, so often expressed in his meditations, for a deeply personal entry into the dispositions of the heart of Jesus. Neri sees Dehonians as "persons capable of feeling and compassion for the profound dimensions ... and desires of wounded humanity."¹³ Neri sees this sensuality that touches on the physicality of the Heart of Christ as an essential

¹¹ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 35.

¹² Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 47.

¹³ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 48.

dimension for Dehonians. It is their mission to “cultivate this in their vital approach to things and to persons.”¹⁴ For Dehon, after all, God had become present as a body in his Son: “By taking on flesh, in clothing myself in a sensible, visible and tangible form, I have made the love of God palpable, perceptible to the senses of humans.” (VAM 96) The way of the devotion to the Sacred Heart is a way of *agape*, but an *agape*, that “has the touch, feeling and smell of flesh.”¹⁵

- b. This sensual approach leads to a specific way of attaching oneself to God in this time, what Neri calls “a contingent foundational experience of faith.”¹⁶ He found it in the way the Pope Francis said he discovered it in the faith – the popular religion - of the Ecuadorian people. I have alluded to the experience above. There Neri linked the mode of being of love with that of mercy. What is significant for Neri is that the Pope did not make a universally valid proclamation. He spoke of a contingent experience; it was a concrete experience that allowed him to place the Sacred Heart in the current space of faith. (p.33) It is, however, an experience shared by many as a contemporary experience of faith.. Pope Francis said that it came to him in a moment in prayer in which Jesus made him aware what the Ecuadorians “have of riches, spiritual wealth, religious feelings, depth coming from having had the courage – yes, there have been difficult moments – the courage to dedicate [their] nation to the Heart of Christ, this divine and human heart which loves us so much. And I see it a bit like this: divine and human.” For Francis this was a moment of the incomprehensible bringing together the divine and human, this divine love in a human love. This coming together of the divine and the human, is for Neri “a particular mode of the being of faith.” (35) For Francis, what was significant is the bodily manifestation – the physical heart – of the love of God which appeared as the forgiveness of human sins. Here Francis did what subsequently the Congregation did in its XXIII General Chapter of 2015, he linked the imagery of the Sacred Heart and with the imagery of mercy as a gesture of God’s being with us. (35)
- c. This spiritual vision was restated again by Pope Francis in the later Apostolic Constitution *Gaudete et exsultate* (2018). The Apostolic Constitution seeks to “repropose the call to holiness... for our time” (#2) It too is a restatement of human self as “a life ... constantly offered for others, even until death.” (# 5) Much like *Evangelii gaudium*, *Gaudete et exsultate* hyperbolically asks its readers to both fill the present moment “to the brim with love”¹⁷ and to live this unconditional love “in the midst of human weakness” (# 18): charity to the full

¹⁴ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 49.

¹⁵ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 50.

¹⁶ Neri, *Giustizia della Misericordia*, p. 32.

¹⁷ A phrase from the Vietnamese Cardinal François Nguyen van Thuan, in par. 17.

(#21) together with “a heartfelt and prayerful acknowledgement of our own limitations. (#50) It is a living the excess, God’s surplus, despite our weakness, despite sin. It once again insists that we are able to love with the Lord’s unconditional love, but not of our own power but with the gift of the Lord’s life shared within our fragile lives. (#18) Pope Francis keeps insisting on the giftedness, the beyond of grace that settles in the midst of life pushes life to newness: “He impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond. He takes us to where humanity is most wounded. ...God is always greater than our plans and schemes. Unafraid of the fringes, he himself became a fringe (Cf Phil 2:6-8; John 1:14). So if we dare to go to the fringe, we will find him there; indeed he is already there.” (#135) The text is addressed to “saint ‘next door’” and calls everyone to take the low road that leads us to the lowly, to the fringes, where the Father reveals Self. (#170)

- d. This is at the core of Dehonian spirituality and is, for Neri, the justification and legitimacy of this spirituality for the church and for the world. This is not the identical spirituality that in Dehon’s time was still too tied to the political and social status of France, nor the spirituality that speaks of God in terms of being, truth, absolute or transcendent, but an outgrowth of the spirituality of the Sacred Heart for our time which presents God as *agape*, as mercy. To present God as *agape* and as mercy takes the devotion beyond conceptual categories, beyond thinking God. *Agape* and mercy are generative experiences of faith. This is a humanistic, positive faith: a revelation of God in the materiality of the heart of Christ. (36) This is corporeal realism. Only this can reach the affective dimension of the human-divine relationship. It suggests that the primary self-communication of God takes place in creation. This is the outcome of a refusal to believe in a God found in a separated reality. God is first revealed in creation, not in some separate reality. For Neri, this is the Christian difference. (37) In this corporeal Jesus is the face of God. Dehon was deeply aware of this. It is, in fact, the geniality of his devotion to the Sacred Heart (see OS I 535) according to Neri. The body is something accessible to phenomenology. This corporeality allows us to have a phenomenology of the reality of God. It also allows Dehon’s spirituality to engage anthropology: “If the body is the quivering of God before wounded humanity, and mercy is the vibration of his beatitude... then Dehon’s spirituality is a moment of transition between the end of modernity and the various experiences of human loving.” (39)
- e. This leads Neri to consider that there must be a new “architecture” of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. He sees the devotion as leading to a form of church that exists as justice for the human. That, according to Neri, is what Pope Francis has tried to undertake in his change in the protocols and procedures of

the Church. It is a Church whose primary concern is social justice. As he wrote in *Evangelii gaudium*: “The Gospel is about *the kingdom of God* (cf. Luke 4:43); it is about loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that he reigns with us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace, and dignity.” (# 180) The devotion is about the impact on society. *Agape* is not only in my private relations but includes our social relations. *Agape* is about a God who is present to the world and is a force in changing the relations in the world. (40) As Pope Francis says, “to believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in everyone means realizing that he seeks to penetrate every human situation and all social bonds.”¹⁸ This is also the route laid out by Dehon, says Neri, who urged his followers to take on the dispositions of Christ in their lives of faith. (MSC 144-148)¹⁹ To see the Sacred Heart as a spiritual architecture of faith is a way of giving new form to the Church in its attention to the poor and in its quest for justice for all in the present situation. (47) It means seeing in the Sacred Heart the “extroversion” of the Church towards the contemporary world. (43) In this “extroversion” of the Church toward the poor and the marginalized has become an authentic theological point of reference for today’s faith in Jesus, the Son of God. (45) This same call is also found in Dehon’s exit from the sacristy: a Church that goes to the margins: “getting into contact with anyone wherever they are, knowing that the gift of charity always precedes it...This urges the Church to assume the movement of incarnation, mirroring the effective condition of the human face. That face is the face of the Sacred Heart, that is, a sharing of life with the suffering Christ, in the flesh of humanity because of its sins.” (45). The devotion to the Sacred Heart then becomes a dedication to the poor and a full immersion in the harshness of our time in its erosion of the human fundamentals.

- f. It is clear that at this point, Neri is clearly reading Fr. Dehon through the prism offered us by Pope Francis. This indeed is a new appropriation of the Sacred Heart for our time. It seeks to restore to the Church a spiritual understanding of the human in all its fragility and precariousness as the designates of the Gospel of the God of Jesus: “Dehonians ought to be persons capable of feelings and compassion of the profound dimension, often unexpressed, of the wounded human desire or of the expectation of its hopes.” (48) What it means that what is central to the devotion is not its ecclesial dimension but its human force. What then is the Dehonian texture to this exit from the sacristy? The word that sums

¹⁸ *Evangelii gaudium*, #178.

¹⁹ In checking the quotes from the *Mois du Sacré Coeur*, it is not clear that Dehon is here referring to the social sphere. Dehon remains within the intimist relation to the Sacred Heart. What Neri proposes is that the *agape* as it invades the social sphere must come from the appropriation of the affections, gestures and attitudes of the embodied logos of God.”

up this life of faith in a precarious world is the French word, often used by Dehon, *confiance*.

2. The driving force of Dehonian spirituality

Already a few years prior to writing *Giustizia della Misericordia*, Neri had identified *confiance* as a key word to describe the internal thrust of Dehonian spirituality.²⁰ The great problem of Christianity, according to Dehon, was not that Christians did not think of God as love but found it difficult to accept that this love was shown in a gesture of the flesh. It is manifested in this unique human being. In the words of Neri: “The opened side, the wound which history cut into the body of God, makes visible and palpable the wound which the Spirit, the original excess and outpouring of *agape*, cut into the heart of the being of God which is the relation between the Father and the Son.” (51) It is not an issue of knowing and accepting the excess of the desire of God for us but to know and accept deep within me that God is lovable, that this love, this *agape*, is a wound in God that originated in my fragility, in humanity’s fragility. The Dehonian spirituality is based on this acceptance – even better, this experience – that God is worthy of my love, that there is a mode of existing, a feeling that I am effectively embraced by God and that I can rely of this God. *Confiance* in Dehon’s spirituality is the steadfast and affective reliance in my existence that God’s love protects me and gives me a deep inner-felt security. It is this *confiance* which is to characterize the human life-style of the Congregation. (63) Before love or *agape* can do so, it must fulfill two conditions.

- a. This God must be felt as being worthy of Love. Dehon asks the question in his writings of the loveliness of God. Is there a concrete gesture which convinces us of the love of God, Dehon asks in his *De la vie d’amour*? What makes God compelling for Dehon but also for the life of the Congregation? It is not enough to say that it is God’s *agape*. For Dehon it lies in the devotion to the Sacred Heart itself; It is based on a *felt agape* or a contingent experience of God’s *agape* in history. It means that the Sacred Heart devotion is to be discovered at the center of human life. For Dehonian spirituality it means to expose oneself to the unexpected and surprising routes of grace in the midst of daily human life. (54) It is the eye and ear set to the events of history and daily life.
- b. What makes God worthy to be loved according to Dehon is mercy. Neri describes mercy as “the justice of *agape*”: it is the affection of a God worthy to be loved. (55) In the devotion to the Sacred Heart we attach ourselves – in full consciousness of our weakness - to a God who does justice to charity. Here is a

²⁰ Marcello Neri, “Uno stile per lo Spirito: Temi antropologici negli scritti spirituali de L. Dehon” in *Anthropologia Cordis: Seminario teologico SCJ (Taubaté, Brazil) 2’8 Febbraio 2014*, Romaç Studia Dehoniana, # 3, 2016, p. 332f.

God who has taken a heart to love me. Hence, for Dehon, mercy is the felt gesture in which *agape* can appear as justice for us. (56) This God is worthy of love because he is a God in the midst of our fragility and human woundedness. In the words of Dehon, “the love that God has for you is none other than the love that God has for himself... Because God loves himself, he can do no other than to love you.” (RSC 12) Hence love is the original form of being in the world of every man and woman. (56)

3. The quality of Dehonian love: pure love

The theme of love, says Neri, is pervasive in Dehon’s writings and difficult to systematize. However, what is important to Neri’s thesis is the question of the quality of the love that God’s *agape* releases in humans. “How ought I to love?” Neri asks? In Dehon’s writings there are multiple references insisting that this love must be a “pure love.”²¹ From p. 63 – 69 Neri seeks to give – in draft form – how such a pure love is humanly possible. In Dehon’s writings it is clear. The love of the devotion to the Sacred Heart must rise above the exercise of self-love, it must rival the love that God has for himself or for us. That means it must be disinterested love. Even when Dehon does not qualify love in most of his writings, it is clear that he intends *agape* or pure love when he uses the word love. Its image is that of the Sacred Heart. “Love, says Dehon, has but one method ... love has but one practice... which is to serve God for love.” (VAM 28) Such a love, in Dehon’s perspective, must be practical because it must find its outlet in the “exteriority of the world” (64) There is no safe distance from love. It is good to remember in this context that for Dehon this pure love is not a matter of the will but of affection. It is affection that must influence the will in our journey of discovery of God’s *agape*: our desire to be close to God, not just my desire but a desire for all “in every time, in every place, in every condition.” (64) For Dehon such a love is effective only to the extent that it mirrors God’s disinterested, other-centered, love. Is such a love possible? For Neri, pure love can only be a formal ideal, it is not humanly practical. It functions as a regulating principle, a maxim without practical content (67) or a type of ultimate horizon for the ethos of *agape*. In the present it is an unrealizable injunction, because it speaks of a “love that is radically deprived of all content.” (68) Its realizations in the practical gestures of love will always, according to Neri, be interested gestures of love but will never be completely pure, that is, never realizations of pure love, which will forever need to find new variations of the gestures of love.

Neri struggles to answer the quandary of pure love that forever exceeds the capacity of the human. I will return to this quandary below. It is similar to the quandary of Jean-Luc Marion phenomenology who also refuses to distinguish between God’s *agape* and

²¹ In French Dehon uses both °amour pur° and °pur amour° without distinction.

human love, insisting that they are to be the same. The Christian tradition has held that *agape* defines God, that for humans *agape* is not a duty but a gift. Charity is a theological virtue, always excessive, revealing a surplus that will only stand revealed in the fulfillment, the present being unable to realize it. In Dehon's time there is not yet an awareness of what subsequently became recognized as the eschatological quality of Christian life. Pure love which for Dehon seemed a possibility in the present situation is an eschatological reality that humans can realize in the present in anticipatory gestures, never as a fulfilled gesture of *agape*. When Dehon seeks to move from "amour propre" to "amour pur", he holds no reservations before the practicability of pure, disinterested love. The congregation is called to practice pure love. When he seeks to apply this pure love to the social scene, the impulse of love's "Vorgriff" or anticipation can only lead to bafflement. The eschatological, at times apocalyptic, language of the Gospel is much more realistic regarding the fulfillment.

4. The practices of piety

It is not surprising then that for Neri, in the final part of his book, the devotion to the Sacred Heart in the contemporary context ends up in what he calls the "appropriate practices of the spirit." These are the forms that exercise the affections of those who have experienced *agape*. They are to guide the transformation of the world and human relations. So what are the practices that give us a glimpse of pure love? For Neri these are the practices that flow from great Dehonian words which shape Dehonian spirituality. Central is the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ. Out of it flow the other Dehonian practices of pure love: oblation, expiation, reparation and victimhood. Neri realizes that these words have lost their glamour within the Congregation. He insists that any re-taking of these themes can only take place in the light of *agape*. Neri presents these practices as ways of responding to the question: "How ought I to love?" True, Neri seeks to reinterpret these practices in a cultural context as a way of a conversation with the contemporary conditions and with globalization and, for him, the practices point to another conception of the human subject. (111)²² Neri, in other words, sees the style of faith of the followers of Dehon to be a way of accompanying people in their specific contexts of life reminding them of the many ways that the lovability of God is there for them. (71) And it directs them to go there in a society where people cannot feel or enjoy this lovability of God because of social injustice, not in a generic sense, but in the precise situations where each one discovers the need for mercy and love. According to Neri, "God knows no other way than to render this justice to humanity." (72)

²² I have made a similar suggestion in my paper at the theological seminar of Taubaté in 2014 in "The Self as Witness: An Anthropology of the Heart" in *Anthropologia Cordis: Seminario teologico SCJ (Taubaté, Brazil) 2'8 Febbraio 2014*, Romaç Studia Dehoniana, # 3, 2016, p 107 – 131.

To make this possible, Europe will have to undo what its philosophy of modernity has put in place, namely, that Europe is the center of the world, that it sees itself as the sovereign European subject, as the center of meaning not only in Europe but for the world. Its religion is one of personal salvation, or individual conscience, individual destiny, individual responsibility, which lays open Europe's self-absorption, obsessive search for individual happiness, consumerism, loss of self in a market economy and its sense of a loss of meaning. In such a context, Neri insists, the spiritual gesture of the bodily insertion of God in this world is an encounter of the world's wounds with the *agape* of God. That is what a devotion of the Sacred Heart is to insert into attitudes of people in their personal interactions. (81) That is for Neri the celebration of the justice of God's mercy.

It is into this context that Neri wants to re-introduce what he calls the "great words" of Dehon: oblation, expiation, reparation and victim. They are all words that seek to break through the woundedness of our time. The Dehonian spirituality insists that this can be accomplished only by taking account of the corporeality of God, a God who shared in all, except sin, the woundedness of the men and women of this world. Dehonian spirituality seeks to participate in stemming the effects of this woundedness. As such, it is a sign and a witness of the excess of *agape* on the members of a congregation who, because of this, dedicate themselves to live this *agape* in the world: a sign of the unconditional love and self-gift of God for the sake of the wounded men and women of this world. In the current context, it demands however that we view restoration of humanity not from above but from the feelings and suffering of the excluded. In other words, Neri seeks to have Dehonians re-interpret the famous Dehonian words from the perspective of the victims of history, from those who have born the brunt of social injustice. For instance, the gesture of oblation becomes an act of oblation or self-gift in the public space of human society. (84) Similarly, expiation and reparation are seen as a way of judging the world on behalf of those who too often experience this world as a place of violence, exclusion, abuse, marginalization. They become therefore practical modes of living the spiritual disposition of faith before God in the public space on life. (88) Along these lines to be a victim means to know how to live in the margins and to be at home there. (102) What Neri is looking for among the followers of Dehon is a restorative concept of justice, something found in the South African Truth and Reconciliation process where reparation becomes the work of restoring trust in society in such a way that it transforms both the guilty party and the victim into a new bond of living together. (98)

With this new translation of the core words of Dehon into a vision of a transformation of the world and of human relations, it is in the final chapter, that Neri looks at what would lead to a world of fraternity and a new social bond along the lines of a Dehonian spirituality. (p. 111 -133) What he examines in this final chapter is the role of adoration,

table fellowship and the feast. In order to begin the process that could lead to the amelioration of the social bonds which European culture will need to work with a different concept of the human subject. He is not the first to propose it. It is a common theme among continental philosophers. Europe needs a self that can stand in solidarity with others, especially with the excluded and the marginalized.

5. What to do with the excess? 84 and pure love

The proposal of Marcello Neri has much to commend it. It gives us a reading of Dehon in a new key. At the end of this long summary of Neri's proposal, we must ask whether such a reading of Fr. Dehon's writings is valid hermeneutically. Neri admits that it is difficult to transform Dehon's texts into a post-modern context. Dehon was steeped in somewhat nostalgic view of a pre-modern Catholic Church where all the roads still led to Rome. To suddenly present him as favouring a postmodern faith in which the spheres of human action – the economy, morality, politics, academe – operate within their own semi-independent agency, will require a solid rationale.

In other words, since the key for such a move is not found directly within the texts of Dehon, the text needs to give a good reason for allowing such an expanded interpretation. What is proposed is even far removed from Dehon's vision of Church. So how did Neri arrive at this? Primarily, through a juxtaposition of Dehon with the new paradigm of reading the Gospel given us by Pope Francis. But does he give us sufficient proof that such a reading of Dehon is permissible? After all, it demands a non-ecclesial reading of Dehon, or, more accurately, a reading of Dehon that strips it off its underlying 19th century vision of the Church. In itself, it makes for an interesting reading of Dehon. The question is whether such a reading does not force the text of Dehon too far from the intentionality of the text, let alone of Dehon as the author.

Now the argument is based not so much directly on a text of Dehon. First of all, the book has very few quotes from the writings of Dehon. And among the quotes, some seem forced in a direction that go far beyond the intentionality of the text. For instance, on page 38, Neri quotes a text from *Mois du Sacré-Coeur de Jésus* where Dehon says that because Jesus has taken on the sensibility of humans in his incarnation, we can surmise how he would have been affected by our emotions and by our difficult moments. (MSC 286) Neri uses this quote from Dehon's writings to bolster his argument for a phenomenology *ante litteram* of the body and corporeality in Dehon.²³ This subsequently becomes an argument for an anthropological approach to the living of faith, of a materiality of our spiritual conduct which is difficult to configure from the writings of Dehon. In his introduction Neri justifies this sort of

²³ A similar stretching of a text of Dehon takes place on p. 19. Here the text of Dehon reads "Your relations with us are as intimate as you would want them to be" (RSC 558) which Neri interprets to mean that God shows his affections "through the *body* of his Logos" (emphasis mine). Technically one could argue that the statement is correct, but for Neri the emphasis is on the bodily aspect. That is not exactly the tenor of Dehon's text.

reading by writing: “It seems to me possible to interpret the aspect of the charism of the dehonian foundation here, as a criterion of inspiration and not of regulation on the level of content, which are left from the beginning to the spiritual understanding of the contingency of time and place.” (19) Hermeneutically, this leaves too much latitude to a textual interpretation. Hermeneutically, this disbanding from the text and the free association of a text in its new context threatens to become an eisegesis.

Neri bases his argument, as he states on page 37, on the following so-called humanistic points in Dehon’s writings:

1. Because of the links between Dehon’s faith experience and the devotion to the Sacred Heart, Dehon sought to recover the concreteness and reality of the revelation of God. For Dehon the Heart of Christ was his physical heart, not a symbol. This fits with the materiality of the incarnation.
2. Because of this bodily realism, Neri thinks that we have access to the affective dimension of the divine-human relationship. For Dehon this is central.
3. Because Dehon accepts the Scotist thesis linking the incarnation with creation rather than with human sinfulness, Neri feels he is justified to conclude that for Dehon, “it is not possible to think of a separated or alternative God.” (37) It would place our link with God through Christ in creation and not first of all in the redemption from sin. This, Neri says, “is a fact of the common history of humans, which can and must show the *proper quality* of the being itself that is God.” (37)

This interpretation of Dehon’s own texts does not push Dehon to our time and situation. Neri leaves them for what they are. That is why at times when Neri quotes Dehon in relation to Francis’ ministry of mercy, it is difficult to insert the perspective of Francis in Dehon’s text. In other words, Neri does not always show how this new and current interpretation lies inherent in the text of Dehon itself as a moment in which the text might reach out beyond itself and allow for a more ample interpretation.

The application of the devotion to a contemporary Dehonian spirituality by way of oblation, expiation, reparation and victimhood is powerful and convincing. It would be a drastic turn-around of the often intimist approach to these central words of Dehon in the Congregation. It would make a much closer link between the intimist devotion to the Sacred Heart and its social implications. This social refiguration of these words is not without a precedent. The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas takes these words in a similar direction, although with a stronger ethical veneer. But within the Congregation this application has not been previously made.

This brings me to my third and final point. Are these “devotions” of oblation, expiation, reparation and victimhood, sufficient to translate what emerges as a primary thrust in Dehon’s writings, namely the power and agency of *agape* or “pure love”? The direction in which Neri takes these basic concepts in Dehon have much to commend it. It takes the Dehonian spirituality to its social component in areas that have previously not been so understood. Here too such a reading of Dehon stretches his own language and

conceptual world. If in the period between 1889 and 1903 he sought to find a way to make pure love enter into the social sphere, it is certainly permissible to expand the central words of Dehon in the same direction. Neri has already given these concepts or practices of oblation, expiation, reparation and victimhood a new interpretation. They may need to be further explored but Neri's reading of these words of Dehon as an appeal to the inclusion of the poor and the marginalized is clearly a way of expanding the pure love that Dehon wished his followers to enact also in the social sphere.

But to do so, it seems to me that we must obtain a clearer understanding of Dehon's notion of pure love.

In its rawness and style of Dehon, Dehon's reflections on such a topic as love is not critiqued nor is it shown to have an unexpected depth which Neri assigns to it. As much as I appreciate Neri's re-situating of Dehon in a time Pope Francis, a more intense reading of Dehon must precede it.

Dehon's *agape* cannot be thematized. It has no content because it "is only possible as a gesture of a body of flesh, which goes beyond any possible measure of giving." (84) see the rest of the paragraph. With regard to oblation as a gift of self, Neri writes, "the gift lives in the expectation that makes it to be such: that of being recognized and received exactly as this liberality without conditions." (84) ((Unless this, the gift could not be such. Precisely because we invest totally in this expectation, which suspends him in his happy success, and is deeply interested in the recognition that he gives to himself, the gift goes to weave the plot of bonds that are not consumed in the frailty of our custody 84-85))

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