

# We are in the Heart of God

## Father Carlos Luis Suárez Codorniú to the Dehonian Family

An opportunity to share what unites us and to thank the Lord for the Dehonian charism with which he has blessed us and places us in the heart of God. Together, we talked about our identity and the youth, of our mission and of all the missions in which so many Dehonians are involved all over the world. And we talked about education, dialogue with culture and how our parishes and communities are called to be a "beacon". We talked about communion, passion and commitment. Here we present my interview with Fr. Carlos Luis Suárez Codorniú, scj

*The DNA of our spirituality is to share the joy of feeling loved in our deepest heart by Jesus. From this experience, our life is filled with enthusiasm about the message of the gospel and we understand that we have no choice except to offer ourselves. This is our oblation: to give ourselves without measure and to go beyond the measure of generosity.*

Last July 20th, unexpectedly, his everyday life changed. The first thing he thought about was Venezuela and the awareness that this new stage meant abandoning the reality in which he lived for the past 30 years: *changing daily habits, relationships, the way of being and of presence, the type of apostolic life, the projects always begun with enthusiasm. It inevitably creates a rift or discord: to abandon something to which you have been bound, which gave you happiness; to have been a part of its history, its reality.*

Born in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in the Canary Islands (Spain) in 1965, he is the son of Agustín and Clara, and has an older brother, Javier. He lived a normal childhood, family-centered, close to his grandparents and older people. *Learning from his experience and his life, growing up in this context of generational exchange* marked him decisively in the experience of fraternal life, of our life as a community. He saw in his house simple people and industrious people. His formation started there.

We cannot neglect his path to the College of the Brothers of La Salle, where he had a basic education: *the example of these brothers, zealous in their way of life as a religious and their focus on teaching was very motivating. At one point he wanted to be a brother of La Salle, he confesses.*

Encouraged by others, he set out on a process of preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation and began to embrace the notion of *an openness for Jesus and for the life of the Church.*

At that time, a magazine came to his house which the Congregation sent to the benefactors in Spain. It included the vocational testimony of a newly ordained Canadian Dehonian and several missionary stories which aroused his curiosity and gave him many questions. In that magazine there was also an address. For two years he had a correspondence with the Novice Master, Fr. Demetrio Jiménez. On the day of his 18th birthday he entered the novitiate of the Spanish province.

The missionary ideal has always fascinated him. He remembers that his grandmother received several publications from the Comboni missionaries: *I liked to read the stories they told; there was always a lot of interest in seeing what was happening outside the island. The testimony of the missionaries always aroused interest to go further.* His first destination was the Venezuelan Region.

He remembers, with pleasure, that a few months after the start of the foundation in India he was offered the opportunity to accompany this first stage: *I had the opportunity to receive the first group of young people who started living with us.* For a short, but very fruitful time, he shared in the dream that these young people would be the first religious of a District that, after 25 years, already has more than a 100 religious age 50 and younger.

On July 20, 2018, he was elected as the Superior General at the XXIV General Chapter of our Congregation. Above all, he feels grateful to God for allowing him to serve the Dehonian family through this task, and also for the trust of those who have risked thinking that he was able to do so. At the same time, he is confident that it is the will of God: *I am very aware of my limits, there are so many things that I do not know. But I feel that I am not alone, that the Lord assists me and that this new responsibility is a team effort.*

Almost two months after the election, he had the courage and the will to commit himself to work and to respond to the requests and needs of the Congregation, and to do so in the best possible way.

### **We have a very fascinating Congregation**

The report presented by Fr. Carlos Enrique Caamaño, who succeeded Fr. Heiner Wilmer as Superior General, presents a Congregation that feels alive with the joy of being able to serve the Church through our charism and how we perceive what is being asked of us.

*We have a very fascinating Congregation. We are a family scattered in more than 40 countries, willing to take on new realities that are born with vitality. We also have realities that have grown old, which have slowly faded away after a brilliant past, that face the passage of time with serenity.*

*The Priests of the Heart of Jesus can affirm, with humility, that the Lord has blessed them in many ways, that they are vital, that this vitality is felt, and there is a desire to continue building and being present in other realities.*

At the last chapter we perceived concerns and even a sense of "dissatisfaction" *in order to feel more capable of being "on the way", with a lighter weight, more open to the challenges that the Church and society need to face, challenges in which we share.*

## **We must nurture communion**

The Chapter expressed its desire that the service entrusted to the superior general is a paternal one: more than a general superior, he is asked to be a general father. A father, a brother, a close person who can accompany, who shows interest, animates, embraces and even corrects, if need be. It was one of the sentiments expressed during the Chapter. This is how he prepares to begin his task with the rest of the general government: *to be close to the various realities and to support, day by day, what our confreres live in the spirit of Father Dehon.*

His personal challenges are, without a doubt, *to learn to listen more deeply, to learn to face the different rhythms of doing things in the different cultures in which we are present, not to rush into judgments due to my cultural perspective; the challenge of letting oneself be surprised: welcoming, receiving, elaborating and accompanying.* In these days he says to himself: *Feel blessed for what you have and contribute as you can.*

The priority for a Dehonian religious today is, *above all, to believe that he is loved by God; to believe from the deepest heart that we are in the Heart of God. To rejoice in this cordiality of God. This helps us to know clearly who has called us, in whom we have believed, who our God is, what we discover in Him and recognize the footprint that has been left in our lives, to savor and share it.*

The Dehonian school, the way, is the experience of the good God who calls us to live, following the example of the Son, the God and true Man, with an open heart to the end: this man who goes towards the cross, because his human journey ends with his open pierced side. This is what we must reach toward.

Dehonians contemplate that moment presented intensely by St. John in Chapter 19 of his Gospel, which for us is a continuous teaching. *To the extent that we will make this shared reading of what Father Dehon has matured and lived, sealed in his heart, we will focus on what is expected of us as religious, together with a spirit of availability.*

In these days there are many confreres who have offered their prayers in view of this new service; his answer is that *the prayer must be accompanied by availability, which is that to which we are called. Beyond personal projects there is a common project that we discover together. In generosity and availability, we will discover our identity, our way of putting ourselves in the Church.*

**Where there is a Dehonian community** there is no lack of concern in facing the many realities which God wants us to address. *The Dehonian, in reference to our reparatory spirituality, sees the world, the society, the Church, itself, with imbalances, with situations that are not right, and is committed to try to do something.* This is not an activity, but a response to the original model, which is God's plan.

We, as the repairers that we are, are going to continue to work hand in hand with God and, perfecting the beautiful project that God wants for all humanity moving forward. We will have to continue to offer that desire to transform a confused world into what God wishes it to be in the

many situations in which we are present, to the many who suffer from physical, educational and health deficiencies... there are many things to which we cannot be indifferent.

There are many things that must be repaired, healed, embellished... *from the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus, Father Dehon sees the need for this world to beat to the rhythm of love and the passion of the Heart of Christ.*

**The DNA of our spirituality** is to share the joy of feeling loved at the deepest level from the depths of the Heart of Jesus. This is fundamental!

When Father Dehon says "he loved me and gave himself for me", he means that one cannot help but respond in the same way. *From this experience, our life is passionate about the message of the gospel and we understand that there is no alternative but to offer ourselves too. This is our prayer: to give ourselves without measure and to go beyond the measure of generosity, as did Fr. André Prévot. This is the path: the indicator of our commitment is to see how much we enjoy and savor our vocation.*

### **Father Dehon and youth**

Father Carlos Luis dedicated himself for many years to the formation of young religious in Caracas (Venezuela), accompanying them by the teaching of Sacred Scripture in the Faculty of Theology. He is convinced that it is worthwhile to share our charism and our mission with youth: *It is the best thing we can do! When someone rejoices in his vocation, it means that what is lived is so beautiful that it must be shared, inviting others to the same experience.*

The first vocational proposal arises from what we are experiencing, it is the best stimulus that we can give to others: *so that our life may be credible, be the consequence of what we are professing. And it is then that we are inviting others to share it, like the first disciples: we have met the teacher and we walk the streets and challenge others to share what we have had in the happiness of knowing.*

Today and always, being a disciple of Christ is a blessing. In the expression of the Council on religious life: We all walk in the Church with him, but are closer not because *we are better, but because we are the ones who need to hear more. So, we are the ones who want to get closer, to listen more. We are not the best, we have hearing problems - he jokes - but we are tuning our ears to hear what the teacher says.* And we must continue to focus on this proposal by working harder within the world of young people in teaching, in the suburbs, in the world of work, etc. There are many opportunities with youth which allow us to be present to them, closer. It is worth it.

## **The essence of a Dehonian parish**

Father Dehon always wanted to be with people, in the most complex social realities, with a parish that *is a beacon that illuminates all of reality, the whole territory; a beacon which remembers that God is in our midst and loves us*. The desire of Dehon is that our parishes become *communities where joy is lived. They give a clear message of the Good News; they are welcoming parishes that know how to conquer the hearts of those who pass by they are missionaries who come out and announce, who invite*.

It is in this way that we carry out parish work in many places of the world; it is an expression of a way of being Church, of helping to understand how to follow Christ. We are repairers: *parishes that are laboratories*.

## **Our educational presence**

Speaking about education is to speak of our origins and of the ideal of Father Dehon to believe that within *youth is hope, that they are a door to a credible change; youth must be accompanied and formed within their hearts*.

Education for a Dehonian goes beyond academic excellence and results in a curriculum, it is focused so *that the person in the formative process has the tools that will accompany him on his path: a way of being in society, of caring, of wanting to respond to others. Education involves helping to broaden the heart, to feel that this world is ours and that we have something to do, that what is happening around us cannot leave us indifferent*.

One of Dehon's goals, from the beginning, was *to make young people become passionate about society, to be attentive to dissatisfaction, not to adapt to what already exists, but to be able to respond according to what is in the heart of God, and therefore respond to God's plan, and be an impulse in daily life*.

We have the challenge of looking at how to actualize our presence in the world of education. *Perhaps it is not always possible from a traditional school, a high school, an institute, a faculty, but we must try to involve ourselves in different ways of teaching...*

## **Mission ad gentes**

Going beyond our borders is a blessing. *To have the experience of sharing life with other cultures, with other peoples, enriches; it is one of the most beautiful ways to live our vocation*, says Father Carlos Luis.

*The sending of missionaries has not lost vitality among us; it was a priority for Father Dehon from the beginning. He felt himself to be a missionary through the confreres who were sent to the various places — some very challenging, as he said — where young people died, and many gave their lives, as we remember on Dehonian Memorial Day.*

At the same time, *it is the joy of being able to communicate the good news. We cannot stop because this is the very logic of our Christian faith, the contemplation of the Incarnation, the "exit"*

*of God by giving us his Son, which is the exodus of God who comes to meet us. The exodus that Jesus lives from his conception, with Mary and Joseph, from the exit from his land, going beyond the limits that sometimes were dictated by the culture itself, is the model we must follow.*

*A Congregation that remains in a missionary mindset reminds humanity that this world is the home of all. Pope Francis has insisted on this idea that the world is home: what happens on the other side of the world, even if we do not see it, affects us all. We are called to feel ourselves as citizens of the world, to get out of our nationalisms or ethnicities that can impoverish us when we compare or move away from. We must pay attention to the differences that enclose us in unconquerable bulwarks and when my originality is shared as a gift to others.*

### **In dialogue with culture, a dialogue of reason and also of charity and passion**

Father Carlos Luis dedicated the last 18 years to theological formation in the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of Venezuela, of which he was rector, and in the Institute of Theology of Religious Life, an experience of "intercongregationality" in which he was able to work side by side with other Congregations and be enriched with other charisms. He himself completed his studies in this pedagogy. It is an academic project that links social reality with pastoral care. *An academic never appears blurred in a context in which one lives and studies theology.* This experience has helped him to understand *that what we study always has a "why," or rather, a "for whom". The effort of study can never be the exaltation of vanity, but an offering. The work of reason is always accompanied and guided by generosity.*

What the Dehonian offers to this dialogue is an attitude, *a way of being in service in an unconditional way to remain united, not to be rivals. This recognizes the limits and the wealth that the other possesses. It's about seeing how the gifts that we each have can enrich without anything being destroyed.*

This too is a reparation: *to work with others without the presumption of knowledge, in what we do and in our way of proceeding; looking for what Father Dehon read in the Gospel of John, "may they be one", without destroying, but in trying to ensure that diversity helps us to grow in understanding and fraternity, which is what we should always aim for. If dialogue is only talk, it would remain sterile because it would not lead anywhere, and certainly not to the gospel.*

To the question about the importance of theology today in Venezuela, he replies that the imprint of Pope Francis marks a direction: he speaks the theology of the people. *The emphasis must always be placed on theology: thinking of God, expressing what we discover, learning what we have contemplated in him.*

He cannot consider theology outside of the reality. *In a context in which the Church recognizes herself as a people, as a people of God, and wants to walk with the people, and commits herself to be closer, meeting many people, our brothers, who exhort us and ask for help in order to give light to their suffering, to what they suffer, to what they desire. This is the way in which theology is embodied. The urgency today in Venezuela is that of a theology of hope that holds that God is the Lord of history, and not those who with their plans cause a situation of unease, of pain, of calamity. It is a hope that prompts commitment and a desire to be involved, starting from faith, to achieve with all the transformation of a country.*

## **The Dehonian family and a shared mission**

This abundant reality in our Congregation helps us to remember *that charisms belong to God*. What Father Dehon lived he shared with a group of lay people from the beginning of the Congregation. *We cannot forget how the laity have always been very close to the project of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, as in the example of the Founder.*

It is a great blessing because it reminds us, first of all, that the charism belongs to the people of God; *what Father Dehon received was not only for his religious, it was for families, for men and women who wanted a sort of consecration, and for many others who wanted to live their lives and their faith with intensity.*

Volunteering, for example, through which we expose people to our founder and at the same time, discover the things that they love: their way of being, as they have faced a very complex period of society, and their commitment to respond to many situations.

Our Congregation is like a great umbrella that gives shelter to many: the religious, different groups of movements that were born, other forms of consecration like the *Compagnia Missionaria*, or other forms of life such as the Servants of the Heart of Jesus to whom we are so bound by our history. *We do not cease to create links to many people and, depending on how we meet, we will continue to enhance the project and grow in the mission.*

We already see with hope the growing number of laity in many parts of the world who profoundly identify with the message and vision of Father Dehon.

*Antonio Rufete Cabrera, scj*