



Final Message of the XXIV General Chapter

The challenge of this Chapter

1. Gathered in Rome, from 14 to 27 July 2018, we celebrated the XXIV General Chapter entitled “With open heart and mind to the urgent needs of the Church and of the world”. We, the 78 members of the Chapter, having listened carefully to one another during these two weeks, wish to bring you the final message of this General Chapter so that you too may hear with open heart and mind from the Holy Spirit what we heard.

2. In the Chapter we have celebrated we recognize a *kairos* of grace. We were all surprised by the circumstances that led to the convocation of this Chapter, but in this unexpected event, we saw an unprecedented opportunity. In the words of Pope Francis, we have experienced how the Chapter is “a propitious time to exercise the spirit of exodus and hospitality” and “to renew docility to the Spirit which animates prophecy”.¹

By a formal vote², the Chapter recommended that the General Government takes into consideration in its program the orientations of the 23rd General Chapter, still ongoing or pending and which have not been explicitly changed by the 24th General Chapter.

3. Sister Nicla Spezzati, ASC reminded us on the first day of the charismatic process in which the Congregation finds itself. As a “narrative community” we can “tell together, in different ways, the care of God and his unfinished designs entrusted to our hand”. For this reason, we ought to deepen our vocation as charismatic and spiritual teachers and mystics of charity. In this light, we entered into this Chapter and into the next six years of the life of the Congregation, as we seek ever more to put on the mystery of the Heart of Christ within ourselves and within people’s social life.

4. This Chapter was not given to consider a specific theme. We were, however, given the opportunity to listen to each other by sharing the life of our Entities from the perspective of the different continents in which we are present and to respond to some themes that concern the whole Congregation. It was a privileged way to see how the *Sint unum* lives within the Congregation and to appreciate the esteem and trust which lives among us. Starting from what we said, we wanted to accentuate the following challenges and perspectives.

¹ “Discourse to the participants of the General Chapter of the Pious Disciples of the Divine Master” May 22, 2017.

² With 55 yes votes, 15 no and 7 abstentions.

Our identity

5. At the basis of our fraternity and our mission lies our specific way of reading the Gospel grounded in the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus, guided by the faith experience of Father Dehon. In this sense, we appreciated the work done by the Dehonian Study Center, which has allowed us to deepen the knowledge of the writings of Father Dehon and his spirituality. Since the figure of the Founder and our *Rule of Life* are not for all confreres real authentic sources of inspiration, we find it invaluable to support the purpose of the Dehonian Study Center to keep alive the charismatic and spiritual heritage of our Institute. While we confirm the benefit of the scholarships offered to some of our confreres to deepen our research in this area, we hope that ways will be found for the greater diffusion of Dehonian studies in the various Entities of the Congregation.

6. We equally appreciated in each geographical area the role of continental theological Commissions. To them was given the task to guide the growth in our charismatic identity in each of our Entities. Likewise, we acknowledged the important role in the deepening of our charism played by the Dehonian Family.

7. *With a formal vote³, the Chapter has recommended that the General Administration establish a commission for the revision of the translations and editions of the Constitutions and the General Directory according the French typical edition of the Rule of Life and the modifications introduced by the previous General Chapters.*

Collaboration and internationality

8. We have understood how important it is to work together, sharing activities and projects, and welcoming confreres from other Entities. The growth of internationality makes us rejoice and has led us to assume a new outlook, even though we are also aware that we must define the criteria for the exchange between the Entities, both as it concerns the members and their economic assets.

9. While some Entities are experiencing strong growth, several other Entities of the Congregation have recorded a disturbing vocational decline⁴ that not only led to the closure of activities and communities but also induced a sense of resignation and discouragement. We hold that even in these situations we should not lose hope, spurred on by the richness of our charism which has words to offer also for an increasingly secularized society.

10. We reiterate the importance of the community of the International College of Rome as a place of formation at the service of all the Entities of the Congregation. Its community dynamics is a privileged place in which internationality and interculturality are experienced. Its formation project must be clear and respected by all.

³ With 76 yes votes and 1 abstention.

⁴ Between 2014 and 2018 the number of members of the Congregation went from 2136 to 2076. In Europe the membership declined from 879 to 800 members, while in North America the membership went from 113 to 99 members. The number of confreres has increased in Africa (from 339 to 344) and especially in Asia (from 315 to 364).

11. *With a formal vote⁵, the Chapter recommends that the General Government deepen the criteria for sending and inserting confreres into the life of the host communities for the purpose of perfecting their formation and / or for the sake of studies in the other Entities of the Congregation. These criteria will be presented at a future gathering of the Major Superiors.*

Vocation and formation ministry

12. The vocational ministry is one of the most urgent questions for the Congregation. Each confrere ought to feel involved in it, sharing with conviction the joy of his vocation. This involvement should extend to the community level as well: every community should be able to say to the young: “Come and see” (see Jn 1:39). Vocational pastoral care should be part of youth ministry and be part of pastoral care for schools and university students.⁶

13. As far as possible, it is preferable for initial formation, especially during the novitiate, to build the link with one's own Entity. At the same time, it is necessary to support international scholasticates. We understand this to mean that the existing scholasticates must be open to accommodate confreres of other Entities. More specifically, both the formative project and the formative community must have an international character. The formation team must be chosen and trained with care. For this reason, we appreciate the initiative of the formation course currently held in Rome, even if some improvements in the structures can be made.

14. *With a formal vote⁷, the Chapter reiterated what was said in the last General Chapter: “To foster the international dimension in initial formation, let the organization of a student exchange be studied and established that allows every scholasticate to have places destined for young religious from other Entities. The General Government, in dialogue with the Entities, should play a coordinating role in these exchanges”.*

15. Ongoing formation is a task that involves every confrere. It is not just a matter of intellectual updating, because it concerns every aspect of everyone's development. In spite of the difficulties that we often encounter, each Entity is called to undertake initiatives along these lines.

The missionary spirit

16. Regarding the missions, we fully support what our General Directory says: “As an international Congregation we hear the call to the universal mission of the Church and we want to participate in it at the individual and community level” (DG n. 33, 1). All the Entities of the Congregation must find a way of responding to this call by way of prayer and financial support, as well as by sending confreres to the missions.

17. Our world is characterized by the phenomenon of the migration of peoples, regional conflicts and poverty that arises from this situation. While we reject any form of populism, which pretends to give

⁵ With 60 yes votes, 14 no votes and 3 abstentions.

⁶ For additional reflection on this topic go to the Letter of the General Administration of August 2017 and to the *Instrumentum laboris* of the next Synod of Bishops in October 2018.

⁷ With 39 yes votes, 32 no votes and 6 abstentions.

myopic solutions to a real “sign of the times”⁸, we realize that this phenomenon asks for a concrete commitment from us – for example, through intentional international communities as a symbol of our common bond – following in this the attention Father Dehon gave in his thinking and actions to the great societal changes and the preferential option for the poor.

18. In an increasingly complex and globalized world, we realize that we are called to act on a global horizon without forgetting that we ought to take upon ourselves the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people among whom we live. Also our Dehonian life must know how to inculturate itself in the different contexts in which it is present, to make the charism – the gift that we have been given – ever more alive. In the midst of all this diversity of cultures and ways of life, we are called to lead a life in a style that is a witness to the Gospel.

19. It is necessary that from the time of initial formation we must cultivate an authentic missionary spirit. This implies both the willingness to go to a mission and the ability to communicate also to others the urgency of the missionary mandate. In this sense, the initiatives of voluntary missionary service and of missionary and social formation of young people should be promoted and eventually improved.

20. We were given a sign of hope by the aliveness of the missionary spirit within us. It pushes us, beyond the difficulties and the temptation to withdraw within ourselves, to seek new possibilities and new areas for the proclamation of the Gospel. In this sense we recall our mission in the International Community of Asia (ICA), a small seed which is already bearing some fruit, and the new presences in Africa and Latin America.

21. The Chapter welcomes the search for new missionary presences. They must be inserted into a global strategic plan that takes into account all the various missions, more or less recent, of the Congregation. This plan should take into consideration, among others, the finding of confreres available to the mission, the legal configuration of the new presence, its economic sustainability, its relationship with the Entities of the same geo-cultural area. The two complementary principles of solidarity and subsidiarity should always be kept in mind.

At the service of evangelization

22. Father Dehon writes that truth and charity were the two great passions of his life.⁹ In the wake of this statement, we recall that the intellectual apostolate is an integral part of our charism corresponding to the very high expectations of contemporary society. This is why it is of highest importance to receive a special formation in the theological and human sciences. In this way we can develop our presence in the theological faculties, in centers of higher education, in publications, in the mass media.

23. The sectors of apostolate in which we are called to work are a privileged occasion for enacting and communicating our charism. Thus, our work in schools and parishes ought to demonstrate a specific style that qualifies us as Dehonian religious. Within the Entities, it is important for this reason to continually reflect with one another in order to learn from each other a common way of being and working.

⁸ See *Gaudium et spes*, # 4: “It is the Church's permanent duty to scrutinize the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel”.

⁹ NQT 3, 342 (March 29, 1886).

24. What characterizes us in part as sons of Father Dehon is the social dimension of our charism. While we sometimes observe among us a worryingly declining focus on this aspect, we want to emphasize once again the importance of a more intense involvement in this activity. The proposed theme of the previously suggested General Conference of Manila as well as the study of the establishment of an office or a commission of “Justice, Peace and Reconciliation” must not be forgotten. The communication of initiatives undertaken by the various Entities in this area is a great help to promote a sharing of projects and social initiatives.

The service of authority and the government structures

25. The authority within the Congregation is called to serve the unity and growth of the Institute. It must try to combine the search for an efficient leadership with the care of fraternity among all the Entities, a centralized management working with the principle of subsidiarity. They ought to study the kind of forms of connection between the Entities and the general administration that keep these aspects in mind.

26. With a formal vote¹⁰, the Chapter determined that the General Government should set up a commission to study a revision of the General Directory, nos. 132-134 to clarify the figure of the Vicar General, the taking possession of office of the Superior General and the presidency of the General Chapter, the duration of the mandate of the General Procurator and the Secretary General. Any changes in the General Directory will be proposed at the next Ordinary General Chapter.

27. With a formal vote¹¹, the Chapter reiterated what was said in the last General Chapter: “The possibility of creating new structures for organizing Entities will be studied, taking into account especially the smaller ones, those who undergoing development or those who are aging. The organization, making use of a federal type, should help to retain the specificity of the individual Entities, in a common schema of coordination (see DG, No. 124,5).”

The economy of the Congregation

28. We recognize with gratitude that the economic situation of our Congregation is in good health. We appreciate the economic policy of recent years, carried out by the General Treasury Office. At the same time, we are aware that each confrere needs a permanent conversion in this area: everyone is called to live the vow of poverty, leading a sober life, maintaining himself, if at all possible, with his own work, and growing in the sense of co-responsibility towards the whole congregation.

29. Among the actions of the fore-mentioned path here are some of the issues which we consider necessary or desirable to continue: the common fund, the contribution of all the Entities to the General Aid Fund (FAG), the creation of an economic support team for Entities, the correct reporting of the budgets and projects, the determination of stable assets, compliance with common guidelines throughout the Congregation, the search for economic self-sufficiency and the need for an economic plan for each Entity, the approval of a directory for aid to families of the members, and the attention to the formation of confreres in the economic field.

¹⁰ With 68 yes votes, 7 no votes and 2 abstentions.

¹¹ With 63 yes votes, 13 no votes and 1 abstention.

30. The *Statute of Intra-congregational Aid* was proposed for discussion at the Chapter. Originally it was to have been at the General Conference in Manila. The document offers criteria to the Entities on how to manage the *General Aid Fund* (FAG) and the economic assistance within the Institute.

The Chapter, by formal vote¹², approved ad experimentum until the next General Chapter the text of the Statute of Intra-congregational Aid, entrusting the General Government with the help of the General Finance Commission, to deal with the additions of any amendments or corrections as suggested by the Chapter assembly.

Communication

31. In a world in which communication is increasingly important, we have been in the process of developing in a formal way in the General Government a specific office that looks after the internal and external communication of the Congregation. Among the initiatives of this office we should mention, among other things, the search for a *visual identity*, that is, a distinctive and easily recognizable symbol of the Congregation, and the formulation of a *Mission statement*, in which we find in a brief statement an expression of our vocation, our vision, and our mission. It must be clear, however, that this is not just a communication strategy but that it is a search for our common identity, while avoiding uniformity.

Conclusion

32. *With a formal vote¹³, the Chapter reiterated what was said in the last General Chapter: “We, the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Dehonians), gathered in the XXIV General Chapter, representing 40 nations, would like to take a stand and communicate our full solidarity with the persecuted Christians around the world. We strongly urge all governments to take steps in order to ensure respect for the dignity and human rights of all. We appeal to the mass media to overcome the general indifference and silence. We reassure our persecuted Christian brothers and sisters of our solidarity and prayers.”*

33. We have experienced these two weeks of the Chapter as the gracious and precious moment: “a Dehonian *kairos*”. We lived once again what it means to be a part of passing on and interpreting Fr. Dehon’s legacy for our time. With the extraordinary circumstances of the holding this Chapter only three years after the 23rd General Chapter, we have lived as a situation of “surprise”.

34. In the opening address of the Chapter, Father Carlos Enrique Caamaño Martín reminded us of the desire for a more synodal Church, a more synodal Congregation. The Chapter evidenced such a synodality, even in the motivation of this final message. We found the urgency in the midst of our fraternity to make our presence a prophetic sign of our times. We realized the need to reform and revitalize some aspects of our lives, concerning structure, economy, formation, vocation, internationality and interculturality in the spirit of *Sint Unum*. In the power of the Spirit, we heard a call for us dehonians to fulfill our identity as the prophets who with open heart and mind respond to the urgent needs of the world. We have celebrated this Chapter as a search of our common voice in the Spirit.

¹² With 66 yes votes, 2 no votes and 9 abstentions.

¹³ With 54 yes votes, 17 no votes and 6 abstentions.

Finally, we ask that the Virgin Mary and Father Dehon accompany in their ministry our new Superior General Father Carlos Luis Suárez Codorniú, and his Council. For us all we ask for the blessing of the Heart of Christ.

Rome, July 27, 2018