

Over 80 people from around the world are gathering July 15-21 in Neustadt, Germany, for “Educare,” the 8th General Conference of the congregation. The tradition of the general conference began in 1969. Held at the midpoint of a superior general’s term the themes have varied greatly, beginning with “The Renewal of the Congregation in Light of Vatican II.” The last conference was in 2006 in Warsaw, Poland; its focus was “SCJs on Mission Ad Gentes. Participants include the major superiors of each SCJ entity, along with invited guests and staff.

This, and other documentation from the conference will be available at the general website, www.dehon.it

The General Conference opens

Fr. Claudio Dalla Zuanna, was the main celebrant at the opening Mass for the VIII General Conference. It would be the archbishop-elect’s only day with the conference, a conference which he was instrumental in planning.

On June 29, only weeks before the conference was to take place, Fr. Claudio was named Archbishop-elect of Beira in Mozambique. Instead of directing the General Conference, Fr. Claudio would return to Rome to prepare for his new assignment.

“There are those who ask how the work of the General Council will be affected by my departure,” said Fr. Claudio in his homily. “Some speak of a loss to the Curia. Without false modesty, I can say that the community of the General Curia is solid and my departure will not weaken it.”

Fr. Claudio’s full homily will be available in Italian and English under the Educare section of www.dehon.it.

Welcome!

In the meeting hall for the first time, participants were welcomed first by Fr. Heiner Wilmer, provincial superior of the German Province. He noted the history of the German Province and its early focus on education. Herz–Jesu-Kloster, the host facility, has been an SCJ property since 1920, though the former quarry was a much more modest facility than what is present now.

After Fr. Heiner, Fr. José Ornelas Carvalho, superior general, took the microphone. He thanked the German Province for hosting the conference; it is the second time that it has done so (the 1982 General Conference was also in Germany). Fr. General also thanked all those who were and continue to be a part of the conference preparations, including the preparatory committee and members of the curia staff.

However, Fr. Ornelas' most heartfelt thanks was toward Fr. Claudio Dalla Zuanna. "I thank you Claudio, for what you have been for the congregation; what you have shared with us, your dreams and your hopes," said Fr. General.

"It is with difficulty that we see you depart but we have great hope for you and we will accompany you in friendship, prayer and solidarity.

Fr. General then gave Fr. Claudio a gift from the congregation, an icon of the Trinity. Accepting it, Fr. Claudio said that "Practically my whole life has been the congregation, I will always be a Dehonian." He added that it is because of the formation that he received as an SCJ that allowed him to be of service to the Church, to go to the Archdiocese of Beira and share the love of God, and the spirit of reconciliation. "Our charism goes with me and it is a gift to the Church."

He then spoke of the conference whose roots were in a previous education gathering in Salamanca, Spain.

It was at this meeting that participants suggested that the congregation reflect on education as a fundamental piece of the Dehonian charism. The suggestion grew into a proposal for the 2009 General Chapter, which the chapter approved.

"Education," said Fr. Claudio, "is the duty of all of society." The family, he added, is where education begins. "But in many areas families are breaking down."

In describing the Dehonians' educational task with youth, Fr. Claudio told the story of Abraham and Hagar, when Hagar, having been sent away could not bear to see her son die, and so she abandoned him.

But she was quickly called back to her son. She was told, "Do not fear, God hears the child's cry." Then the child saw the well of water.

Just like Hagar, Dehonians are called not to abandon the younger generations. They must open their eyes to "the water," the water that quenches their thirst with values. "We have a well of water to communicate to all," said Fr. Claudio.

"To educate," said Fr. Claudio, "is not simply an action of providing instruction but a duty we all have to contribute to the development of the young, to help them find their way on the path of life."

During this conference, Fr. Claudio said that participants must identify what it means to be a Dehonian educator.

"We have to meet the young where they can be found," he said. This includes media, schools and parishes.

“When we give education, we give life,” he concluded, and then turned the conference over to the Preparatory Committee.

Fr. Dehon as an Educator

Fr. João Carlos Almeida opened the afternoon with a presentation on the founder as an educator. A member of the Central Brazilian Province, Fr. João is a professor at the Instituto Teológico SCJ of the Faculdade Dehoniana in Taubaté and chairperson of the Latin American Theological Commission. Fr. Joao’s doctoral thesis was on the educational philosophy of Fr. Dehon.

“What values marked Fr. Dehon’s style as an educator?” asked Fr. João.

Fr. Dehon “went out” to the people. By doing so he saw the needed balance of strictness and tenderness, of reason and the heart. By “going out” he opened his mind to the wider world. By “going out” he became involved in Catholic social works, he learned the importance of sharing ideas through newspapers and educated discourse.

Fr. Dehon felt that often his fellow priests were absent in debates on ideas of consequence in society. Priestly formation wasn’t preparing men to debate the concerns of society.

Fr. Dehon put priority on the formation of priests, but also on the young. He was an advocate of Christian education when the government of France tried to curb the role of Christian educators.

By “going out” the founder developed a preferential option for those on the fringes of society.

The founder spoke of what he saw as the “ideal” educator. This would be an educator who was based in love. Fear does not motivate, and neither, he believed, did merit.

Teaching, for Fr. Dehon, did not simply mean transmitting information. It was about developing a relationship between instructor and student. A good bond with a student, not fear, rewards nor punishment, is what he believed was the most effective means of educating.

Fr. Dehon developed almost a “fourth vow” of education that was tied intimately with truth and charity.

A Dehonian educator needs to transmit to the younger generations a sense of availability, solidarity and community. Education, for Fr. Dehon, is an “action;” it is a way of transmitting values to the younger generation. Education is a form of reparation where love and truth are brought together said Fr. João.

What do we value, what do we hope to share?

Fr. Olaf Hamelijnck led the final session of the day which focused on a questionnaire sent to SCJs prior to the General Conference. In it, SCJs were asked about the values passed on to them by previous SCJs and the values they thought were important to share with the younger generations.

In both instances, availability and *sint unum*, or a shared life, were the top responses, followed by a sense of service and a call to be prophets of love.

In linguistic groups participants briefly spoke about the results of the survey. Reporting back, several noted the importance of finding the right language to use with youth, to find the means to pass on values in a way that will be heard. It is only by learning the language of youth can there be a dialogue with youth.

And in the tradition of Fr. Dehon, teaching is not simply the transmission of information, but the development of relationships that allows education to flourish.

More?

Documents from the General Conference will be posted under the “Educare” section of the general website (www.dehon.it)

Photos are available from a link at the site, or by going to:
<http://generalate.smugmug.com/>