

## Reflections for the Feast of the Sacred Heart

It is only proper that on this celebration of the Feast of the Sacred Heart – in the Jubilee year of mercy – that we reflect a bit this afternoon on mercy. Fr. General has done so in his letter for the feast. The Chapter of last year urged us to think and do mercy. Also the six-year plan of the General Administration asked us to pass on to others the Region’s works of mercy. I have personally done a lot of thinking about mercy in the last three years, since Pope Francis made mercy the hermeneutical key of his office as Bishop of Rome. Also Dehon had much to say on the topic.

### 1. Mercy in the writings of Dehon

“Miséricorde” is a frequently used word in the writings of Léon Dehon.<sup>1</sup> Although Dehon uses the word often in a social and political context – mercy for France – or as attached to the name of God (God of mercy), the Sacred Heart (the abyss or symbol of mercy), or Mary (mother of mercy), he has three meanings of mercy that are significant for us.

For us there are three meanings of mercy that are significant for us.

The most frequent use of the word mercy is in conjunction with forgiveness or pardon for sin. Mercy is what annihilates sin, overcomes sin. Understood is here the power of God to change the condition of a person from being “lost”, “condemned” or “excluded” to the condition of being “saved.” In other words, mercy changes a person who has become incapacitated because of what he or she has done, from being a sinner, to being “in grace”, restored to being a capable human. Dehon gives no reflection on how mercy accomplishes this. Although Dehon had a doctorate in theology, he did not write as a theologian. Most of his reflections on mercy are found in his meditations. They are not theological tracts, but spiritual reflections.

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<sup>1</sup> DehonDocs indicates 1048 uses of the word *miséricorde* (plus 65 times the Latin, *miser cordia*) in the writings of Dehon. It compares with *charité* (1563), *amour* (3627) and *réparation* (1063). The main texts in which Dehon speaks of mercy are *Couronnes d’Amour*, *Rétraite du Sacré-Coeur*, *Mois du Sacré-Coeur*, *Directoire spirituel*, and *Études sur le Sacré-Cœur de Jésus*.

Secondly, Dehon speaks frequently of mercy in God. He calls mercy the “attribut divin le plus glorifié dans la sainte Écriture. » (RSC,72) When he speaks of God’s mercy, he often attaches qualifiers that speak of “excess”, “abundance”; mercy is said to be “inexhaustible,” “inexplicable.” It connotes the excess in God, God’s surplus beyond justice. It is the ultimate face of God in whom Dehon trusts. He connects this mercy most frequently with God’s self-abasement, God’s *kenosis*, God’s humility in the incarnation and in the cross. Walter Kasper has said that God’s mercy is as “the visible and efficacious side of God as charity toward the outside.” (p.136) Mercy is God’s visible, experiential form. That is why for Dehon the symbol of mercy was the Sacred Heart. There he read the extent to which love goes. For him it was the superabundant and excessive side of God. For Dehon that excessive generosity was visible in Jesus as in the miracle of wine at Cana, at the multiplication of the bread, in the many stories he told of the abundance of the kingdom of God.

And there was a third use of the word mercy in Dehon. It touched on the impact God’s mercy in our relationship with others. Those who receive mercy, Dehon says, receive the capacity to distribute it to others. In a beautiful phrase, Dehon has God say “je veux aider votre miséricorde” (RSC 315). The effusion of God’s mercy allows us to show mercy to others –“taking on all the sufferings of our brothers.” (Ext 8035185, 3) It is the foundation for our “compassion for the infirmities of our brothers.” (CAM 253) That is what the last Chapter proposed to us: become merciful to one another.

I know that much more can be said about Dehon and mercy, particularly since in the congregation’s history we have not made much about this mercy, despite the fact that Dehon used the word “miséricorde” more than a thousand times in his writings. In fact, the word does not occur in our constitutions. Yet, now it is part of our vocabulary. In an interview in March of this year, the emeritus Bishop of Rome, Benedict XVI suggested that “the concept of the mercy of God is becoming ever more a central and dominant concept: it is a sign of the time.”

#### **a. A word about words**

We may well ask ourselves what is meant by being a “sign of the time”. I can’t go into a full discourse about this, but allow me to make two points about mercy.

The first note is about language and its role in our discourse about the world. Even though the word mercy has entered with renewed force into our language through Sr. Faustina and her devotion to Divine Mercy, it took off with Pope Francis. He made it into one of these words that for many fit this time. Certain words have particular power. In an article by Helen Vendler about poetic remaking, Helen Vendler reminded us of the power of words.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, she says, poets go through major contortions to find a correct word in a poem. In changing one word in a poem for another, the poet is not only remaking the poem but also him or herself. In that context she quotes W.B. Yeats:

*The friends that have it I do  
wrong  
When ever I remake a song,  
Should know what issue is at  
stake:  
It is myself that I remake  
("Introduction" to *Complete Poems*, 1908)*

A new word in a poem is not just a happenstance, it is a moral choice because poets realize that such a word in a poem is like doing open-heart surgery on oneself: "It restores the uprightness of the self."

A poet like Emily Dickinson realized that finding the right word was not a simple task. In one case in a rough draft of a poem, she considered thirteen possible adjectives for a single noun. The right word is a matter of truth, truth in the sense of authentic. This poetic truth is not some adequation with reality, but a practical truth that remakes the world, a truth that opens possibilities or makes one capable in a way that another word does not. Sometimes words, certain choice words, choice meanings, open up a world that one previously had not been imagined as possible. These words may make us newly capable.

Of the weighty activity of Dickinson's choosing among thirteen adjectives, Helen Vendler says, "Dickinson's pondering of adjective after adjective suggests the flood of intellectual and moral

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<sup>2</sup> *New York Review of Books*, March 10 2016, p. 40.

alternatives that are generated when the poet searches for truth. She is not assembling a group of synonyms ... It is not merely a single word that is lacking ... but an unknown element of her original vision. To fill the spot, the poet must reclaim the entire vision, revisit it and explore it until she finds the neglected element and acknowledge it." (p.41) It is not a matter of nomination, but of capturing and revealing a vision.

I believe that "mercy" is such a word for our time. There was a lot of expectation around this word at the last Synod, also at our last Chapter. As I said, Bishop of Rome emeritus Benedict XVI found mercy be a "sign" of our time. Is mercy a word that can "remake" the self, remake the world? Does mercy reveal such an authentic vision, that only this word can enunciate? That, I think, is the case.

#### **b. The same and the other**

If that is the case, I need to present another note on the concept of mercy. If mercy is one of these words that is able to remake the world, then we might need to think about what kind of word it is and about what sort of reality is it speaking. When we speak of the real in the West, we think like Greeks. We look for essences: What the thing is. We do that by abstracting from things what are different in order to arrive what things have in common. We call it the ontology of being. What all things, even God, have in common, we say, is being. We understand things by this abstraction. We think that after having isolated all the differences, that somehow we have captured reality. It means that we in the West have constantly sought for what is the same. Is there an alternative? The alternative is to do what the Jews have done. They focus on the difference: what we in the West tend to leave out. If we in the West have tried to think God ontologically, that is, where God and ourselves share sameness, the Jews think of God in terms of infinity, that is, how God is different, infinitely different from us. What difference does that make? What we know about the infinite is not theoretical – because we cannot know the infinite - but practical. So what is revealed in the word "mercy" is not a theoretical revelation, a new fact about God, but an encounter. It makes an ethical claim on us. In other words, it obligates us, as Levinas says, it is a word that makes us responsibility for the other. Or as Ricoeur says, it is a word that summons us, it calls us. So it is not a neutral word: It summons us to discipleship.

Perhaps, that is what went wrong at the Synod. The Synod Fathers held that God's mercy was a theoretical revelation. As such, mercy is thought to be subject to a law, that mercy is bound by sameness and that we can determine and know what God must do in every case. It would mean that mercy too is limited: God cannot do anything for divorced and remarried Catholics who for the rest of their lives will be unable to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ. That is mercy as a theoretical concept.

If mercy, God's mercy, is a practical and not a theoretical issue, what does that mean? How does mercy obligate us, summon us: how is mercy a vocation? We would have to ask, "Where do we encounter the summons of mercy? Pope Francis gave a way. Our practical experience of God's mercy comes from an encounter with those people who are suffering from a denial of mercy and make an appeal to us to be merciful. To discover God's mercy, all we need to do is to look into the eyes of the remarried divorced Catholics and experience personally the appeal of mercy that we encounter there. Because that is where God's mercy speaks to us directly. It is through their eyes that the utter dynamism of God's dance of love pours out beyond God and touches us. Most of us have sat with people, parishioners and heard their stories. Face to face with them, we have experienced becoming responsible for them. It is here that God's exuberance touches us and takes us captive. The same happened to us, I think, when week after week during last summer and autumn we looked into the faces of the refugees streaming into Europe. We realized that their eyes reflected the infinite demand of God to us to take care of them.

The letter of Heiner Wilmer, our superior General, on the occasion of the Feast of the Sacred Heart touches on this urgency of God's mercy at this time. He asks that

"In our parishes, schools, universities, in education and formation institutes, in our social works, in whatever areas that we have influence on public opinion, let us make migration our theme. We are convinced that every confrere can do something. Every community has an opportunity to do something creative. ... never in our history have there been so many people on the road, searching for new life, as at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. ... Fr Dehon tuned up his sensitivities so as to be able to feel the heartbeat of Jesus in order to make Jesus' heartbeat

his own and to make Jesus' vision his own. ... What the Industrial Revolution meant for Fr. Dehon at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is similar to what migration means for us at the beginning of the 21st century. As Dehonians we see migration as the greatest challenge of our times."

As a community we have already responded in a very generous way to the appeal of the Syrian refugees. Each of our communities have initiated measures to be able to welcome a refugee family. It is at this point one way in which we can show our compassion but also the generosity that comes through us of the Sacred Heart. We will all have an opportunity to welcome the stranger into our midst and so become ministers of God's compassion.

We pray during this adoration that we may be touched to our core with the enormous energy of love that became manifest among us in the piercing of the side of Jesus. May it remain a constant summons for us to listen to the orphan, the widow, the poor among us.

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