

## *André Prévot and Léon Dehon<sup>1</sup>*

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**1** A hundred years after his death, André Prévot remains virtually unknown in the Congregation. And yet, as the first novice master, serving from 1885 until 1909, he, more than any other follower of Léon Dehon, set the spiritual course of the Congregation until the major reforms of Vatican II. Although popularly it is assumed that there were differences between Léon Dehon and André Prévot, these differences were not considered substantial, just a part of the mosaic of the Congregation. However, with the shift brought about by *Perfectae caritatis* (1965) centering the spirituality of institutes of consecrated life on the charism of their founders, the role of Léon Dehon has become more prominent than the influence of the first novice director. Much of the reflection in the Congregation since 1965 has for this reason shifted to the interpretation of the charism of Léon Dehon. André Prévot faded into the background.

**2** Within the Congregation this shift of perspective has hardly been reflected upon. What is the role of André Prévot in the congregation? What is at stake is not the personal holiness of André Prévot – of that there is little doubt in the Congregation – but what was his contribution to the understanding and living of the charism of the congregation? The causes of beatification for both men were in the beginning seen together. Today we are aware more of the differences between the two. What was and is the contribution of André Prévot to the flourishing of the charism of the Congregation? Did André Prévot understand Léon Dehon's aim for the congregation?

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<sup>1</sup> Originally the text was given as a conference to the SCJ members of the Philippine Region on August 7, 2013.

## 1. THEIR DIFFERENT ORIGINS

**3** The paths that led both men to the Congregation in the 1870s and 80s seem similar. Both were influenced by victimal spirituality. Both came through an association with religious sisters. Both had to deal with failure.

**4** Léon Dehon with his strong desire to be a religious priest was led through his association with the Soeurs Servantes – particularly Mother Ulrich and Soeur Ignace – to found a congregation with a victimal devotion to the Sacred Heart. Because of the influence of the overly mystical sisters – their spirituality too strongly based on “revelations”<sup>2</sup> – Dehon’s young Congregation was dissolved in 1883 and out of the failure resurrected in 1884 as “Priests” of the Sacred Heart. The “victimal” dimension of the spirituality, the Vatican found, needed to be toned down and the foundational “revelations” to be discounted. Too young and inexperienced, Léon Dehon had allowed himself to be led by outward signs. In time, this failure prompted him to search elsewhere for what grounded his faith and his mission. In the aftermath of *Perfectae caritatis* the congregation found Dehon’s charisma not so much in the story of its origin with the sisters but with a faith intuition. That was the conclusion of the foundational General Chapters of 1966/7, 1973 and 1979 which declared the faith experience of Dehon’s “active presence of the love of Christ in his life” as constitutive (# 2).<sup>3</sup> What was at first an intuition, has through research become a conviction: Dehon’s search for securing God’s love became more and more guided by faith in the Scriptures.<sup>4</sup>

**5** Also André Prévot came to the Congregation by an association with a religious woman: Mère Véronique Lioger, founder of the Soeurs Victimes du Sacré Coeur. She too had a close association with victimal spirituality: a strand of Pierre de Bérulle’s “French spirituality” that in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries became connected with the devotion to the Sacred Heart. She had started a congregation of priest

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<sup>2</sup> In a letter of Fr. Guillaume of February 13, 1913 we read: “There was in the aim of the Congregation, such as understood by the Servants of the Sacred Heart of Saint Quentin, a great danger for illusion. They wanted only a pure love and they tried to reach this love without taking into account sin. In these cases one must fear a tendency toward the extraordinary, from which there is no escape. They allowed themselves – to say it in simple terms - to be led only by visions and revelations.” Archivio Dehoniano AD B 115/4 Inventory 1180.28. Fr. Dehon later admitted that he was not equipped to be the spiritual guide of the Soeurs Servantes. At age 30 he hardly understood the spiritual pitfalls of so-called revelations.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Bourgeois, *Notre Règle de vie: Un Itinéraire*, (Roma: Centre Général d’Etudes, 1987) vol. 15.2, p. 119-191.

<sup>4</sup> The centrality of John 19.31-37 for Dehon can be found, for example, in his “Retraite du Sacré-Coeur” (39<sup>th</sup> meditation); “Mois du Sacré-Coeur” (Meditation 26) his “Couronnes d’amour” and especially in “Études sur le Sacré-Coeur”. André Perroux has pointed out also the centrality of Galatians 2.19-20. See also his “Les grandes lignes d’une expérience spirituelles: Galates 2, 19-20 et Père Dehon,” *Dehoniana IX*, 2011, p. 45 -72; see also my « Presentation » « Our Origins in the Faith Experience of Fr. Dehon.” *Dehoniana XI*, 2011, p. 9 – 19. See the article of A. Perroux in this issue.

repairers of which André Prévot became a part through a common spiritual director, Emile Roux. His association grew until, in 1876, he became Mère Véronique's spiritual director and became a member of her "Prêtres Victimes".<sup>5</sup> When Mère Véronique died in 1882 and with her the association of Priest-victims, André began a correspondence with Léon Dehon whom Mère Véronique had pointed out to him as the one who would carry forward her victimal project. In May 1885 he entered the novitiate. In October of the same year he was named the novice director by Dehon. He remained in that position until 1909.

**6** At first glance, both men seemed in the beginning to be going in the same direction. Both adhered to a victimal spirituality. Both underwent a crisis – Dehon at age 40, Prévot at age 43 – when their lives' project was fundamentally challenged: Dehon with the dissolution of the congregation, Prévot with the death of Mère Véronique and her project of "Prêtres Victimes." The reaction to these events in their lives distinguishes these two men. For Dehon it led, despite an ongoing ambiguity in his language – but also in his actions - to grounding the congregation on a new trust in God's love. For Prévot the death of Mère Véronique did not lead him to search in a new direction. He remained faithful to her victimal spirituality and the ministry to "fallen priests." In her death, he did not react as did Dehon in the crisis of the "consummatum est". For Dehon this was a "no" to his project. Prévot held on to the word of Mère Véronique that her "Oeuvre" would have continuance in the Oeuvre of Dehon. What he sought in the congregation was a replica of the aim of Mère Véronique. That remained his lifeline. This also developed more and more into the line of divergence between Dehon and Prévot.

## 2. THE ARISTOCRAT VERSUS THE SMALL ENTREPRENEUR

**7** In class-conscious 19<sup>th</sup> century, Léon Dehon and André<sup>6</sup> Prévot stood worlds apart. The Dehon family came from northern France and belonged to the landed aristocracy. His background gave Léon Dehon a sense of ownership of life and its means. This sense is obvious in the ease of his relationships with the powerful of his time, his free relationship with finances, his creativity with institutions, his travels, his education, his belief in having a political voice. Dehon remained an aristocrat in his outlook all his life. His sense of self made him a natural leader.

**8** André Prévot came from a family of small entrepreneurs from southern France who struggled financially because of the effects of the industrial revolution of the

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<sup>5</sup> E. Driedonkx, "De Dienaar Gods Andreas Prévot, 1840-1913" (manuscript), p. 5. Prévot writes that during the last ten years of her life: "he was the recipient of her confidences and her intimate secrets." He considered these the greatest gift of his life. *Vie de la Servante de Dieu Marie Véronique de Coeur de Jésus : Caroline Lioger* (Paris, Charles Amat, 1913) p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> His baptismal names were (Marie) Léon Regis Florent. He received the name André when he entered the novitiate.

19<sup>th</sup> century. Because he is less well known, his story needs to be told at greater length.

**9** André (his baptismal name was Léon) Prévot was born in 1840 in Le Teil in the Rhône valley of Southern France, the seventh child (of fifteen) of Simon Prévot and Anna Descoux Villard. His father was the captain and owner of a transport barge on the Rhône river. At first his business was quite successful but because of the new competition from the railroads, the transport company came under heavy financial pressure. His father tried to adapt but went bankrupt after his barge was badly damaged hitting a bridge pylon while navigating challenging flood waters. In his honesty, he sought to pay back his creditors. He did not spare his family. Everything was sold, including household goods. It was thus that his family ended up in poverty. The love for his family could not prevail against his sense of duty of justice towards his creditors. The stubborn and inflexible trait that so characterized André as an adult seems rooted in his family background.

**10** From his parents he received an intense Christian formation. Daily mass, the nightly rosary and spiritual reading were part of the every-day routine.<sup>7</sup> Because of his piety he was permitted to make his first communion at age ten. André was a serious child. His sisters found his piety exaggerated and called him jokingly – after his baptismal name – “Pope Leo.” They found him stubborn but also easily enraged. As J.-M. Abel says of his childhood, “He laughs and plays with his toy soldiers. But it looks like his gaiety and joy of life have no hold on him except as a duty. His piety is deep, serious and willful.”<sup>8</sup> At the age of twelve he entered the pre-seminary of the Basilians in Aubenas. He was an excellent student and walked away with all the awards. He used the money to pay for his studies.

**11** During one of his holidays as he is returning home, he wanted to cross a river near Le Teil which had swollen because of heavy rain. He becomes caught in the current and only with difficulty did he reach safety. He accorded his rescue to Mary for whom he retained a great piety for the rest of his life.<sup>9</sup>

**12** At age 15 André entered the major seminary of the diocese of Viviers, helped financially by one of his brothers and an aunt, a religious, who got permission to give him a part of her patrimony. There again, his intelligence and his piety were quickly

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<sup>7</sup> Three of his sisters, Anna, Francisca and Elizabeth joined a convent, each a different one.

<sup>8</sup> J.-M. Abel SCJ, “Pater Andreas Prévot” (Manuscript in Dutch: The original is published in *Almanach du Règne*, 1950) p.1. For a more developed approach to the life and work of André Prévot see, Georges Bertrand, *Vers le cloister et la sainteté, Vie du R.P. André Prévot* (Lille – Paris – Bruges, 1920) 432 p.; Benedetto Caporale, *Un sacerdote riparatore, P. Andrea Prévot* (Roma. postulazione) 1959) 30 p.; Idem, P. Andrea Prévot (Padova-Roma: Edizioni Messaggero, 1960) 329 p.; A. Dierker and J. Sengers, *P. Andreas Prévot, Schetsen van zijn leven en werk* (Sittard, 1936) manuscript; Anonymous, *Ter nagedachtenis van P. Andreas Prévot – bij zijn 100e verjaardag* (Sittard, 1940), 62 p.; J. Keup, *La Charité chrétienne* (P. Prévot) (Tournai – Paris, 1947) 126 p.

<sup>9</sup> E. Driedonkx, “¿Cuándo comenzó el p. Andrés Prévot a ser maestro del noviciado en Sittard?” (manuscript), p. 1.

noticed by his teachers. During this time his spiritual director was Emile Roux, a Sulpician, a pious man who introduced him to a life of penance and sacrifice to the Heart of Jesus in the style of Jean-Jacques Olier, the founder of the Sulpicians and one of the main influences of the French school of spirituality.<sup>10</sup> While in the seminary a spiritual crisis overcame André that pursued him for the rest of his life. It was characterized by a deep-rooted fear. I will come back to this because it is an important key to understanding Prévot. Abel calls it Prévot's "chronic struggle with death."<sup>11</sup>

**13** In 1859 André interrupted his theological studies and entered the Jesuit novitiate in Aix-en-Provence. He was strongly attracted to the Jesuits because of the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius but also because of their devotion to the Sacred Heart with its strong emphasis on reparation.<sup>12</sup> But he lived its message of the injustice done to God so seriously that his sacrifices and self-denial took a terrible toll on his health. After a year and some months his exaggerated life style had reduced him to a skeleton. Emaciated, he was sent home to regain his strength. In the village of Le Teil the children made fun of him calling out, "Look at him, a skeleton!"<sup>13</sup>

**14** When he recovered he returned to the seminary of the diocese of Viviers. Without the support of his aunt, who had died in the meantime, he who was so attracted to poverty hired himself out to rich families as a teacher. In this way he supported himself during the rest of his theological studies. He was ordained in 1865.<sup>14</sup>

**15** Hence, as to their origins, the difference between Dehon and Prévot could hardly be greater. Of their temperament and character, Prévot is much more attracted to a life of sacrifice and self-denial than Dehon. Dehon remains ever the aristocrat. This will temper the spiritual life of each.

### 3. THE FIRST YEARS OF PRIESTHOOD

**16** The details of the years of Léon Dehon in the cathedral parish of Saint-Quentin are well known: how he threw himself into the catechetical ministry, set up a successful *patronat* (*l'oeuvre Saint Joseph*), began a "Cercle des Jeunes", connected with the "Cercles des ouvriers" of de Mun, became the diocesan social director,

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that also Léon Dehon during his studies in Paris also had a Sulpician, Fr. Prével, as his spiritual director. Through the Sulpicians both were introduced to French Spirituality and victim spirituality.

<sup>11</sup> J.-M. Abel, "Pater Andreas Prévot", p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Throughout his life, Léon Prévot retained his appreciation of the Jesuits. When Léon Dehon's Congregation is suppressed, Prévot writes to Dehon in 1884 to encourage him to adopt the Rule of the Jesuits. To his own novices later he taught the "Eight principles of St. Ignatius", principles he had learned in his novitiate with the Jesuits. E. Driedonkx, ¿Cuándo comenzó...?, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> B. Caporale, *P. Andrea Prévot* (Padova: Ed. Massaggerio, 1960) p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Paolo Tanzella, scj: *Carta Bianca-Vita di padre Andrea Prévot*, pp. 9-31; B. Caporale scj: *P. Andrea Prévot*, p. 11-14.

began a newspaper, and at the end in 1877 received permission from the Bishop of Soissons to found a Congregation through the establishment of a secondary school, Collège St. Jean.<sup>15</sup> During these first years, he chafed against the restrictions of “diocesan priesthood” wanting to be a “religieux à Dieu.” As a religious he felt freer to be engaged with people who lived “beyond the sacristy.” In the school he found a partial outlet for what was growing within him.

**17** A kind of restlessness also typifies the first twenty years of André Prévot’s priesthood.<sup>16</sup> He too sought religious life at every turn. Until he finally found himself in the congregation, he moved from one post to another. The first few years after ordination he spent in Aix-en-Provence as chaplain to the Ursuline sisters, while he studied for a doctorate in theology.<sup>17</sup> He obtained a doctorate on a thesis on Richard of St. Victor, a 12th century magister in the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris, known for his psychological approach in his writings on mysticism and contemplation. During this time, André Prévot also began “Bethania”, an association of reparation based on the house of Bethany where Mary, Martha and Lazarus hosted Jesus as a friend. In 1875 he was suddenly appointed pastor at Port-de-Bouc. From there he requested to be allowed to become a religious and so arrived at Avenièrès with Mère Véronique’s “Prêtres-Victimes.”

**18** With Mère Véronique Prévot found the true passion of his life: offering his priestly life in love and reparation to the Sacred Heart for “fallen priests.”<sup>18</sup> In Mère Véronique Prévot found a soul mate. She “had an immense heart,” he said.<sup>19</sup> The new congregation of priests for priests, however, never got off the ground. When the small group dispersed, Mère Véronique sent him to Rome both to promote the Congregation of the Soeurs Victimes and to study philosophy and theology. In 1879

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<sup>15</sup> NHV IX, 13. The Collège St. Jean was the main reason why Bishop Thibaudier continued his support when the congregation seemed to flounder in 1883. See also João Carlos Almeida scj, *Léon Dehon e a Educação* (Roma: Studia Dehoniana 50, 2008), p. 44-45. Dehon was often absent as director of the school, but he was always there for the annual graduation ceremonies. For the rest of his life Dehon stayed in touch with the alumni, meeting them yearly in congresses.

<sup>16</sup> In a letter to Dehon he writes: “In all likelihood Providence will continue to send me from one side to the next, as has been happening for ten years, without letting me see where I am guided.” Archivio Dehoniano (henceforth AD) B 18/5.12.

<sup>17</sup> In the meantime he continued to support himself by teaching children of well-to-do parents.

<sup>18</sup> Evaristo Martínez de Alegría, *Le Bon Père André Prévot*, Studia Dehoniana 57 (Roma: Centro Generale di Studi SCJ, 2012) p. 10. In a letter Prévot writes: “How beautiful is reparation made by priests for the sins of other priests. Our Lord is constantly begging for such consolation.”

<sup>19</sup> *Positio super Vita et Virtutibus. Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Andreae Prévot, Sacerdotis Professi Congregationis Sacerdotum a S. Corde Jesu (1840-1913)* Roma, 1996, Vol. I, p. 6. Prévot wrote a lengthy biography of Caroline Lioger: *Vie de la Servante de Dieu Marie Véronique du Cœur de Jésus : Caroline Lioger* (Paris : Charles Amot, 1913) 925 p.

he obtained a second doctorate in theology at the Gregorian University. As Mère Véronique's health declined, he moved from one place to the next – from Aix-en-Provence to Villeneuve, to Aigues-Mortes to Bouillargues, all within three years. In between, he found time to write his most popular book *Amour, Paix et Joie*, an interpretation of the devotion to the Sacred Heart according to St. Gertrude.<sup>20</sup> In 1882 we find him with Mère Véronique, who by now is confined to bed and dying. When she died in 1883, he began a correspondence with Léon Dehon. In 1885 he finally settled, joining Dehon in Saint Quentin.

**19** Both men were influenced by the wave of victimal spirituality that took hold of France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; however, it affected them differently. Although Dehon wanted to put “victim” in the name of the congregation and he took a vow of victimhood, he personally avoided the excesses of victimal spirituality. His perspective on victimal spirituality was moreover challenged by the Vatican investigation of the foundations of the congregation in 1883. In a rebuke of its victimal spirituality, the Vatican unilaterally changed the name of the congregation from Oblates (victims) of the Sacred Heart to “priests” of the Sacred Heart. The situation of Prévot was somewhat different. Although in *Amour, Paix et Joie* he promoted a softer version of reparation in the devotion to the Sacred Heart according to St. Gertrude, in practice Prévot displayed the excessive reparatory traits for which victimal spirituality became suspect. This remains the paradox of Prévot's life. He wrote a book on St. Gertrude with whom he says that he identifies but whose love for the Heart of Jesus does not require the exceptional mortifications, while in his life he lived another, a much more penitential victimal spirituality. With this sacrificial spirituality Prévot and two others the Congregation. Paradoxically, their joining at this particular juncture may well have saved Dehon's congregation, but at the same time it allowed their version of victimal spirituality obtain a foothold in the congregation.

#### 4. TEN LETTERS

**20** How did the two men come together? The project for priest-victims, that is, to found a congregation of priests dedicated to the Sacred Heart who would make reparation for “fallen” priests – priests who had lost their faith became a driving desire for André Prévot.<sup>21</sup> He was given the task by Mère Véronique to realize such a congregation but the difficulties and disagreements among the Priest-Victims made it impossible. And so the group dissolved. Mère Véronique, saddened by this turn of events, said, “I pray our dear Lord that he helps establish this work in another place and under better circumstances.” Only a few days later Mère Véronique received a

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<sup>20</sup> A. Prévot, *Amour, Paix et Joie. Spiritualité de la dévotion au Cœur de Jésus* (Tournai, Éditions J. Duculot, 1961) 328 p.; *Love, Peace & Joy* (Westminster: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1911).

<sup>21</sup> Evaristo Martínez de Alegría, *Le Bon Père André Prévot*, p. 10.

letter from Léon Dehon, whom she did not know at the time. In the letter Léon Dehon had described his young congregation to her. She showed the letter to Prévot, and she said to him, “Our prayers have been answered.” Before she died in 1882, Mère Véronique acknowledged that there was a kindred spirit between Dehon and her. To continue her project, she pointed Prévot in the direction of Léon Dehon.

**21** And so after her death Prévot began a correspondence with Léon Dehon. In the intense correspondence Prévot wanted to make sure that Dehon’s Saint-Quentin group was what Mère Véronique had in mind. There are ten extant letters to Fr. Dehon in the year before he entered the novitiate, each time exploring whether Fr. Dehon’s Saint-Quentin group was what he was looking for: the extension of Mère Véronique’s vision.<sup>22</sup> With one of his first letters, Prévot also sent him his book *Amour, Paix et Joie*.<sup>23</sup> This book on the devotion to the Heart of Jesus according to St. Gertrude he wrote to Dehon, “expresses all my thoughts.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, paradoxically, the book does not really represent the spirituality of either Mère Véronique, or, for that matter, of Prévot himself.

**22** In the first letter, he wrote: “In line with several indications from Providence ... I find myself writing this letter to you to receive information from you ... with regard to the Priests of the Sacred Heart.”<sup>25</sup> He is being very careful. What he was looking for was clearly Mère Véronique’s victimal spirituality of priests for priests. At this point P. Prévot was 43 years old and he still had not found his place in life. He continued to ask God what might be his vocation. When finally he made his move on May 21, 1885, he told no one. He took the night train from Nîmes to Saint-Quentin and fell on his knees before Fr. Dehon and asked to enter.<sup>26</sup> Prévot sought to enter even though he knew the crisis that Dehon’s congregation was undergoing with its suspension by Rome.

**23** Ten days after he entered the novitiate in Watersleyde, the Netherlands, Prévot wrote that he was convinced that the Congregation was exactly what Mère Véronique had in mind when she wanted a congregation of priest victims.<sup>27</sup> Again, just after he

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<sup>22</sup> The letters can be found in the Prévot Archives in Rome. They are found in AD B 18/ 5.5-15. They were written between November 3, 1883 and February 2, 1885. Even in the last letter of early 1885, he again asks Dehon: “Mère Véronique sought Priest-Victims: is your aim the same?” (AD B 18/15.15).

<sup>23</sup> Prévot sent Dehon the manuscript of the book. It did not yet have the final title. It was called: “Treasure of the Devotion to the Sacred Heart according to St. Gertrude for this Time.” In his 10<sup>th</sup> letter to Dehon (January 21, 1885) Prévot again insists that he is more a follower of St. Gertrude than of Mère Véronique.

<sup>24</sup> AD B 18/ 5.9.

<sup>25</sup> NHV XV,23; AD B 105.1.

<sup>26</sup> Prévot by this time had become used to failures. He had kept everything very secret so that he could return without too much explanation. He had said nothing to his friends.

<sup>27</sup> See Evaristo J. Martínez de Alegría, scj, *Le bon Père André Prévot* (Roma, 2005: manuscript), p. 14. Watersleyde was in the Netherlands. In 1882 the French government had started to expel religious from France. It is for this reason that a novitiate was opened in the

pronounced his first vows (only four months later on September 22, 1885) he wrote to M. Marie Joseph, the superior of the Soeurs Victimes and successor of Mère Véronique: “I am more clearly convinced each day that the thoughts of M. Véronique and ours are the same.” He continued: “In the Congregation of the Sacred Heart we have the same goals as Mère Véronique: the consolation of the Sacred Heart, reparation, service to priests, a life of sacrifice, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. We follow almost the same program as we did with Mère Véronique.”<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, also Fr. Dehon thought that Prévot was on the same wavelength with him.<sup>29</sup> In a letter Dehon writes, “His letter is a testimony of union with us.”<sup>30</sup> The differences became evident only later.

## 5. MÈRE VÉRONIQUE AND VICTIMAL SPIRITUALITY

**24** As we saw, very early in his secondary studies his spiritual director, Emile Roux, introduced André Prévot to Véronique Lioger and her victimal spirituality. This victim spirituality movement originated in Marseille.<sup>31</sup> In 1857 Véronique Lioger had founded a congregation of Sisters Victims of the Sacred Heart in Grenoble, France, taking the name Mère Véronique. This contra-reformation victim spirituality was very popular in France in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>32</sup> It presented itself as a way of living physical suffering as a positive force, seeking to make suffering redemptive for others. Victim souls were of two types. The first type did not inflict suffering and mortification on themselves but accepted the sufferings of every-day life by offering such sufferings to God in order to make them fruitful for others. But there was also a second type. Here the victim soul asked God for suffering, sacrifices and humiliations. In this version the victim imposed mortifications upon him or herself for others to show one’s love of God. Sometimes this meant supreme

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southern part of the Netherlands. It later moved from Watersleyde to Leyenbroeck-Sittard. Bishop Thibaudier of Soissons in his letter to the Vatican said that he had not given permission to Dehon to establish the novitiate outside his diocese. In 1881 the congregation was still diocesan.

<sup>28</sup> AP B 18/39. In this letter M. Marie Joseph also wrote that because of the difficulties of Dehon with Rome in 1883, “It would not ever be possible to confuse them [the Soeurs Servantes] with M. Véronique.” Despite the existence of two volumes of correspondence between Dehon and the Soeurs Servantes (A. Perroux, *Le Père Dehon et Mère Marie du Coeur de Jésus* “Studia Dehoniana 46.1- 46.2 (Roma: Centro Generale Studi SCJ, 2003), no study of the differences between the Soeurs Servantes and the Soeurs Victimes exists.

<sup>29</sup> Fr. Dehon at his deposition at the beatification process for M. Véronique in Namur showed that for him there was an interlocking of the two congregations. See Alegria, p. 63.

<sup>30</sup> AP B 18/5.1.

<sup>31</sup> Paula M. Kane, “She Offered Herself up”: The Victim Soul and Victim Spirituality in Catholicism, *Church History* Vol. 71.1, 2002, p. 81.

<sup>32</sup> See E. Driedonkx, “De Dienaar Gods P. Andreas Prévot (1840-1913); Leerling van Zuster Veronica van het H. Hart Lioger; Novicenmeester te Sittard,” (Nijmegen, 2012) Manuscript of 45 pages.

sufferings.<sup>33</sup> For some it was the acceptance of extreme physical pain, chronic ailments or physical disabilities. Victim spirituality sought to make these sufferings, received or self-imposed, useful for others. Within the Christian tradition such suffering is considered beneficial for others not because of the intensity of the suffering but because of the power of love with which the suffering is accepted. Suffering for its own sake or to evoke pity – even God’s sympathy – is not considered wholesome. Suffering that is tinged with self-hatred or a lack of appreciation of one’s body cannot be salvific for others. However, compassionate suffering out of love for the other is. That is how Christians have generally understood the reason for the incarnation. God in Christ came to vanquish suffering and death.<sup>34</sup> Accepted suffering expresses faith in the powerlessness of suffering, illness, even death. In this manner one is a witness of the resurrection. Suffering and death are “powers” to be defeated. There is nothing salvific in suffering on its own. In short, the line between wholesome and unwholesome vicarious suffering is difficult to keep clear. That was certainly the danger within victim spirituality. All too often there was too great an emphasis on abnegation and suffering.

**25** Inherent in victimal anthropology one finds a pessimistic view of the human capacity. This is due to its one-sided understanding of the order of creation. In other words, victimal spirituality is certainly more Augustinian than Thomistic in its outlook on the identity and absolute dependency of creation, ascribing a more devastating influence of sin on human identity and capacity. This manifests itself in victimal Christology. Bérullian anthropology – in a traditional mode – holds that our humanity was corrupted, inherently corrupted, by an original sin. It needs to be healed but it cannot do so by its own power. By saying that it can be healed only in Christ, Bérulle remained within a traditional teaching of Christianity. However, in French Spirituality, the relation of the human and divine in Christ took on a particular, non-traditional twist. In Christ, his humanity is presented as totally subservient to his divinity. In this formulation, humanity has no subsistence and identity in itself, it only exists in subservience to divinity. With this Bérulle seems to be insisting that there is something inherently lacking in the human, not because of sin but as a creature. The role of humanity becomes one of servitude, obedience and humility. It has no dignity, identity and glory on its own. Only in obedience, humility and sacrifice – only in self abnegation – and replacing this impotent self with Christ

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<sup>33</sup> Augustine Poulain, (*The Graces of Interior Prayer 1901*) identified these two forms of victim life. The first was a general acceptance of sufferings that one encounters in life. The second type of victim, he holds, “goes on to ask for suffering, not to attempt to avoid those that have serious results, to offer even life itself.” (p. 77) He warns against the second. They may be extremist, potentially dangerous to health and misguided as a search for the extraordinary but often accompanied by auto-suggestions. See also Paula Kane, “She Offered Herself up,” p. 101.

<sup>34</sup> Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2014) p. 119.

– is it possible to be human. That is why “union with Christ” is so important in Bérullian spirituality. Bérulle maintained that the nothingness of the human could only be healed through a radical union with Christ.<sup>35</sup> To overcome our nothingness, he said, humans need to “make their own the states of the life of Christ.”<sup>36</sup> Only “in Christ” can what is lacking in our humanity – its nothingness – be properly acknowledged and lived.

**26** That is why the death of Jesus on the cross is so important. The death of Jesus represents the sacrifice, the oblation, of the human self to the Father. In this sacrificial obedience to the Father, Jesus restored humanity to its primordial image, that is, an acceptance of its nothingness. This dying of Christ is an eternal dying. The death is never overcome. It is through our sacrifice, our oblation, that we join in this ministry of love of Christ. Hence: “love and sacrifice”.<sup>37</sup> It may sound attractive until we see what this teaching says about our humanity. This is essentially a negative view of humanity.<sup>38</sup> But it is also a particular theology or view of the work of Jesus Christ. With a constant focus on sacrifice, the view of the human as “the nothing”, that is, from whom nothing positive can be expected, is strengthened. This is an anthropology of “néantisme.” This, joined to a rigorous dosage of corporeal penance, as became the case with victimal spirituality, can become a poisonous mix.

**27** Victim spirituality was also gender related because the participation in the spirituality was much higher among women – particularly women religious – than among men. It was often propagated among women by spiritual directors who were mostly priests.<sup>39</sup> It was a spirituality that emphasized the offering of one’s life to

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<sup>35</sup> De Condren, founder of the Sulpicians and an initiator of the victimal movement, wrote: “you ought to regard yourself as a mass of sin, because of which all one’s movements are opposed to God and enemies of his sanctity.” Here perfection is only presented in terms of a reduction of the self to the nothing, a self annihilation, not as a positive movement. Aloysius Yudistero Adifitri Tyassanto, *De Bérulle à Condren: L’évolution de la Christologie de l’école française de spiritualité*. Mémoire de la Faculté de Théologie, Université catholique de Louvain, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> See my *Faith in the one who loves me: The spiritual legacy of Leo Dehon* (Ottawa, Milwaukee: Priests of the Sacred Heart, 2007, p. 30-37.

<sup>37</sup> A. Perroux, *Le témoignage d’une vie*, manuscript 2010, p. 54.

<sup>38</sup> See the perceptive critique of the theology of creation of Bérulle by R. Bellemare, *Le sens de la créateur dans la doctrine de Bérulle* (Bruges: Desclée, 1959); see also William Thompson, *Bérulle and the French School* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> Paula M. Kane, “She Offered Herself up,” p. 86. In the spiritual direction there was an unspoken subordination of women: “It was the silent and nearly invisible women who were praised by male commentators as models of sanctity. Further, confessors and spiritual directors commended a woman’s inattention to her own body as proof of her total submission to God. Victim soul mysticism was not ultimately sensitive to women, assenting to culturally-sanctioned norms for their subordination and often responding to their genuine physical pain by intellectualizing or ignoring it. When women’s bodily suffering became unbearably real to those who witnessed it, theologians and priests retreated into the safety of theological abstraction or to the fond idea of the happy handicapped.” The unspoken collusion between

God, to be a victim for the glory and love of God, “in order to make up what is lacking in the suffering of Christ.” (1 Co 1.24) In the school of French spirituality it was deeply connected with the devotion to the Sacred Heart. Because of its anthropology, the spirituality placed great emphasis on sacrifice and self-denial, as a form of the emptying of self.

**28** The lifestyle of a victim was to be one of humility, even passivity, symbolized by the solitude of Christ on the cross. This sort of vicarious suffering for others, it was felt, allowed women in their own manner to enter into the redemptive work of Christ; hence, the dangerous but compelling attraction of victim spirituality to women.

**29** In line with this spirituality, Caroline Lioger wanted to repair the world through her union with Christ on the cross. She wanted the suffering Christ to live in her, so that as a victim for Christ with Christ, in her sufferings she would be able to save sinners.<sup>40</sup> For her, this spirituality and its sacrifices was especially oriented to make reparation for “fallen priests.” It was with this vision in mind that André Prévot joined her.

## 6. VICTIM SPIRITUALITY: DEHON AND PRÉVOT

**30** With both Dehon and Prévot taking a vow of victimhood, victim spirituality clearly played a role in the foundation of the Congregation. But the understanding of the vow was clearly different. The aristocratic Dehon lived a resoluteness in his life but this did not include self-imposed sufferings. Léon Dehon lived victim spirituality intentionally at the first level, where he would accept as coming from Providence all the sufferings and setbacks of his life. His sense of reparation did not involve taking on suffering deliberately, as it did for André Prévot. Dehon may have desired for himself – even for the congregation – a more strenuous reparation. However, he

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victim women and their confessors, which rewarded women for seeking ever-increasing suffering, probably pushed some women toward the darkest corners of victim-hood p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> In his book on Véronique Lioger (*Vie de la Servante de Dieu Marie Véronique*), Prévot wrote how she suffered terrible neglect from her parents as a child, was denied love by her father, was farmed out to another family from whom she received little care, and was ridiculed by other children. All these negative experiences are interpreted in an exaggerated way hagiographically by Prévot (p. 11-28). So, for instance, Prévot recalls a memory of Caroline at her first communion: “At my first communion, the good God cast into my soul the profound seed of the cross, so that I asked Jesus instantly to be always allowed to suffer. He answered my prayers.” (p. 23) She acknowledges that she ruined her health as a young person by her fasting, mortifications, prayers all night (often under her bed) but also cutting herself and wearing sackcloth and chains. Because she ruined her health, she was refused entry by congregations (p. 35-36). Prévot saw nothing unusual in this, attributing everything to her desire for sanctity. We find the same observations in Paula Kane’s article, “The presence of victim souls in religious communities was likewise a mixed blessing, since they frequently became too ill or were too handicapped to be adequately cared for by their orders, and had to be sent home.” “She Offered Herself up” p. 99; see also Marcel Denis, *La spiritualité victimale en France*, Studia Dehoniana 11 (1982) (Roma: Centro Studi, 1982).

never imposed it nor did he live it. One can hear this desire in a regret about himself in a statement he made after the death of Prévot: “It was Fr. Prévot who was the true spiritual and interior founder of our work; me, I was only the apparent founder.”<sup>41</sup> The statement is telling for in it he acknowledged the difference between him and Prévot. He may have admired the way of Prévot, but personally he had taken another approach.

**31** That becomes clear when we examine Prévot’s lifestyle. Here Prévot and Dehon are worlds apart. What makes Prévot stand out is a great number of stories about him which give a clear orientation to his understanding of victim spirituality.<sup>42</sup> When people talk about Prévot, they talk about his extraordinary feats of abnegation. People who knew him personally had an almost unending fund of stories about Prévot’s acts of mortification. Most interpreted these stories as being evidence of his sanctity. The accounts of these events set him apart. He showed himself to be ruthlessly against any comfort, tasty food, sleep, proper clothing, bodily care, personal needs, books, protection against the cold, personal appearance or against other minor comforts that most would consider standard, not extravagant.

**32** Here is just a selection of these accounts. They tell of Prévot in Aix-en-Provence with the Ursulines giving away his mattress to a poor person and himself sleeping on pruned vine slips, of Prévot saving food from his own table to give to the poor, of Prévot putting the fresh sandwich in a drawer to eat it a day, or days, later, of Prévot never using soap to wash himself, using only a towel dipped in the water (the water in the wash bowl was still clear at the end of the week), of Prévot shabbily dressed, with clothing not washed for a long time, of Prévot not owning a comb, using his hands through his hair, of Prévot shaving badly always, using only a shard of mirror to view himself (when it fell and broke, he asked a novice to get him another, but before the novice’s eyes, he purposefully dropped the new mirror and kept just a piece to shave by), of Prévot spending all night praying in the chapel, hiding behind the altar so as not to be seen by the novices, of Prévot refusing to light the stove in his room for warmth in the cold Dutch winters, of praying for hours on his knees, spending two to three hours each day in adoration (when he was assistant in Aigues-mortes, the pastor of the parish said derisively that he did not need another statue in his church), of losing his pants one day during mass because he had lost so much weight, of Prévot refusing – until commanded by Fr. Dehon – to be at the side of his mother as she lay dying, and then being at her side only briefly, of Prévot’s avoidance of women and warning the novices with a loud voice whenever there was a woman in the novitiate, of Prévot wearing iron chains and bracelets and hair shirt,

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<sup>41</sup> AD B 108/2. See Alegría, p. 19: “C’est le P. André qui a été le vraie fondateur spirituel et intérieure de notre oeuvre, moi je suis le fondateur apparent.”

<sup>42</sup> The majority of the stories about Prévot can be found in the diaries of P.J. Slangen, “*Het eerste begin van onze Congregatie in Nederland.*” The diaries (handwritten cahiers and a typed text) are found in the Archives in Rome. Cahiers 7-9 contain his memories as a novice. P.J. Slangen was in the novitiate in Sittard between 1894 – 1896.

of Prévot always having his watch in hand to remind himself of not losing a minute, of the lengths to which Prévot would go to bring back “fallen priests” (one day going all the way to Berlin to meet one).

**33** It is the excess in these accounts - and many others - that is striking and which makes them memorable. This for most people was Prévot. We know no similar stories about Fr. Dehon. It is not as if there was no critique of this rigorism of Prévot. Fr. Dehon, on several occasions, urged Prévot to take it easy on himself. Even Mère Véronique, who was not easy on herself, counseled Prévot against some of his excesses. To Dehon’s warning to “Be careful about too much abnegation”, Prévot responded, “Yes, but it is the ruin of poverty and obedience”<sup>43</sup> or “Not to have a cross, what a cross!”<sup>44</sup>

**34** It is true, Prévot did not impose his style of life on the novices - in fact, he discouraged them from following his example. Yet, it was also clear that his ultimate goal was to find among them victim-novices. In his correspondence to Claire Baume, for instance, he identified five “frères – victimes.”<sup>45</sup> In another letter in 1903 he talked about “notre novice victime.”<sup>46</sup> In his letters to Claire Baume, it becomes clear that his deeper adherence remained with victimal spirituality. His direction of her reveals that the ultimate intent of all his work also with the novices was, if possible, to introduce them to what he must have found the higher way. He sought to lead to a complete death of self in vicarious sacrifices for others.

**35** At the spiritual level Prévot from time to time also sought to push Dehon into this direction. In a small anecdote, a letter of Prévot to Dehon, he commented on a confrere who wrote about the reign of the Sacred Heart. Prévot complained to Dehon that in the text the word “victim” had been removed. He was missing, he wrote, the reference to “penance and reparation.” In the margin of the letter, Dehon assured him, “Yes, the Reign of the Sacred Heart won’t happen without penance and reparation.”<sup>47</sup> The marginal remark is, however, not so marginal. Dehon was at this time already moving in a different direction, also with regard to reparation, a way that Prévot could not follow. For Dehon reparation was never wholly an interior, sacrificial action.

**36** It is true that for Dehon the charism was not only about love. Love was always to be accompanied by reparation, immolation, and oblation. It was always love and something else. The difference between Dehon and Prévot lay in the content of what

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<sup>43</sup> AP B 8/44.1900 a, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> AP B 8/44.1900 a, p. 195.

<sup>45</sup> AP B 14/44,41, p. 5. In his “Lettere sull’abbandono: Corrispondenza tra P. Prévot e Père Lazare osb” *Dehoniana* 5.6. Editio Typica (1973) p. 93, Marcel Denis says that Dehon did not approve of this gathering around Prévot of this group of “fervent ones”. See also Alegria, “Corrispondenza tra P. Prévot e Claire Baume” p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> AP B 1903 a, p. 104-106.

<sup>47</sup> AD B 105 /2.

follows the “and.” When Prévot spoke about reparation, it was about prayer and self-negation, in line with his strand of victimal spirituality.

### Prévot’s victimal spirituality

**37** So the question becomes: What was his spirituality? What can we say about his spirituality? One of his bishops, Bishop Forcade, at the time when Prévot was chaplain of the Ursulines in Aix-en-Provence, considered him too mystical. A “mystic-mysticasse,” he called him.<sup>48</sup> Augustin Jacquemin, Prévot’s successor as novice director in Meslin-l’Évêque, speaks of an idealized spirit of sacrifice in him. Jacquemin saw Prévot’s spirituality summed up in the motto: “Love and sacrifice.” Of this Jacquemin writes: “Fr. André did not have to do much to convince me that his teaching is truly good and necessary; that it is impossible to work for the glory of the Sacred Heart and to do good for souls, unless in some way one follows his spirit ...: *If the grain of wheat does not die, it will not produce fruit.*”<sup>49</sup>

**38** In his writings Prévot did not articulate this ascetical urge. In his *Amour, joie et paix*, he turned to Gertrude to express his approach to Christ. His spirituality, he proposed, also to Dehon, was, like Gertrude, a suffering with Christ on the cross for sin. He said that he sought to become, like Christ, a victim in an internal abandonment. Like Gertrude, he said, he wanted to accept the sufferings that life would send him. In the book there is no reference to imposed suffering.

**39** Yet, in his actions he was much more ascetical. In one of his first letters to Léon Dehon on March 14, 1884, we hear this other understanding of the life of a victim. The life of victimhood, he writes, is a “continuam mortificationem, through pure love.”<sup>50</sup> In the same period when he was exploring his future with Dehon, on May 12, 1884, he writes to him: “From the beginning, I have offered myself wholeheartedly to our Lord as a victim for your Oeuvre; I will be very happy to contribute to it on my part by a life of abjection and abandonment.”<sup>51</sup> Jacquemin remembers well the maxim of Prévot, “If there is no sacrifice, there is no Love.” Everything in his life turned around this “love and immolation” with an emphasis on immolation and sacrifice. No one can have greater love, according to Prévot, than to give one’s life for what one loves.<sup>52</sup> In a conference in 1905-06 to the novices, Prévot

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<sup>48</sup> J.-M. Abel, *Pater Andreas Prévot*, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Evaristo J. Martínez de Alegría, “Le bon père André Prévot: “Fare traboccare la misura della carità” (Corso di Formazione dehoniana 2010-2011) p. 98. P. Jacquemin recalls how one day he saw how the face of P. Prévot broke into a friendly smile to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. “It was like a greeting of a dear friend.” (Alegría, “Le bon père André Prévot” p. 103).

<sup>50</sup> AP B 18/5.11. P. Prévot went along with the toning down of the language of victim once the Vatican objected to the name of Victims of the Sacred Heart in 1885. But in his letter to Dehon even as late as 1908 he retains the emphasis of “penance” in his mode of reparation. B 105/2.

<sup>51</sup> Letter of May 12, 1884. B 18/5.5.

<sup>52</sup> This is the reason why Prévot saw in the life and death of the missionary the highest

wrote, “In one word: understand your vocation, religious life: it is suffering, sacrifice, that is your vocation. And for that the Church asks vows.”<sup>53</sup> For Prévot religious life is obedience, a sacrifice of your memory, your intellect, as in the prayer of St. Ignatius. That is bearing the trace of Christ in one’s heart!

**40** Along these lines, it is possible to understand a popular motto of Prévot: “Let overflow the measure of charity.” One can never do enough. In a positive anthropology such a motto says, because God’s love is so generous, emulate this generosity. But in a negative anthropology, such as that of Prévot’s, the measure of charity was the measure of sacrifice. In that sense, he was a radical; he was in a constant struggle against the defects and miseries of nature. For him, half measures were not enough to cure the illness of human nature.<sup>54</sup> It showed in his way of genuflecting and making the sign of the cross: he was always attentive to the smallest details. He would at times stop the prayers and say to the novices: “Slowly, my brothers, please be reverend and pray calmly!” Our humanness must be kept in place. It must accept its “nothingness.” With Prévot this manifested itself in a rigorism to the bitter end as if for him everything turned around sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice, mortification for the sake of mortification. Only in radical self negation and self abandonment can I be a “self.” Prévot seemed so utterly convinced that the seeking of what satisfies and pleases is so strong in young people that only mortification could break the hold.

**41** This regime of sacrifice showed itself most clearly in his deep sense of obedience to the rule or to any regulation by a superior. He taught this to the novices: they were told to keep exactly to the rule. When he admonished the novices, it was mostly in relation to keeping the rule. He himself had great difficulty when circumstances necessitated a change in the rule.<sup>55</sup> It is here that his motto: “Let the measure of charity overflow” becomes more measured by sacrifice than by love. In other words, a life of austerity, penance, and renunciation seemed like second nature to Prévot. In one of his letters to Claire Baume, Prévot frets whether perhaps his illness and

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fulfillment of his motto “love and sacrifice.” For him a missionary was a victim of the Sacred Heart. For the novices he held out missionary life as “the boundary of the possible in which to become martyr and victim of love.” “*De Maria nunquam satis*”, pp. 15-16. However, he also warned that the missionary desire could weaken the notion of reparation in the novices.

<sup>53</sup> AP P0003/019/001, p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> Alegría, “Le bon père André Prévot,” p. 100.

<sup>55</sup> For instance, in Sittard it had been agreed upon to have a night of adoration on the 25th of each month. It could happen, however, that the 25<sup>th</sup> preceded a Thursday on which there would be a Holy Hour from 11 to 12 at night. In such situations, Prévot found it difficult to give the novices some extra time to sleep. When P. Dehon intervened, P. Prévot seemed deeply hurt. As he admitted to P. Jacquemin, “It must never be easy to change a rule.” P. Jacquemin had an experience of this one day when he wanted to meditate on a passage from a book on St. John Bergmans, read in the dining room. So he had taken the book from the dining room. Afterwards, Prévot corrected him by telling him that the rule did not permit him to take books from the refectory without permission. (Alegría, “Le bon père André Prévot” p. 102).

weakness is caused by his old mortifications. To this he adds: “I don’t know what to do. Without mortifications I fall into anxiety.”<sup>56</sup> That is why he needed rules: “Outside of the rule there is only chaos;” it is also why he needed Dehon and his confessor to constantly affirm him and hold his obsessive side in check.

**42** All his life he remained troubled. His spirituality comes across, therefore, as embroiled in fear, not as a liberating grace. Constantly being induced to sacrifice himself, he could not understand that people also needed to have moments to relax. Although he acknowledged that coffee helped him to calm down, he could not reconcile his desire for the “maudit” coffee. For him it was a matter of staying on track, of pushing himself to the end, to stem the self. Only obedience would make him more pliable and prevent his fight against sin to become an illness.<sup>57</sup> It was said that at the end of his life, when he was made provincial superior of the Western Province, that he changed. Suddenly, he was able to laugh and he was entertaining around others. But his fears remained. He who wrote about “Love, Peace and Joy” and taught “pure love, full tenderness, pure grace” succeeded only rarely to give himself over to God’s heart in all tenderness. For himself, he remained: “And I, so small, forever on the cross, what a grace!”<sup>58</sup>

**43** On this point Dehon was always different from Prévot. In a letter of February 18, 1913, Dehon writes: “The only different nuance I have with the Victimes of Marseille and of Avenières [the group of Mère Véronique] is that I let our Lord himself take hold of the handle of the whip. I insist less on personal mortifications, while considering them necessary, but I recommend above all the patient abandonment to the trials that our Lord sends. Our Lord did not crucify himself, he allowed himself to be crucified.”<sup>59</sup> A year later on February 12, 1914, he called the manner of the Priest-Victims a “more violent manner where one does a lot by oneself.” And there he also placed “un peu” Père André. His own way he called “softer,” leaving the trials to our Lord to determine. “That is our vocation,” wrote Dehon. He points to mortifications “with which one must be moderate because of one’s health: those that deal with sleep and food and to instruments of penance.”<sup>60</sup> However, if Dehon, like Prévot, insisted on love *and* reparation, we do not see in him the sort of mortification of Prévot. In later letters Dehon blames Captier for causing the serious difficulties at the beginning of the Congregation by saying that in 1881-1882 he pushed the

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<sup>56</sup> AP B 8/44. 1900 a, p. 195.

<sup>57</sup> Philippe in notes added to the article of J.-M. Abel points to Prévot’s sense of justice. For him the denial of God’s rights, the refusal to fulfill the religious and priestly duties, were – in the eyes of justice – a horror and at the same time something that spurred him on to vicarious reparation. For him it meant, as it did for Mère Véronique, entering into some kind of self-flagellation. (See Abel, “Pater Andreas Prévot,” p. 2, note 11).

<sup>58</sup> M. Alegria scj: “Le bon Père André”, *Cartas sobre el espíritu de abandono*, pp. 26-29.

<sup>59</sup> OSP, II, 359.

<sup>60</sup> AD B 44/7.

congregation to a life of love without reparation.<sup>61</sup> Also Dehon held on to the “Ecce Venio” where he asked his followers to be generous and prompt to give of themselves without reserve, but it was to be “without violence.”<sup>62</sup> Dehon, however, was not thinking only of physical mortification but he envisioned also apostolic commitments as part of reparation.

### Reparation for priests

**44** From the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the focus upon priests, both in the French School of spirituality as well as in victim spirituality, is difficult to understand. Both for the Soeurs Servantes and the Soeurs Victimes the emphasis of vicarious reparation is especially for faithless priests. The Soeurs Servantes had read the devotion as a practice of reparation to Christ for the indifference to and neglect of his love, but the emphasis of the reparation in victim spirituality was reparation by priests for priests. Mère Véronique insisted on founding a congregation of priest-victims for priests. It is with this in mind that Prévot joined her in 1876. And when in 1883 Prévot began the exploration of his vocation with Dehon, he wanted to assure himself that Dehon sought the same goal. He took seriously Dehon’s word: “The works regarding priests ought to be given preferential consideration.”<sup>63</sup>

**45** This preoccupation with what he called, “poor priests” was not minor. If for Dehon the “Oeuvre” is the congregation, for Prévot the “Oeuvre” is reparation by priests for priests. That is the meaning of being “priest-victims.” And so it was that among his novices he sought victim souls for priests. Nothing could make him happier than to find among his novices a “frère victim” who shared his passion. Although he looked for practical solutions, such as establishing houses for fallen priests, the ministry remained mainly one of prayer and sacrifice. When he met such a priest, he would urge everyone to give him every attention.<sup>64</sup> It was this that he was looking for in Dehon’s congregation.

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<sup>61</sup> A. Perroux, *Le témoignage d’une vie* p. 79. In *Vita e personalità di P. Dehon*, p. 600 Dorresteijn attributed to Captier, whom he calls a “fausse mystique” and psychopath, some of the prayers found in the first prayer book “*Nos Prières*” composed for the novitiate.

<sup>62</sup> On September 24, 1883 Dehon wrote to Prévot: “Our Congregation is only an answer to the specific request of a cult of love and reparation to the Sacred Heart made by our Lord through Margaret Mary to persons who consecrate themselves to him ... The spirit of sacrifice, oblation and reparation is proper to the Spirit, inspired by the Sacred Heart. We have in our Rule no corporal mortifications. For us, in the first place, come the sacrifice of the heart and abandonment.” AD B 35/3.4.

<sup>63</sup> Alegría, p. 46.

<sup>64</sup> Because he shared this concern with Claire Baume, his letters to her are filled with references to the “Oeuvre” and how he sought “novices victimes” to take on this work. See for examples the letters of 1904 AP B 8/44 p. 125. Although the cases of priests leaving during the time of the expulsion of religious congregations from France in these years was great, the obsession about “fallen priests” must have another, difficult to determine, source.

**46** Prévot oriented his ministry of prayer and sacrifice to priests in difficulty. There are plenty of stories of the lengths to which Prévot went to persuade “poor priests” to change their ways. When he was still an assistant in Villeneuve – les – Avignon (he was chaplain at the time to Mère Véronique’s congregation), he once went to visit a priest and knelt before him and begged him to change his life. He told him, “I offer my life for you, but be converted, my dear friend.”<sup>65</sup> Prévot called these priests “les prêtres malheureux”, the “unfortunate or unhappy priests.” In his typically interior, spiritual approach, Prévot saw his life as a victim offering himself in union with Christ-Priest on the cross as a way of helping those in the priesthood to live true consecrated lives.<sup>66</sup> To help these priests Mère Véronique and André Prévot had plans to set up houses of hospitality for such priests. He must have proposed this to Dehon because in a letter written to Claire Baume, after Prévot’s death, Dehon writes:

**47** Soeur Véronique and Fr. André understood this ministry in a different way than I: namely, by giving hospitality to “fallen priests.” I think that Providence has decided otherwise. Our apostolates would have suffered through this confusion. In fact, the hospitality was given by another Fr. Prévot who started houses in Paris and Rome. It appears that our task here consists in helping this apostolate with our prayers and through the creation of bursaries. What do you think?<sup>67</sup>

**48** It is true that Dehon had assumed this same orientation from the Soeurs Servantes who also sought a group of priests who would do reparation for priests. In that sense, Prévot was right: also Dehon saw the need to make reparation for priest by priests. However, his reparation took a different slant, inasmuch as Dehon was much more interested in the structural reform of preparing young men for the priesthood. Dehon’s “reparation” for priests was directed toward a spiritual, pastoral and educational formation of priests. He saw a need to “repair” at the cultural and philosophical level. That was also why he was interested in seminaries and Catholic universities.<sup>68</sup> Dehon was interested in a Catholic elite, well trained, who could redirect Christian life in France.

### **The practical side of Prévot**

**49** There exists an impression in the Congregation that Prévot was only some kind of mystic who lacked a practical sense of life. With his refusal to look into the camera, he gives an impression of himself as “other worldly.” Fr. Dehon is thought

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<sup>65</sup> Positio, Biografía, doc. p. 438. See Alegría p. 46.

<sup>66</sup> Alegría, p. 48.

<sup>67</sup> AD B 108/2, inventory 0116576. Dehon also wrote her that Prévot changed his mind in 1903 when he saw that others had begun to realize his project of a hospitality house. But also Dehon refers in a letter (AD B 108/2, inventory 0116578) about starting a house for priests who are tired and sick. See Driedonkx, “El P. Andrés Prévot y *La Asociación reparadora del Sagrado Corazón* p. 17.

<sup>68</sup> NHV VI, 115; 120.

to be the more practical visionary. However, Bishop Philippe advises us to go to Watersleyde and Sittard.<sup>69</sup> There Prévot showed his eminently practical side. He conceived a plan to build a minor seminary near the novitiate to welcome the children from the big families in the neighbourhood.<sup>70</sup> He showed himself to be a master builder. He oversaw the re-construction of the house in Watersleyde. He also built the big edifice of Leyenbroeck-Sittard. He also financed the construction. He was a brilliant and careful fundraiser. In Sittard, according to Philippe, during his time as novice master Prévot did all the fundraising to pay for the higher studies of the congregation. At the time, there were not as yet any scholasticates. All studies at the universities of Lille, Leuven, St. Sulpice, Rome and the diocesan seminary of Luxemburg were paid for by Prévot's fundraising.

**50** His practical side showed also in the manner in which he took on the project of the novitiate in Watersleyde in 1885. He had just been professed in September 1885 – after only four months of novitiate – when he was appointed as novice director. Despite his intense spiritual life and his ingrained uncertainty, his early work in the novitiate showed him that he could be very decisive in his initiatives. He quickly made the novitiate into a powerful center for vocations, and pastoral and religious formation.<sup>71</sup>

**51** When Prévot first joined Dehon in 1885, if anyone seemed otherworldly it was not Prévot but Dehon and his first followers. Prévot was made the director of novices so quickly because the excessive supernaturalism and unhealthy mysticism of the early members of the congregation had made the situation of the congregation unstable.<sup>72</sup> Dehon left it to Prévot to put his house in order.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> HM 27-2/6.

<sup>70</sup> The project was proposed at the General Chapter of 1886. Bishop Thibaudier allowed him to accept only ten children. In 1887 five students came from the apostolic school of Fayet. Prévot bought a farm in Leyenbroek but soon it was too small. There he built the first part of a school and in 1889 the community moved to the new location. Prévot guided this community for 20 years. See Driedonkx, “Leerling van Zuster Veronica.”

<sup>71</sup> E. Driedonkx, ¿Cuándo comenzó el P. Andrés Prévot a ser maestro del noviciado en Sittard?, p. 7.

<sup>72</sup> For a much more extensive information see the Vatican dossier named “*Rerum variorum*” of 1884, no. 5 (Protocol 579/1951) It is interesting to note that what was sent to the Vatican leading up to the *Consummatum est* was a dossier containing (1) two documents which a diocesan commission had put together on the writings of Soeur Ignace and P. Captier (NHV XIV, 136); (2) all the writings of Soeur Ignace (4 folders); (3) a piece on Léon Bachelard (lived in Fayet, under the influence of Captier, committed suicide in 1887; (4) Letters of a few persons; (5) a letter of Bishop Thibaudier asking for guidance. A copy of the Constitutions was also included. But the Constitutions and Directory were not of Dehon but of Captier. The Bishop of Reims and Soissons were perplexed about the extent of the reliance on supernatural affirmation in the new congregation.

<sup>73</sup> Lamour as well as Captier had in mind another congregation with two or three branches: one a contemplative group with a monastic obligation of choir and adoration and another a more apostolic group. Captier went so far as to propose this in the written constitution of 1881

## The spirituality of the congregation in the hands of Prévot

**52** Although many had high praise of Prévot's conduct of the novitiate and many admired his ascetic lifestyle<sup>74</sup> – it is true, for some it led to fear of him – the assessment of his spiritual food for the novices was not always positive. It seemed that after fifteen years Prévot's direction of the novitiate became more and more spiritualized. He was accused to skipping over the necessary first steps for a basic spiritual formation and growth.<sup>75</sup> One of the novices, Fr. Lacroix, wrote afterwards: "We were on his side and generous in our judgments, but we were also small wolves, restless to attack him and to criticize any over-the-top teachings which were insufficiently documented and balanced. We expected to receive a synthesis and a perfect analysis of human and divine life in us ... but Fr. André filled us literally with an exalted spirituality ... without giving us the analysis of the reality of life, without an application to human life... Never did he give us a sexual formation. ... From it all, on the part of the novices, there came a constant criticism, dissatisfaction, failure of the method of education, little interest for the greater part of the instruction, opposition to the novice director and disorder."<sup>76</sup>

**53** Although criticism is not unusual among novices, the direction of the criticism is telling. It was said of Prévot that "he gives a rich, refined, dessert, but that it lacks solid food." The witness of Fr. Lacroix is revealing: "He wanted to make us more angels without a body than saints with a body." Prévot seemed often detached from real life and he tended to propose a spirituality that was full of emotivism, but hardly realizable. He was also impulsive and quite impatient of the faults of others. He had the penchant to be full of agitation but the restlessness could not give direction. And so he idealized certain perspectives of life often lacking a discretion for the real.<sup>77</sup>

**54** In a letter about Prévot, Dehon alludes to this criticism. "Give a solid base to the novices. Not too much mysticism. The foundations must be given priority. Always be practical...". Dehon tells him of the charges he has heard: "From the beginning of the year and throughout, he speaks about the life of love... The danger is that this only forms servile hypocrites. Be careful to form consciences."<sup>78</sup> An Abbot Wiart

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that was rejected by the Vatican for its strange mysticism. In the crisis of 1883-4, he left the congregation. Lamour also had mystical tendencies and was replaced as novice director by Prévot.

<sup>74</sup> The testimony in the diaries of P.J. Slangen, "*Het eerste begin van onze Congregatie in Nederland.*" Archives in Casa Generalizia, Rome. Cahiers 7-9.

<sup>75</sup> E. Driedonx, *De Dienaar Gods*, p. 25-26.

<sup>76</sup> AD B 44/8-H, inventory 763.07.

<sup>77</sup> See Driedonx, *De Dienaar Gods*, p. 48.

<sup>78</sup> AP B18 5/2. See Alegría, p. 24. Prévot was well aware of the complaint. In 1902 he quotes from a letter which Fr. Rasset, the assistant general wrote: "Fr. Assistant wrote me, it is said that the good Fr. André serves a delicious desert, but the main dish is lacking." Also Fr. Dehon in letters written in 1903 tells Fr. André that he must change his approach. On February 8, 1903, he writes: "Please, forgive me, if I cause you suffering. Seeing so many

who knew Prévot well said to Dehon: “But isn’t he too saintly to be made a master of novices?” With this formation program Prévot formed the majority of the novices in the Congregation either directly or indirectly until the 1950s. The influence of Prévot upon the self-understanding of Dehonians reached right up until the post-conciliar reforms. In the United States Province the two texts of Prévot, *Fresh Flowers for Our Heavenly Crown* (Hales Corners, 1954) and *Love, Peace, and Joy* (Westminster, Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1911) were more popular than the writings of Fr. Dehon. Of Dehon at this time the province published only *The Spiritual Directory* and the *Three Crowns*.

### Spiritual direction of women

**55** Prévot’s spiritual world was one of struggle for the interior life in the individual. This was not only with his beloved novices. He undertook an immense correspondence of spiritual direction with a number of women, among them Claire Baume (the archives contain 3,908 letters), Lucie Reynaud (185 letters), Me de Ligonès (74 letters) certain Soeurs Victimes (108 letters), Mother Abbess of the Sisters of St. Claire of Mons (70 letters), Carmel Sisters of Aix and Ath (21 letters), and religious of other congregations (20 letters) and others.<sup>79</sup>

**56** Here Prévot took on the traditional role of a spiritual director within victimal spirituality. He wanted to make of Claire Baume, a lay woman who worked in the parish of Roquevair as organist and catechist, a kindred soul, by encouraging her to go in his direction of victim spirituality. He encouraged her to offer herself to “remedy the terrible ills of our Society.” As the direction progresses, Claire enters more and into a vicarious life for the congregation, accepting sufferings for its sake, making reparation for “fallen priests,” making reparation for the weaknesses and the failures of the members. He told her at one point, “Be a mother to this dear society, so sorrowful and abject... Be a mother like Mary, mother of the just and of sinners...”<sup>80</sup> The obsessive direction and the massive volume of the writings also allowed an intimate relationship to emerge: “Allow me to be your little daughter

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persons leave the Congregation and noticing so little constancy, many say: This is because something is going wrong in the novitiate. It lacks a proper formation in faith and conscience.” Dehon criticizes Prévot: “From the beginning of the year and throughout the year, one speaks of the life of love. It is the crown of the building without foundations... Your spiritual direction is not what it should be. You form ‘eye-servants’. You must form consciences.” E. Driedonkx, “De Dienaar Gods P. Andreas Prévot, 1840 – 1913”, p. 17.

<sup>79</sup> The letters are found in the Archives at the SCJ Generalate in Rome. There were more letters but they have been lost. The greater part of the letters to Claire Baume (1868-1934) were written between 1893 and 1913. Some of the letters to Claire Baume were also from Fr. Dehon, whom she consulted regularly. Dehon took up the correspondence after the death of Prévot. To the formal letters, Prévot often appended notes which dealt more with congregational and daily issues. See Evaristo Martínez de Alegria, “Corrispondenza tra P. Prévot e Claire Baume” (manuscript 216 pages).

<sup>80</sup> AP B 8/44.1899, p. 152.

forever, who is happy to be humbly submissive to her good and saintly father... May I say this to you?" In the margin of the letter, Prévot writes, "So much the better! Be an ingrate (you would be happy to die in your recognition of me); it is I who suffer, and you are the happiest of mothers."<sup>81</sup>

**57** These letters tell the story of Prévot as in a story with all the crises and counterpoints of day to day events, in which one day, Prévot is downcast, upset and depressed by events, and the next, he is encouraged and hopeful. In general, they are a story of the struggle to keep Claire Baume on track in her mission of a Martha. But we also hear of his many discouragements about the congregation with its many weak and "anemic" members. It is important, he tells her that "you be a victim for the society." The letters are filled with self-doubts about his spiritual state. He thinks himself to have lapsed in his practices of mortification and in his fervor. His outlook is pessimistic. But what is striking is how this whole life and that of Claire Baume and the novices is configured on the literary plot line of victim spirituality. For Prévot there is no other emplotment of life, certainly not for religious life, and everything and everyone is judged by their capacity to stay within its plot lines.

**58** This correspondence lets us see his life as a novice director: all his concerns about different novices, his uncertainty about his formation of the novices, what he prays about in adoration, about the state of the congregation and the success and the failures of the members, about the struggles between the Germans, French and Dutch in the novitiate, weak superiors, rebellious students in Lille, Brussels, Louvain, his financial worries, all the issues that preoccupy the leadership of the religious communities. The plot line also gives us a glimpse in Prévot's constant restlessness and anxiety and his need for reassurance: "Why is there so little love in me?" When he encourages Claire, the letters are full of the language of victimhood: persevere in your abandonment, increase my cross, let us die for this, if necessary, be for me the angel of purgatory. In the letters he also talks about those novices whom he calls his guardian angels, these are novices who followed the victimal spirituality and who are judged to have arrived at a mature level of spiritual life. Together with Claire Baume they formed a group of "frères victimes" consisting of five of whom she was to be the Martha and mother.<sup>82</sup> From them he received much support and encouragement. When in 1900 he became so ill that doctors feared for his life, Claire offered herself as a victim for him.

**59** In these letters we encounter the anguished Prévot. He appears here as hypercritical of himself and also of the congregation, sometimes presenting his earlier life with Mère Véronique as less anxious. But this is also the anxious and impatient Prévot, often very unrealistic about himself. To Claire Baume he reveals his anxieties, his doubts, his fears of not being a good director of novices, his fear that he does not have the confidence of Dehon, his constant search for security in his

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<sup>81</sup> AP B 8/44.1899 b, p. 163.

<sup>82</sup> AP B 14/44.41, p. 5.

confessor and in Dehon, his superior. He is concerned when he receives conflicting messages from “T.B.P. Général” (Très Bon Père, a name he always gives Dehon) and his confessor, always confronting them with his enormous scruples.

### Prévot’s anxiety attacks

**60** The theme of “canceling the past” comes up too often in his writings to be ignored.<sup>83</sup> In his correspondence with Dehon and Claire Baume the word that stands out and recurs in almost every letter is “inquiétude”, restlessness, anxiety. In almost every letter he complains about his inability to overcome his anxieties, despite Dehon’s constant – and absolute! – advice to him: “Let go of every anxiety!” His struggle for God, the source of all love, as he wrote of the Spirit in his last book<sup>84</sup>, is at the same time a source of deep, uncontrollable anguish within. In 1900 he writes to Claire Baume:

**61** *“I had made great efforts, many times and for a long time, trying to follow this absolute principle given me by TRP the General: Let go of every anxiety. 1. I always find myself with this difficulty: I cannot apply this principle in the same way to every obligation which gives me anxiety and makes me uncertain. And so I feel like a prisoner. 2. And then comes this other difficulty: I don’t know whether I have said this to my confessor, or whether he has understood me (there are so, so many misunderstandings with foreigners), or I have forgotten to say the circumstances which might have changed his response to me. It is truly necessary that I hold to this principle: Let go of every anxiety! Please, pray to the Madonna for this.”*<sup>85</sup>

**62** All his life he fought against this “inquiétude” and it seems he never superseded it. It is rooted in an event that pursued him all his life and which may explain in part his restlessness.

**63** Abel describes the event as follows: “In his youth he had known the terrifying grace of knowing what is sin.”<sup>86</sup> For the rest of his life “he could not but live on the edge of that precipice. He saw himself as a sacrificial lamb continually threatened by its knife. Hence his self-denial became the primary function of his spiritual life and the death struggle his normal state of sentiment.”<sup>87</sup> This event is important for the understanding of Prévot’s life and spirituality. As he writes to Claire Baume in 1899: “I have wanted to say that, after my fifteenth year, and especially during these last

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<sup>83</sup> For example, in A P. B 8/44.1898, p. 136-139.

<sup>84</sup> *Manuel de la Dévotion au Saint-Esprit* (Paris - Tournai: Casterman, 1913).

<sup>85</sup> AP P0009/044/006 (1900), p. 150.

<sup>86</sup> J.-M. Abel, Pater Andreas Prévot, p. 4. This is how Abel describes the experience: “At age sixteen, eye to eye with the terror of sin and hell, of fear, he experienced the need to empty himself and to offer himself as a hostage. But the victim doubts whether he is living in grace and tries to purify himself. Blindfolded he goes into the spiritual arena.” p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> J.-M. Abel, Pater Andreas Prévot, p. 4. See also G. Bertrand, p. 387-388. Some advised him that this temptation and suffering was due to his vow of victimhood. In that light, Prévot could accept the suffering. But it was an insidious agony.

ten years, I have not ever had any real peace.”<sup>88</sup> It must be said that Prévot was heroic in battling this debilitating experience. It colored his life but also his spirituality. His “love and immolation” in all its radical harshness, may also be seen as a deeply personal response to this experience of sin and his general anxiety. As he says in the same letter to Claire Baume: “This source of anxiety is always there.”

**64** At age 71, two years before his death Prévot was still trying to put the anxiety into words. The language remains impenetrable.

**65** *Especially, I recommend my soul to you, full of grace, and yet little by little less faithful, at 71 years of age. This comes, in large part, from an old anxiety or disquiet about something that happened fifty years ago or more, which I cannot overcome and tears at my heart. I imagine it, as a supposition, like being placed between sin on the one hand and hell on the other or the threat of being annihilated, etc ... I have said that I prefer sin over hell, etc ... And now, it seems impossible to have contrition, without thinking of finding myself back there again. However, if I were to think myself to be back there again, I feel as if it would be impossible not to prefer the sin ... I limit myself to an ordinary act of contrition without thinking to be in it, and it becomes impossible for me to stay calm. ... I see hell at the end of the road. I cannot say it to you any more clearly.*<sup>89</sup>

**66** At this point in his life, he described the event as “I have consented to prefer sin over submission to God.”<sup>90</sup> Or, in other words, “I have consented to the thought of doing evil, which did not permit me to have contrition.”<sup>91</sup> G. Bertrand writes of this: “He who preached so well about pure abandonment, pure trust, did not succeed in abandoning himself, to obey, or give himself to the infinite mercy. Scrupulous or obsessive. God permitted Satan to remain there, to keep reminding him of this idea in his head without ceasing ... He became a victim of this sin of thought, of this impossibility of repentance, in one word, of this imaginary turmoil against which nothing or no one could reassure him.” In his letters to Dehon, Prévot literally works himself into scrupulous knots, seeking forgiveness for this event. Again and again in the margin of these letters, Dehon writes: “scrupules, scrupules...” “let it be! Chase all this from your mind.”

**67** Of course, Prévot’s living of the life of a Priest-Victim may not be totally interpreted as a reparation for this traumatic event. His life for others, especially his dedication to and love for his novices, his need to be in the presence of the Lord in

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<sup>88</sup> AP B 8/44.3 b 1899, p. 104f. He speaks of the event at age 15 again a year later to Claire Baume: AP P0009/044/006 (1900), p. 41-42, again on p. 150. Four years later he writes: “The old reasons of my preoccupations return.”, AP P0009/044/010 (1904), p. 7. A dominant theme in these letters remains this “anguish – anxiety.”

<sup>89</sup> See Alegría, manuscript, p. 49-50. See also *Positio Canonizzazione I, Servo di Dio P. Andrea Prévot*, Biografia documentata, p. 449-455.

<sup>90</sup> AP B 105/2. This is in a letter that Prévot wrote to Dehon in the last year of his life in 1913.

<sup>91</sup> June 28, 1913. See AP B 105/2.

the chapel three to four hours a day, speak of a greater soul. But the event does colour his need for obedience and the rule and for guidance by others in his spiritual quest.

**68** Here may lie a clue to explain the obsessive side of Prévot. Several have remarked that Prévot's real nature was "hard and dry"<sup>92</sup> but that it was transformed from his "Sacrifice and Love" into a model of patience, love, gentleness and sweetness at the end of his life. Underneath there remained the struggle. H.M. Ostrach in his analysis of the writing style of Prévot rightly points to Prévot's "lack of confidence in himself," as someone who lacks internal harmony, as someone who lives in a constant fever and whose excessive tension is released through impulsive discharges.<sup>93</sup>

**69** Is there something similar in Dehon's life to Prévot's struggle with sin and hell? With Fr. Dehon it is difficult to pinpoint what he means by his constant references in his writings to his "faiblesses et fautes."<sup>94</sup> In a letter of 26 February, 1892, he writes, "My faults are of such a nature that a whole life could not expiate them." But these are remarks made at a time when he is being besieged by the calumnies of two confreres: Blancal and Delgoffe. Dehon tended to interiorize the attacks he suffered from confreres as well as from Bishop Duval of Soissons. But they are more the exculpatory recriminations of someone who had a healthy sense of himself.

**70** In 1909 he wrote: "Our Lord makes me see the immense misery of twenty years of my life, where I lived in the tepidity and neglect constantly vacillating in my good will. I want to live now in spirit at the foot of the cross with Magdalene, crying for my sins to my dying day."<sup>95</sup> The twenty years may refer to the period between 1892 and 1912 where Fr. Dehon felt "abandoned to aridity and struggle." Of it he writes: "Our Lord permitted the devil to hand me over to unending assaults. I felt like I was at the door of the Divine Heart. I received graces for others, but not much for myself."<sup>96</sup> At one point in 1918 he says, "Towards the middle of my priestly life came the rude assaults of the devil which sometimes troubled my spirit and my senses."<sup>97</sup> From his writings there is no evidence of a struggle similar to that of Prévot. It is clear that he is being tossed to and fro between the events of his life that he interprets through divine providence. He had an intense sense of living within this divine providence.<sup>98</sup> It is true also Dehon suffered from an underlying restlessness. He too sought affirmation to overcome his internal doubts, his uncertainty, his need

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<sup>92</sup> Alegria "Le bon père André Prévot", p. 125.

<sup>93</sup> See the graphological analysis of Prévot's writings in Boite 2 of the Archives of Soissons.

<sup>94</sup> NQT XLIV/1921, 8. See also the letter of 26 February, 1892.

<sup>95</sup> NQT XXIV/1909, 137.

<sup>96</sup> NQT XXXV/1914 p. 171 -176.

<sup>97</sup> NQT XLII/1918, 4.

<sup>98</sup> See the interpretation of Léon Dehon of World War I as providence: David Neuhold, "Kriegswahrnehmung inmitten einer Fülle "schriftlicher Meditation" Leon G. Dehons "Notes Quotidiennes" 1914 – 1918" (manuscript).

for “supernatural” confirmation. Ledure sees here the aftermath of his troubling relationship with his father against whose wishes he became a priest. Is here a sign of latent guilt?<sup>99</sup> Perroux doubts this.<sup>100</sup> But his restlessness and anxiety is not pathological as it is with Prévot.

**71** In both Dehon and Prévot there was a search for mercy and tenderness. This private quest for mercy was abetted by the spiritual atmosphere of love and immolation. Prévot suffered immensely from scrupulosity. In him there was a deep insecurity: a demon that haunted him and made it difficult for him, for instance, to say the words of consecration. Also Dehon, at various periods of his life, showed an intense need to be affirmed. He needed others, like the sisters, to assure him that he was on the right path. If this insecurity and desire for confirmation was to be found in the lives of both Dehon and Prévot, each responded differently.

### **The social outreach of the devotion to the Sacred Heart**

**72** In the end, however, it is not the intensity of the reparatory work and personal struggles of Prévot in relation to Dehon that stands out most. For the congregation what separated Prévot from Dehon is the relation to the social dimension. From the beginning Dehon understood himself as a “prêtre religieux de Dieu” as a priest working outside of the diocesan sacramental framework in parishes. What identifies him was his ability to gradually incorporate his own extensive apostolate among workers within the context of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. In 1889 he began the periodical “Le Règne du Sacré-Coeur dans les âmes et sociétés” in which he outlined a social devotion to the Sacred Heart.<sup>101</sup> This engagement of the world of workers and Christian democracy became one of the main ways in which the congregation came to recognize the charism of Dehon after the impasse of 1883.

**73** From the conflicts with other members, as they became public in the chapters of 1893 and 1896, the social understanding of the Sacred Heart was not shared in the early congregation. Blancal, the main opponent to Dehon, called this ministry “politics.” As he wrote in a letter to Dehon on July 6, 1897, this ministry has nothing to do with the aim of the congregation which, he continues, is “a special cult of love and consolation towards the Heart of Jesus as a means of a quick sanctification.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Yves Ledure, “Léon Dehon, entre mythe et histoire”, p. 94. André Perroux does not see this negative influence of his father. For him, what Dehon received from his father and his background a sense of aristocracy. Dehon, he maintains, retained an aristocratic view of life. It is also what he displayed in his relationship to the congregation.

<sup>100</sup> In a conference held at Foligno for the Famiglia Dehoniana of Europe in January 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Stefan Tertünte, *Léon Dehon und die Christliche Demokratie* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2007), esp. p.98-121; Yves Ledure, *Le Code du Royaume*, Clairefontainer Studien Band 4 (Clairefontaine: Heimat und Mission Verlag, 2001), esp. “Le Règne Social du Sacré-Coeur”, p. 52 -76; see also my “The Charism of Fr. Dehon in the Church,” in *Incontri dei Vescovi Dehoniani /Meeting of Dehonian Bishops* (Rome, January 2013) p. 69-90.

<sup>102</sup> H. Dorresteijn, *Vita e personalità di P. Dehon*, p. 692.

That this position received six votes in the chapter of 1893 shows that this position was widespread. It is telling that Prévot came to Dehon's rescue. When in 1896 Dehon announced that he had decided to renounce his position as Superior General, Prévot stood up and said, "In whatever way you look at it, I am of the opinion that Fr. Dehon is the only one who can lead the congregation." It must have cost him because he was always so cautious and so "unworthy".<sup>103</sup> For the congregation this social dimension is not peripheral to its understanding of Dehon's charism.

**74** In his desire to follow the guidance of Dehon, Prévot tried desperately – but unsuccessfully – to follow the social trail of Dehon. In 1906 Prévot tried to launch his own "Catéchisme de l'Ouvrier." In imitation of Dehon he called it "Projet de Catéchisme Social." He got no further than a seven-page project, subtitled, "Un mois à l'école de Jésus ouvrier et de S. Joseph."<sup>104</sup> In a letter to Claire Baume he acknowledged it to be a failure: "I was not able to produce anything clearly regarding the *Social Manual*, my heart is not in it. It is not my style and I would not have done if circumstances had not pushed me."<sup>105</sup> In the margin Dehon points Prévot to Watrigant's *Le décalogue et l'ouvrier*. However, this compendium of the social movement from 1899 is lost on Prévot. It is clear that Prévot cannot follow Dehon in this aspect of the congregation.

**75** As P.J. McGuire indicated at the General Chapter in 2003, this inability pointed to a much deeper difference:

**76** *He [Dehon] was that rare combination of mystic and missionary, a man whose life-long, intense, interior prayer had to express itself in unwavering apostolic activity on behalf of the One who loved him and whom he loved with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength. This set him apart from his friend Father Prévot whose spirituality did not inspire apostles on fire with zeal for the Kingdom of God, but Victim-Souls who turned away from a sinful world and spent their lives in an interior castle of self-mortification and purification.*<sup>106</sup>

**77** Here Prévot shows himself to be totally a child of victimal spirituality. As Paula Kane observes, victim spirituality was interiorly oriented. It often launched attacks on socially engaged Christians.<sup>107</sup> It was never for a social impact. For Prévot ministry meant to pray and sacrifice for others. It was never to do something for the person, other than to pray for him or her. What he wrote he meant literally: "Let us zealously work by prayer and sacrifice to bring back to the Heart of Jesus those poor souls whose conversion He so ardently desires."<sup>108</sup> Prévot's prayer does not lead to a practical or social solution. He turns everything into a desire for suffering: an acceptance of God's will is an acceptance of a desire for suffering. Here he can be

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<sup>103</sup> E. Driedonkx, p. 35, *Alegría*, p. 60-69.

<sup>104</sup> In the Postulator's Archive in Rome (autografo).

<sup>105</sup> AP B 12/44.18 1906.

<sup>106</sup> P.J. McGuire, "Charism and Mission- Part Two Mission" *Dehoniana* 2003/2 p. 79.

<sup>107</sup> Paula Kane, "She Offered Herself up," p. 98.

<sup>108</sup> André Prévot, *Love, Peace, and Joy*, p. 19.

no further apart from Dehon for whom prayer and apostolic activity are close companions.

## CONCLUSION: WHOSE CHARISM?

**78** After Prévot's death, Fr. Dehon, reflecting back on what Prévot had lived, wrote: "It was Fr. Prévot who was the true spiritual and interior founder of our work; me, I was only the apparent founder."<sup>109</sup> Of him, Fr. Dehon said, "He was our first repairer."<sup>110</sup> And Prévot said of Dehon: "He is our spiritual guide." But were the two projects the same? Both said they wanted as their ideal, love and reparation to the Sacred Heart. But in the final analysis they were really far apart.

**79** In 1885 as he was entering the novitiate Prévot was convinced that he and Fr. Dehon were seeking the same. Also Fr. Dehon never saw that Prévot wanted anything else than what he wanted. It is quite clear in the exchanges between Dehon and Prévot that Prévot was not a leader, not a reformer. He did not have the character of being a founder. He needed someone like Léon Dehon to guide him. He needed Léon Dehon for his own stability. As Abel says, "Mère Véronique ... thinks to have found a founder in him. But she is wrong. ... The extraordinary character of his experiences, his mentality, excluded him from such a mission. No founder, no recluse, he had to enter into an existing congregation, where obedience and spiritual direction can guarantee his vocation. The congregation of Fr. Dehon, which he joined, offered him this providential self-protection. There he evolved to the extent that his limits permitted."<sup>111</sup>

**80** But did he evolve beyond Mère Véronique's project? In the final analysis he remained too much within his own weakness, nervousness, hardness to have grown beyond his first vision.<sup>112</sup> His compartment was too fearful to dare to move beyond. Sadness was his dominant mood. He needed his austerities to overcome his constant anxieties and to counteract his uncertainties. They gave value to his life.

**81** Yet it is true, most found him to be thoroughly good. He was the "bon père" to Dehon's "très bon père." He could speak beautifully about love and he knew love. However, the baroque spiritual path of André Prévot was much more fraught with danger than Léon Dehon's. The path of victim spirituality with its abnegations and self-inflicted penances, as the letters between Prévot and Claire Baume frequently indicate, can easily lead to self-delusion and self-exaltation in one's spiritual life. The little group of the elite – the "frères victims" among the novices – did not survive

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<sup>109</sup> AD B 108/2. See Alegría, p. 19. "C'est le P. André qui a été le vraie fondateur spirituel et intérieure de notre oeuvre, moi je suis le fondateur apparent."

<sup>110</sup> In a letter of March 21, 1923.

<sup>111</sup> J.-M Abel, *Pater Andreas Prévot*, p. 4.

<sup>112</sup> P. Goebels, the novice director of the Spanish Province, said of him: "It was the humility of this man, so dry and hard of temperament, that made him a model of goodness and amiability." *Driedonkx*, p. 31.

in the long duration. “The friendships of grace are very, very, very delicate; if it becomes mixed with nature, it suddenly ends,” he said.<sup>113</sup> André Prévot was well aware of this; even he skippered between the dangerous waves of self-sought victimhood.

**82** And so would we repeat Dehon’s acclamation of Prévot as our “true spiritual and interior founder”? It may well be that Dehon saw in the self negation and abandonment of Prévot’s victimal spirituality a lost ideal of his time. He may even have thought that it was the appropriate response to the ecclesial and social ills. He may have thought like Prévot that the congregation had lost its way because “every day it was more forgetful of reparation.”<sup>114</sup> What Prévot saw was gradual disappearance of the spiritual world of Mère Véronique, a negative Jansenistic world that had no carrying power beyond the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prévot showed himself incapable of attracting any more people to his vision than the little group of elites. And so Prévot never went beyond Mère Véronique’s world and Oeuvre. Until the end the victim spirituality remained his spiritual world. He was never the interior founder, nor the practical one.

**83** Yet, Prévot had a great impact on our spirituality. Because he was the first novice director and guided many in the first steps of a spiritual life in the congregation, his influence remained right up until Vatican II. After the council, this influence faded. In the renewal phase no one turned to Prévot in order to grasp the charism of Dehon. In whatever way he may have been a light for Dehon, he has not been a source for the renewal of the congregation. His teaching and ascetical moments seemed too dictated only by prayer, abnegation and a literal obedience to God, whether it was found in a rule, in a person, or sometimes an event.

**84** In a classical text on the style of holiness, Louis Lavelle wrote that saints can be compared to either a hero or a wise person. Prévot’s way was the way of the hero. The hero is characterized by submission.<sup>115</sup> Often they seem like fools, and, like Prévot, often in conflict with nature, and with prudence. But his heroism now seems excessive. It no longer serves as a guide to live our charism today.

**85** For us Prévot’s style is too different from Dehon’s style. The love that overflows for Prévot is a love that is constructed out of sacrifice. The sacrifice is a willed sacrifice, watch in hand. For Dehon it was not so. Dehon’s reign of the Sacred Heart is much gentler, much more than “penance and reparation.” Dehon’s struggle, we understand today, was for the heart of the world. Dehon’s reign of the Sacred Heart reaches beyond the individual. It had a societal aim. Openness defines Dehon’s style.

<sup>116</sup> This we find not only in the texts that he wrote but more by the “event” of Dehon,

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<sup>113</sup> AP P0012/044/020 (1907), p. 93.

<sup>114</sup> AP P0012/044/009 (1903), p. 49.

<sup>115</sup> “De la sainteté” in *Quatre saints* (Paris : Albin Michel, 1951) p. 45-49.

<sup>116</sup> Marcello Neri in *Aesthetics of Faith and Dehonian Spirituality*, a conference given at Albino on March 5, 2013 to the Dehonian Major Superiors of Europe (manuscript).

by what he loosened in history.<sup>117</sup> In this way, Dehon is less tied to the limitations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century than Prévot.

**86** What he loosened in history was for us a specific way of following Christ. This following is hard to institutionalize.<sup>118</sup> Dehon himself tried it by trying to fit within an Ignatian spirituality. But without much success.<sup>119</sup> Dehon's spirituality is very pliable to many situations and forms. He allows us to have the imagination that God is present in every season of human life and in all the occupations. In Neri's words, "Dehon's spirituality ... is highly sensitive to the changing forms of the spiritual presence of God in the thickness of human living, because God does not want to impose himself, but desires to be desired."<sup>120</sup> In our reception of Dehon today, he comes to us more and more as a searcher: a searcher of the scriptures for an authentic word of God that would establish him in love.

**87** What then about Fr. Prévot? He was a saintly man with a unique sanctity and spirituality which, despite Fr. Dehon's words, is not ours.<sup>121</sup> He serves as a sort of counterpoint to Fr. Dehon, alerting us to a way of living our spirituality, taking it in a direction that may well be saintly but is not exemplary for us or for the world today. In the end, I am reminded by Peter's words to the risen one at the end of John's Gospel. When, after having been given the charge to "feed my sheep", Peter saw the disciple whom Jesus loved and he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" (John 21.21-22) Our "follow me" is the way of Christ indicated by Fr. Dehon. We leave Prévot to God.

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<sup>117</sup> Christoph Theobald has called this "pragmatique historique" in "Le style pastoral de Vatican II et sa réception postconciliaire" Ed. Joseph Famerée, *Vatican II comme Style: L'herméneutique théologique du Concile* (Paris: Cerf, 2012) p. 267.

<sup>118</sup> Marcello Neri, *Aesthetics of Faith and Dehonian Spirituality* (manuscript: Meeting of Major Superiors of Europe, Albino, 2013).

<sup>119</sup> See the dissertation of Gabriel Pisarek, *L'influssio degli Esercizi spirituali di sant'Ignazio in P. Dehon* Studia Dehoniana 55 (Roma: Centro Generale Studi SCJ, 2012) # 55.

<sup>120</sup> Neri, *Aesthetics of Faith and Dehonian Spirituality* (manuscript).

<sup>121</sup> When Dehon returned from the funeral of Prévot, he presented Prévot as an example: "Who can remember that Fr. André ever made a solely natural action? On my part, I who have known him so many years and from so close, I cannot find any."