

SOME GRACE-FILLED MOMENTS OF THE CHEVALIER CENTENNIAL CONGRESS

Introduction

We started the Congress with two days of pilgrimage, following the footsteps of Fr. Chevalier in Issoudun, the location of his life and ministries for more than fifty years. Through this reflective experience, followed by some days of presentations, meditation and conversation about his personality, spirituality and mission, the participants of the Congress developed a stronger interest in the life, ministry and writings of our Founder. There was a kind of eagerness to know Fr. Chevalier in a more intimate way, and the same became true concerning Mother Marie Louise Hartzler and Fr. Hubert Linckens.

The sessions did feed, but, fortunately, did not take away, a hunger for more information and deeper knowledge about the beginnings of our congregations and lay participation. We have a sense that, back at home, participants will be motivated to continue their search and reading about the important persons, moments and influences that played a role during the early years of our Chevalier family.

In this paper, we do not intend to give a summary of the presentations and discussions of the Congress. The presentations, given during the Congress, are available on a special CD, in French, Spanish and English. Here, we would like to present some elements that received more prominent attention during our conversations. These were perhaps the moments when we felt touched, in a special way, by the guidance of the Spirit.

- **Concerning Chevalier's personality.**

What impressed us was that by continuously deepening his knowledge of Devotion to the Sacred Heart and practicing it consequently, Chevalier changed from a man with a rather detached and rigid character into a kind and warm-hearted person; from adhering to austere theological convictions, into a man with a somewhat broader vision of God's designs of love concerning humankind; from practicing a spirituality of ascetics into a spirituality of trust in God's unconditional love. This has been for him a lifelong process. It seemed to us that he had been constantly struggling to achieve a balance in his life between an attitude of independence, determined by his sense of vocation and mission, and a willingness to develop

personal relationships and to collaborate, strengthened by the virtues of compassion and readiness to forgive.

- **Concerning Chevalier's vision**

Once again we realized how profoundly Chevalier had been touched by the Devotion to the Sacred Heart, and inspired by the story of Margaret Mary. He had been deeply impressed by the words of the Sacred Heart to her: "*This is the Heart that has loved humanity so much that it has spared nothing, in order to show its love; and as reward, I have received nothing but ingratitude...*" While studying and meditating upon the Devotion to the Sacred Heart, he set out on a lifelong spiritual journey. Only gradually, with the help also of some spiritual writers of the French School of Spirituality, did he discover the implications of God's unconditional love to humankind as revealed in the human Heart of Jesus. In the end, he could write: "*In its essence, the Gospel is only compassion, mercy, the love of the Heart of Jesus,*" or, while quoting a spiritual writer of his time, "*It is good to think of the network of love with which God at every moment surrounds each soul he created on earth... Each one's biography is a marvelous history of God's goodness.*"

Our motto: "*May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be everywhere loved,*" we heard again as an invitation to become missionaries of Christ's love in every culture or sub-culture, while its realization should begin at our own hearts and in our families or communities and be applied to whatever service or ministry to which we are called.

- **Concerning Chevalier as a Founder.**

It struck us that it had been Chevalier's dream, not just to found a religious Congregation, but to set up a widespread religious movement, bringing together into one Society, priests, religious and lay, with and without vows, living community life or not, who would make it the main purpose of their lives to spread the Devotion to the Sacred Heart as the divinely-willed remedy for the ills of the time. We consider Chevalier's original vision of what he called "the three branches," to be a strong foundation of our hope that in the near future we will be able to receive the world-wide community of lay members as a full and independent branch of our Chevalier Family.

A strong desire was expressed that our three congregations and groups of lay people in the different provinces, unions and districts should make the dream of Fr. Chevalier become true, by working closely together, especially in the field of formation of our religious and lay members, towards living and applying a Spirituality of the Heart. It was said: "*People see more of what we do, and less of what really motivates us.*" According to the intention of Fr. Chevalier, we were founded, not in the first place for accomplishing certain social or pastoral ministries, but for giving witness to our belief in God's love through practicing a Spirituality of the Heart in the context of the world in which we live.

- **Concerning Chevalier and Our Lady of the Sacred Heart***

Reflection upon Fr. Chevalier's vision of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart made us aware of the fact that our devotion to Mary is fundamentally relational: we honor Mary because of her relation to the Heart of Jesus. Influenced by the royal court culture of France in the past, Fr. Chevalier saw Mary's concern for humankind more specifically expressed in her role of intercessor. Nowadays, based on new biblical and sociological understanding, Mary's same concern for humankind invites us to become actively involved in the struggle for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Mary's reminder to Jesus "*they have no wine,*" is repeated, nowadays, when we hear her saying to us: "*they have no drinking water, no food, they are homeless, they don't get any education... Try to do something about it.*"

- **Concerning a Paradigm Shift in our Spirituality**

A shift during the Congress from presentations paying attention to the past (Chevalier and his time) to other talks that paid attention to the present (the Chevalier Family and its present day living and ministering), brought also home to us the fact that since the Second Vatican Council, and endorsed by James Cuskelly MSC and his General Administration, we have gone through a transition from Devotion to the Sacred Heart towards a Spirituality of the Heart. A Spirituality of the Heart tries to capture the vision of Fr. Chevalier in a language and manner more in tune with our times. It is amazing that in so many parts of the world, members of the Chevalier Family, have grasped this shift in their practice of serving and ministering and in the way they are building up new communities. Inspired by Fr. Chevalier, who was

deeply moved by the evils that afflicted the people of his time, while strongly believing in the liberating power of God's love as revealed in the human heart of Jesus, they have taken up new forms of ministries and presence, especially among the less privileged in society.

- **Concerning living Chevalier's heritage today**

The last week of the Congress brought us to different parts of the world in which members of the Chevalier Family are living and working, among the poor, among people of other religions or among unbelievers. While listening to their talks, it struck us that all the presenters, inspired by a Spirituality of the Heart, focused on and were involved in, the development of human dignity, human values and basic human rights. Special attention was paid to deprived people such as women and the poor. In the multicultural and inter-religious society of today, members of the international Chevalier Family endeavor, through presence, dialogue, mass media and service, to build up a society where people respect one another as fellow human beings, with equal dignity, rights and obligations. We realized that through living a Spirituality of the Heart, we become agents of promoting "a civilization of love," while being engaged in the history of God's love, incarnated in human hearts.

- **Concerning Formation in the Spirituality of the Heart**

The question "how do we incorporate the richness of the Spirituality of the Heart as lived in the Chevalier Family, into initial and ongoing formation programs," has been constantly at the back of our minds, while listening to the presentations on Fr. Chevalier and his time and on the presence of the Chevalier Family in modern society. The *internalization* of attitudes and values, inherent in the Spirituality of the Heart, together with Fr. Chevalier's understanding of Mission, should certainly become an important element in our formation programs. However, brought home to us also was the fact that today's world is "*absorbed in media*" and that modern media demand a new alertness in our listening, reading and watching. Therefore, helping people to listen, to read or to watch *with a discerning heart*, should be an important element in our formation programs. Moreover, a greater appreciation of the possibilities offered by the media, could become a way of creating in our hearts a more profound awareness both of the richness and the evils of our time, and of

fostering within us a greater attentiveness to "*the voice of the voiceless*" and "*the face of the faceless*". The use of media in our formation programs should also lead to a deeper recognition of the potentialities, arising from within a multicultural and inter-religious society.

- **Concerning the beatification process of Fr. Chevalier.**

We know that the process toward the beatification of Fr. Chevalier will be long and arduous. However, studying his life and writings, in order to make better known his personality, charism and spirituality, while praying for his beatification whatever the outcome might be, will certainly bear fruit in making us more aware of the identity and mission that as the Chevalier Family we have inherited from Fr. Chevalier.

- **Conclusion**

Some participants used the image of a tree. The Congress-experience enabled us to deepen our roots, in order to grow more strongly, to reach out more widely and to bear fruit more abundantly, in the field of Spirituality of the Heart, lived in today's world.

***Fr. Hans Kwakman MSC, aided by the Listening Committee,
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