

“The Church will give us its social doctrine” (CSC 5)

***The Social Catechism as a catechism of public morality:
implied author, mock reader, and contemporary relevance***

Dehonian Theological Commission of Latin America

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Introduction

In considering the mosaic of Father Dehon’s social works, the *Latin American Theological Commission* (CTDAL) chose² the *Social Catechism* (CSC). It was first published in February 1898 with the aim of providing formation in social morality. This theme had already been addressed in other works, especially in the *Christian Social Manual*, but here the topic is presented in a new format and addresses a different audience.

The research is structured into three sections corresponding to three levels of reading, according to the aforementioned *Guide to Studies and Research*. In the *Introduction*, a brief presentation of the work is provided, along with an exposition of the theory of the implied author and the mock reader according to W. Booth, and addresses the fundamental question of CSC. In the *first section*, we analyze the concept of the implied author; in the *second section*, we address the mock reader. Finally, in the *third section*, we examine the relevance of CSC today.

What is CSC about, and how is it organized?

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² This text was drafted by the CTDAL in response to *the Guide for Studies and Research* and prepared for the 7th Dehonian Theological Seminar, held in Taubaté, Brazil, from July 30 to August 4, 2026. The statement that the CTDAL “chose” the CSC refers to the fact that the CTDAL was to select a work for research from among Father Dehon’s various social works.

CSC is organized into four parts: Preface (1–13); I - The Principles of Social and Political Life (14–92); II - Principles of Economic Life (93–241); III - Social Duties (242–296), and IV - Apologetics: Social History of the Church (297–521)³.

In the first two chapters, Father Dehon adopted the format of traditional catechisms: brief questions, followed by short and precise answers. It is a “conceptual” book with clear statements, firmly grounded in the authority of the Church.

In the first part (*The Principles of Social and Political Life*) we find answers to such basic questions as: what is the end of man? (CSC 14); what is the role of the family in social life? (CSC 19); what is the origin of public power? (CSC 22); Is the Church not hostile to democracy? (CSC 57); Is taxation justifiable, and to what extent? (CSC 69); What to think of secret societies? (CSC 87)

The second part (*Principles of Economic Life*) touches on such questions as: Is labor simply a commodity, an element of production, which is sold according to the prevailing market rate? (CSC 101); under what different regimes can labor be organized? (CSC 103); what is the Church’s preferred economic system? (CSC 116); on what grounds are wages to be determined? (CSC 125); what is meant by capitalism? (CSC 147); what are the advantages and disadvantages of credit? (CSC 164–173); what are the most frequent abuses by banks? (CSC 180); is the right of inheritance or succession legitimate? (CSC 230)

The third part (*Social Duties*), which is the shortest (242–296), begins by discussing the role of the priest: “What are the duties of the priest in relation to social life?” (CSC 241). In this part, the duties of various actors in society are presented, such as Christians in general (CSC 248), heads of households (CSC 258), employers (CSC 259), workers (CSC 263), magistrates (CSC 277), among others.

Finally, the fourth part (*Apologetics: Social History of the Church*) analyzes universal history, one of the central themes for Father Dehon. This section aims to highlight the social role of the Church in the progress of humanity, emphasizing its role in defending the family,

³ In the Preface to the Italian translation of CSC, G. Toniolo presents a simpler organization: “*The art of giving discourse a popular appearance and liveliness reaches its perfection here in the two parts that make up the volume. In the first, the aim is to answer, through propositions of irreproachable conciseness and crystalline clarity, questions regarding the fundamental and often complex principles of the social, political, economic, and moral order. [...] The second part is an apologetic summary of a social history of the Church, in which, through the testimony of facts, the Church reveals itself to the eyes and, even more so, to the hearts of the people, as the liberator from all tyrannies and the promotor of all progress, especially for the protection and rehabilitation of the humble*” (TONIOLO, G. Preface to “Catechismo sociale,” Italian translation, in “Opera Omnia di G. Toniolo,” Vatican City, 1947–1953, vol. 4, p. 409.)

freedom, social organization, and the fight against slavery: the Church has always offered a just doctrine. The chapter concludes by addressing two fundamental topics in Father Dehon's social writings: Christian Democracy (CSC 514) and the Reign of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (CSC 519)⁴.

Thus, the structure of the text and the relationship between the four parts become evident. While the first two parts provide the doctrinal foundations ("what we believe"), the third points to "what to do" (duties), and the fourth part, based on history, presents the justifications for the Church's role in history and "what to hope for," letting it all converge on Christian Democracy and the Social Reign of the Heart of Jesus.

Theories of Wayne C. Booth

We will approach Dehon's social text using the theories of Wayne C. Booth⁵, who insists that every narrative inevitably constructs an *image of the author* in the text's formal, stylistic, and ethical choices. He calls this the "implied author." The implied author is neither the biographical author nor a real psychological entity. It is a textual instance inferred by the reader, responsible for the organization of the text's values, moral orientation, argumentation, etc.

According to literary critics, Booth opposes both a naive biographism and the radical elimination of the author proposed by certain structuralist currents, arguing that literary interpretation requires the reconstruction of this "normative presence" that guarantees rhetorical coherence and aesthetic credibility to the work.

The Fundamental Question

The *Research Guide* advises the writer to seek to discern the fundamental question, that is, *the* question guiding the writing of the text⁶. As a thesis, this question can be formulated as follows: *how should a Catholic understand and reorganize social life (political and*

⁴ The theme of the Church's social role in universal history runs through various texts by Father Dehon, such as his speeches (*Discourse to Workers for the Feast of St. Francis Xavier* [DIS 9050092]); his articles (*Peace and God's Truce*, in: *La Chronique du Sud-Est*, April 1901 [REV 8031090]; *Les moines au tribunal de l'histoire*, in: *Le Règne du Cœur de Jésus*, 04.1903, [EXT 8035186]), and his unpublished texts, that is, texts such as drafts and reading notes that were never published (*L'Église et le peuple* [QSS 9160049]).

⁵ Cf. BOOTH, W.C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

⁶ "What question was Dehon, through his implied author, trying to answer in his text? What was his answer to the question within the horizon of expectation of the reader—the implied reader—of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?" (cf. Study and Research Guide).

economic) after the modern rupture, in the face of the advance of ideologies and practices that exclude God and the Church from the public sphere (Freemasonry, social atheism, socialism, liberalism), and what is the Church's place in this reordering? From various perspectives, this question will be addressed below.

1. The implied Author of CSC

This first section (first reading) reveals the identity of the implied author through a structured analysis of the text. The following issues are discussed: (1) the literary genre and the strategies of persuasion employed by the text, (2) the original context of the text and its influences, (3) the authorial presence in the textual construction, (4) the dialogue with the audience within the text and the problem of the addressees, and finally (5) an evaluation of its discursive effectiveness.

1.1 Literary Genre and the Strategies of Persuasion

When examining CSC, it is necessary to identify the text's genre and how the author attempts to persuade the reader. The literary genre of the work is defined as a question-and-answer catechism, characterized by its concise style and its focus on forming Christian consciences in the face of the transformations of its time. This structure is particularly evident in the first three parts, as presented above. In addition to this form of "catechesis for adults," the fourth part takes the form of a historical-apologetic analysis, which is a distinct literary subgenre within the catechetical genre⁷.

The content of *the CSC*, one might say, is the social doctrine of the Church as preached by the popes throughout history and, in particular, by Leo XIII. According to A. Perroux, this book was "*conceived as the indispensable complement to the chapters on private social morality that were already widely taught*"⁸. "*May this little book become a classic and popularize the teachings of Leo XIII*" (NQT 12/110, cf. NQT 12/127).

The *CSC* functions as a manual of Social Morality and, in a certain sense, as a book of popular theology, serving as a bridge between the magisterium of Leo XIII and the questions

⁷ A "comparative" study with other works of the catechetical literary genre can be found in the second section, in the context of the mock reader (cf. 2.3 The Catechism as a Literary Genre in the Late 19th Century).

⁸ PERROUX, A. *Le témoignage d'une vie: le Père Jean-Léon Dehon*, STD 59, Rome, 2014, p. 67.

posed by lay Christians. The author acknowledges the need for such an approach by stating that it has become necessary that there be a theological treatise focused on social morality and the fourth commandment of the Decalogue (CSC 12)⁹.

The author seeks to convince the reader using a question-and-answer approach, presenting himself as a reliable moral guide and offering well-defined arguments for religious and social debate. His power of persuasion is rooted in his authority as a minister of the Church and in his extensive knowledge of social reality and ecclesiastical teaching. In a time of doubt regarding the papacy, he demonstrates a loyalty to the Pope, presenting himself as an authoritative interpreter. He employs objective, direct, and succinct language that is easy to grasp, which encourages the practical application of concepts. Amid the diversity of ideas, characteristic of the late 19th century, his clarity helps to consolidate the convictions of Catholics.

The historical argumentation, present in the fourth part, is used as a persuasive resource to demonstrate that the Church has always been the promoter of progress and freedom, combating errors such as Caesarism (populist authoritarianism) and individualistic liberalism. The author seeks to convince the public that civil society has been shaken “to its foundations” since the 18th century, propagating political heresies and economic errors (CSC 5).

The author acts as an “advocate” for God’s rights, arguing that the State cannot disregard religion without falling into materialism and the perversion of its own purpose (CSC 30). In this sense, Father Dehon defends the Church’s place in society at a time when anticlerical movements sought to exclude its role.

1.2 The Genesis of the Text and Influences

First, it is essential to analyze the *historical context* in which the work is situated.

CSC, published in February 1898, is part of what is known as the “social years” period (1893–1903), a term the Founder himself used to describe a time of intense social activism¹⁰. The cycle began in August 1893, when Dehon stepped down from the leadership of St. John’s College, a landmark event in his life (NQT 6/213), and ended in 1903 with the death of Pope Leo XIII and the expulsion of the Congregation from France due to the anticlerical policies of

⁹ Cf. Note n. 41.

¹⁰ “I received an excellent letter from Victor Berne, the apostle and patron of social works in Lyon. He reminds me of my intense social campaign, which lasted at least ten years, from 1893 to 1903” (NQT 44/152).

Émile Combes (NQT 18/46). Administrative demands and the move to Brussels led Dehon to reduce, but not halt, his apostolic activities in the social sphere. During this period of intense social activity, he sought to apply *Rerum Novarum*, transforming his educational vocation into an apostolate focused on social formation and Christian democracy.

Much of the author's social bibliography is concentrated in this period, evidenced by the publication of seven significant works, including the CSC¹¹. His writings advocated for the formation of workers' associations and legislative action in order to overcome liberal individualism and to promote a society guided by Christian principles. In other words, Father Dehon shifts the focus of education beyond the school environment, acting as a "social educator," a project that is evident in *CSC*. All this effort was aimed at building the "Reign of the Heart of Jesus in souls and in societies"¹².

CSC was likely written in particular demanding year of 1897¹³: the Founder delivered five lectures in Rome, later published in the volume *Christian Social Renewal* (RSO), and participated in several meetings of the Social Studies Commission of the Diocese of Soissons, which had drafted the *Christian Social Manual* (MSO) in 1894. In April 1897, Dehon was appointed consultant to the Index. That year, in addition to his travels, he helped organize the seminarians' meeting in Val-des-Bois for social formation (August), participated in the Fourth Congress of the Franciscan Third Order in Nîmes (also in August), and attended the Christian Democracy Congress in Lyon (in December). At this last event, Father Dehon was elected to the Central Council of Christian Democracy. Thus, it can be said that this context of interaction with different ecclesial groups, as well as the demands of congresses and the debates promoted by Christian Democracy, presented a range of questions that were addressed by *the CSC*.

During that same period, Father Dehon published two other social works. By December 1897, he had already released *Pontifical Political and Social Guidelines* (DPS). Earlier that year, in March 1897, he also published *Our Congresses* (NCG). Furthermore, as

¹¹ Father Dehon's social bibliography, limited to books, covers the period from 1893 to 1903: *Christian Social Manual* (1894), *Usury in the Present Age* (1895), *Our Congresses* (1897), *Papal Directives* (1897), *Social Catechism* (1898), *Wealth, Mediocrity, and Poverty* (1899), and *Christian Social Renewal* (1900). The exception is *The Plan of Freemasonry*, published in 1908.

¹² Cf. Emerson M. RUIZ, *Father Dehon as a Social Educator of Youth: A Study of the Articles in "Crônica do Sudeste,"* in TQ 40 (2024) pp. 12–57.

¹³ Although published in 1898 by the publishers *Bloud and Barral*, the project for the work originated as early as 1894, as a proposal for a book simpler and more accessible than the *Christian Social Manual* (cf. Letter from Mons. Jean-Baptiste Duval to Léon Dehon, July 16, 1894 [LC1 115907]).

mentioned above, the drafting of *CSC* began shortly after the publication of *the Christian Social Manual* (1894)¹⁴.

In *Notes Quotidiennes*, where he mentioned the publication of *CSC*, Dehon expresses satisfaction with the work's immediate reception, noting that the text “*was well received by the press, and I received favorable letters from the archbishops of Aix and Avignon, the bishops of Fréjus, Nevers, Saint-Dié, Laval, and from Monsieur Cardon, capitular vicar of Soissons*” (NQT 12/110)¹⁵. This recognition by the French hierarchy confirms the legitimacy and pastoral usefulness of his effort: to systematize a complex subject in a catechetical form, using more pedagogical and accessible language.

An analysis of the work's context should identify the main *influences* on the writing of *CSC*: these are centered on the Church's magisterium and the leading figures of social Catholicism in the late 19th century. The fundamental and most frequently cited influence is Pope Leo XIII, whom Dehon considers the true author of the Church's social theology¹⁶. In addition to Leo's magisterium, the work draws upon Sacred Scripture, though not to the same extent as in his spiritual works¹⁷. Theologically, the influence of St. Thomas Aquinas is explicit, through the *Summa Theologica* (*CSC* 46). The author also mentions Pope Pius IX, through the encyclical *Quanta Cura* and the *Syllabus* (1864), to identify the social errors of modernity (cf. *CSC* 5-9).

Finally, there is the influence of major figures in European and American Catholic social action who inspired Dehon. Among the names of those who “echo the Pope's words”

¹⁴ By comparing *CSC*, *DPS*, and *MSO*, one can discern a coherent, though distinct, set of understandings and approaches to social problems. The *MSO*, a collective work coordinated by Father Dehon, has a formative and pragmatic character, widely used in seminaries, linking principles with concrete examples and empirical data. *DPS* presents itself as an interpretive synthesis of Pope Leo XIII's magisterium, aimed primarily at the French clergy, with greater theological depth and a focus on ecclesial guidance (notably in the context of *the ralliement*). *CSC*, in turn, takes a catechetical form aimed at a broader audience, as demonstrated here. Despite differences in audience, method, and style, there is a convergence on central themes: the origin and organization of society, the Church-State relationship, the labor question, criticism of liberalism and socialism, the corporatist proposal, and the ideal of Christian democracy oriented toward the Social Reign of the Heart of Jesus. The three works also share the notion of “social malaise” (cf. *CSC* 70, 97, 99, 519) as a common diagnosis. Together, they outline a coherent system: *MSO* as uses a formative and applied foundation, *DPS* uses as its hermeneutical key the magisterium, and *CSC* presents an instrument for popular dissemination. This reveals Father Dehon's ability to adapt a common doctrinal core to different audiences and purposes.

¹⁵ On the reception of *the CSC* among the episcopate, cf. LC1 74129; LC1 74133, LC1 74115.

¹⁶ The Pope's basic sources are the encyclicals *Inscrutabili* (1878), *Quod Apostolici* (1878), *Immortale Dei* (1885), *Libertas Praestantissimum* (1888), and, of course, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which Dehon uses to give foundation to the major principles of Christian political and social life (cf. *CSC* 10.15.504)

¹⁷ Sacred Scripture is explicitly cited in the following sections: *CSC* 23 (Rom 5), 24 (Rom 12), 26 (Rom 13:1), 27 (Matt 28:18–19), and 37 (John 20:21).

and whose advice is put into practice Dehon mentions Cardinals Manning¹⁸ and Gibbons¹⁹, as well as Ketteler²⁰, Windthorst²¹, Decurtins²², de Mun²³, and Harmel²⁴. In the historical context, on the moral and social reform (CSC 409), Dehon highlights the influence of the Mendicant Orders (Franciscans and Dominicans).

Each section concludes with a comprehensive bibliography²⁵ which, on the one hand, highlights the breadth of the research field covered and, on the other, underscores the role of

¹⁸ **Henry Edward Manning** (1808–1892), an English clergyman, converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism in 1851. He had been very active in the Oxford Movement. He was appointed Archbishop of Westminster in 1865 and created a cardinal by Pius IX on March 15, 1875.

¹⁹ **James Gibbons** (1834–1921), an American Catholic clergyman, who studied at the major seminary in Baltimore and was ordained a priest in June 1861. He became a parish priest of St. Patrick's, then of St. Brigid's and St. Lawrence's in Baltimore, and was appointed Apostolic Vicar of North Carolina in March 1868. Appointed bishop of Richmond in July 1872, he was promoted in May 1877 to coadjutor bishop of Baltimore. He succeeded the titular bishop in that see in October of that same year. He was appointed cardinal by Leo XIII on June 7, 1886.

²⁰ **Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler** (1811–1877), a German clergyman. After studying law in Göttingen, Berlin, and Heidelberg and theology in Munich (1841–1843), he was ordained a priest in 1844 in Münster and appointed bishop of Mainz in 1850. A member of the Frankfurt Parliament in 1848 and of the Reichstag in 1871–1872, he was very active politically, fighting for the freedom of the Church and Catholics vis-à-vis the Prussian state. He was a main opponent to Bismarck's Kulturkampf. He was also one of the pioneers of social Catholicism in Germany and Europe.

²¹ **Ludwig von Windthorst** (1812–1891) was a German politician, a leader of the Catholic Center Party, and the most prominent opponent of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck during the Prussian-led unification of Germany and the *Kulturkampf* of the 1870s. Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* persecuted the Catholic Church in Prussia in an effort to destroy papal control. Bismarck ultimately lost, but it was Pope Leo XIII who negotiated with Bismarck in the end, leaving Windthorst out of the picture.

²² **Caspar Decurtins** (1855–1916), a Swiss politician, was elected in 1877 to the Grand Council of the Canton of Graubünden and, in 1881, to the General Council of the Federal Parliament. As leader of the conservative Catholic party, he was an active promoter of the Church's social doctrine and a member of the Fribourg Union. After leaving politics in 1904, he held the chair of cultural history at the University of Fribourg (1905–1913), of which he was one of its founders. In the last years of his life, he joined the *Sodalitium Pianum*, the traditionalist network led by Mons. Umberto Benigni, and fiercely opposed the modernist theses, especially in literature.

²³ **Albert de Mun** (1841–1914), a French politician and Catholic, served as a deputy for Morbihan from 1876 to 1878 and for Finistère from 1881 until his death. An uncompromising Legitimist, he fought for a long time for the restoration of the monarchy, but after 1892 he yielded to the requests of Leo XIII and joined the Third Republic, aligning himself with the conservative and nationalist right. Very active in social causes, he was one of the founders of the Catholic Workers' Circles (in 1871). He was elected to the French Academy on April 1, 1897.

²⁴ **Léon Harmel** (1829–1915), a French industrialist and Catholic, managed the prosperous Val-des-Bois spinning mill in Warmeriville alongside his father and brothers. Continuing and expanding his father's work—who had promoted the establishment of various charitable works to assist his workers—he made his company a model of cooperation and co-management between owners and employees, in accordance with the ideal of Christian corporatism and the principles of social doctrine defined by Leo XIII in the encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891). He supported the policy of aligning with the Third Republic and was one of the driving forces behind the nascent French Christian Democratic movement. In 1852, he married his cousin Gabrielle Harmel (1833–1870), with whom he had nine children. In 1861, he joined the Franciscan Third Order. He was appointed Commander of the Order of St. Gregory the Great and Knight of the Order of Pius IX.

²⁵ For further reading, the author highlights the works of Father Pascal (*Moral and Social Philosophy*), Léon Grégoire, and Goyau.

the CSC not only as a link to the social teaching of Leo XIII but also as a bridge to fundamental works of the nascent Christian sociology²⁶.

1.3 The Author in the Textual Fabric

A comparison with the author's other social works shows that the thematic scope addressed in *CSC* goes beyond the concerns of his other social writings. In this sense, the text offers answers to a wide range of social concerns of the time, centered on the social role of Catholics and the Church in the world. A comparison with the author's other works from this period reveals that, while *CSC*'s answers are more concise, they are also more "Catholic" and universal, generally transcending the boundaries of explicitly French issues²⁷. The requests the author received for translations into new languages indicate that his intention was achieved²⁸.

The author of the work seeks to offer answers that people (apparently) were seeking. He does not shy away from difficult questions and interweaves theological reflection with a very traditional expository model, namely the catechism. The fourth chapter, the longest, highlights the text's apologetic intent: to offer people arguments for the defense of the faith and the "rights of God"²⁹.

The author particularly defends the Church's right to participate in social processes. It is a catechism on the social morality of the modern age, on the importance of Catholic

²⁶ Another notable work that may have influenced the creation of *the CSC* was the "catechism" (*Principles of Communism*), written by Friedrich Engels in 1847 as a draft program for the newly organized Communist League. This text used the format of 25 questions and answers, an approach known at the time as a "Profession of Faith," intended to organize doctrines in a didactic manner for workers. Shortly thereafter, however, this format was discontinued at the suggestion of Engels himself, who considered the catechism structure outdated. Thus, the draft became an essential reference in the drafting of the 1848 Communist Manifesto. Regarding this possible influence, it is worth noting that Father Dehon and many of the "abbés démocratiques" sought to counter socialist threats by creating social works and initiatives that, on several occasions, bore similarities to the projects of that group. This strategy can be seen in *The Christian Social Manual*.

²⁷ Cf. note n. 13.

²⁸ "I published these lectures in several volumes: *Social Catechism, Christian Renewal, Pontifical Guidelines*. Several of these volumes were translated into Italian, Arabic, Hungarian, and Portuguese. They became classics in various seminaries in France and Italy" (NQT 39/122). The translation into Portuguese was underway in September 1906, as recorded by Father Dehon during his visit to Pernambuco, Brazil, where the book was being printed in the newspaper "União operária." This was possibly the first of Father Dehon's social works to be translated into Portuguese (cf. NQT 20/79).

²⁹ For example, in *CSC* 43, the author makes explicit the apologetic scope of social doctrine by stating that the Church "may intervene" in public life to uphold simultaneously "the rights of God and the rights of peoples." This intervention is not presented as an arbitrary intrusion, but as a consequence of its moral mission: to protect the social order when it is threatened by errors that reject God's sovereignty and weaken the moral "foundations" (*CSC* 5) of society.

participation in society... In other words, the implied author defends the workers, but also indicates that Catholic workers must defend the Church and its *standing* in society.

The implied author is also a “pastoralist,” in the sense that he is capable of flexible and adaptable reflection, wherever possible or necessary. For example, in CSC 46, the author demonstrates that if the ideal described in the preceding sections did not materialize (the centrality of the Church in a Catholic society), the Church must master the art of adapting to new realities, as was the case in the United States and England, where religious (Catholic) unity was wounded, but the Church had freedom of action amid a dangerous religious diversity. On this topic, the author, when referring to the concordats in *CSC*, states: “it certainly does not constitute the ideal...” (CSC 49). That is, there is an “ideal” and a “possible” reality, and the author seems to know how to navigate between these two realities, showing, on the one hand, dogmatic continuity, and on the other, the need for adaptation, characteristic of pastoral interpretation. Social action is presented as a duty that must respond to “times and circumstances” (CSC 1).

As for *strategies*, the author writes with the aim of persuading readers regarding the responses the Church offered in the face of that new social reality. Father Dehon constructs his strategy of persuasion by projecting the image of a connoisseur of social studies, the magisterium, and the world beyond French borders.

A central strategy of his narrative is the insistence on serious and methodical study as a prerequisite for the social apostolate. Dehon argues that one must study to know and one must study to teach. It is necessary to study especially the social issues that present themselves as new, and which should always have been studied in the Church (cf. CSC 291), arguing that the priest must not act without rigorous intellectual preparation³⁰.

1.4 The Proposed Dialogue: Audience and Issues

³⁰ According to A. Perroux, in *CSC*, Father Dehon implicitly applies a dynamic similar to the “see, judge, and act” method, always starting from concrete reality to analyze it and guide pastoral action. Father Dehon starts from reality as an “excellent observer,” presenting as much information as possible on a given social problem (see). Next, he conducts a study of the social situation based on the Church’s magisterium, especially turning to Leo XIII (judge). Finally, he commits to action that leads to a change in reality (act) (cf. PERROUX, A. *Le témoignage d’une vie: le Père Jean-Léon Dehon*, STD 59, Rome, 2014, p. 67ff).

After examining the work's origin, structure, and influences, it is essential—albeit initially—to investigate its intended **audience**. This analysis is introductory, as it will be explored in greater depth in the next section of this study.

In *the CSC*, the implied author addresses a Catholic individual who exercises conscious responsibility in the ordering of society, who operates beyond the private sphere of faith and who moves within the realms of public decision-making: political, economic, educational, and cultural. This is a reader who possesses a certain capacity to influence society and who seeks reliable guidance to judge and act in the face of the social transformations of the late 19th century, an era marked by the secularization of the state, the rise of individualistic liberalism, the revolutionary threat of socialism, and the reorganization of the industrial workforce.

Given this **target audience**, it is clear that Father Dehon, as the implied author, seeks to address certain **specific issues**. He attempts to answer some doctrinal, social, and political questions arising from the transition from the 19th to the 20th century. He does so in the face of the progressive secularization of the European continent and France, which was also a product of socialist and rationalist ideas.

The author is aware of the difficulties of integrating Christian doctrine with modern thought. He recognizes the need to reposition Christian anthropology and morality in the face of new social ideologies and the emergence of an independent (autonomous) morality that contradicts heteronomy. In the preface to his work, Father Dehon outlines an analysis of the modern era:

But with the 18th century, civil society was shaken to its foundations. The philosophical fantasy of the Social Contract gave rise to the Revolution. During the 19th century, the political heresy of social atheism progressed, and error spread in the economic sphere. Collectivism became the ideal, and anarchy the means. Catholics devoted themselves to the search for political and economic truth. The Church will provide. Christian Tradition preserves within itself all the words of life, to reorganize them according to the needs of God's children. The Church will give us its Social Doctrine (CSC 5).

Given this context and seeking the implied author in Father Dehon's text, we can identify several questions:

a) What ought to be the relationship between Church and State in a secularized society? Is it possible for the State to disregard religion?

The relationship between Church and State must be guided by the real distinction of purposes and competences: the Church, having a “spiritual and supernatural” end, is “unmistakably distinct from the State” and remains “a perfect and independent society in its own sphere,” endowed with its own authority (CSC 28). For this reason, for Father Dehon, it is not legitimate for the State to deny religion its social citizenship or to declare itself indifferent to it, for this would amount to “pure materialism.” Furthermore, “reason itself demands a social worship,” since “society, the work of God, owes Him worship as its author” (CSC 30).

b) How can we emphasize the divine origin of the social and political order, thereby orienting it toward the practice of Christian morality?

Drawing inspiration from the encyclical *Immortale Dei*, Father Dehon affirms that society was created for the sake of man, and not the other way around (CSC 15). Therefore, society cannot exclude from the social order that which is proper to the human person, such as the family and religion. Society “must protect them and grant them peace both internally and externally, and help them to develop fully. Such is the divine plan. Society is willed by God for the sake of the common good” (CSC 16).

c) How could a Christian vision of the economy and social justice be formulated that would be capable of addressing the social issues of his time?

Father Dehon presents a conciliatory path between liberalism and socialism, proposing a Christian economy marked by charity and guilds, typical of the Middle Ages. In this proposal, already present in *Rerum Novarum*, there is a defense of small organizations and the family against the power of the State that sickens society (social malaise). This is the core of what the Church’s Social Doctrine would later call subsidiarity.

“A century ago we lived in that fragmentation we call individualism: little community and local life, without guilds, without associations. The State absorbed everything; we had a congested capital and a congested governmental organization: all members of the social body were weakened and anemic. But the spirit of association has resurfaced. It is nature reclaiming its rights” (CSC 510).

d) How should Christians be guided in the face of new political regimes (republics, democracies, in place of the old monarchical regime)?

CSC seems to be grounded in Father Dehon’s attempt to deepen Christian social theology as a response to a world in crisis and undergoing abrupt transformations. It aims to

address the problem of atheism, the hegemony of the State at the expense of individual freedoms, materialism, and the loss of modern religious meaning in the public sphere. In a certain sense, it can be said that Father Dehon lays the groundwork for what is known today as Public Theology, understanding the Church not only as the transmitter and depositary of the truth of dogma, but as a teacher of social life.

1.5 Assessment of Discursive Effectiveness

As we approach the conclusion of this section in which we present Father Dehon as an implied author, it is pertinent to ask whether he answered the central question of the work³¹ as well as the other issues arising from it, as formulated throughout the text.

Father Dehon grounds the social action of the Church (and of Catholic readers) in four points: a) the responsibility to preserve and adapt Christian revelation³²; b) the subordination of political economy to Christian morality; c) public action in the pursuit of justice and charity; and d) the Church's historical role in defending freedom, equality, and social justice. The goal is a Christian society based on collaboration between the Church, the family, and professional associations³³.

Father Dehon speaks from a position of knowledge, but not in a distant manner. His language is simple, direct, and marked by a conversational tone that invites agreement. Thus, with *rhetorical effectiveness*, Dehon's implied author seeks to convince not only through faith but also through reason, academic and scientific knowledge, thereby guiding and reorganizing the social life of Catholics. He bases his argument on three complementary pillars:

³¹ This was the question *posed by the Research Guide*: "What question was Dehon, through his implied author, attempting to answer in his text? What was his answer to the question within the horizon of expectation of the reader—the implied reader—of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?" At the beginning of this study, this question was formulated as follows: "*How should a Catholic understand and reorganize social life (political and economic) after the modern rupture, in the face of the advance of ideologies and practices that exclude God and the Church from the public sphere (Freemasonry, social atheism, socialism, liberalisms), and what is the Church's place in this reordering?*"

³² The author demonstrates that the Church possesses the political and economic truth that Catholics seek. He points to an organic continuity: just as the Church articulated dogmas during doctrinal crises, it now articulates a social doctrine in the midst of a civil crisis. The author contrasts the "fantasy" of the Social Contract and the Revolution with "truth" and interprets socialism/atheism as a "political heresy."

³³ On the one hand, the author seeks to "restore" a Christian society that finds its social axis primarily in small associations inspired by the Middle Ages. On the other hand, especially in the conclusion (CSC 514–521), the author looks to the future, toward Christian Democracy and the Social Kingdom of the Heart of Jesus—realities that, though rooted in and expressed through medieval categories, point toward the future.

1. *Moral reason*, which appeals to the sense of natural justice and the dignity of the worker, through the articulation of moral, economic, and social arguments.

2. *Ecclesiastical doctrine*, grounded in the magisterium of Leo XIII, particularly *Rerum novarum*, which confers institutional legitimacy upon him (as the Pope's interpreter, preacher, and "recorder").

3. *Concrete social experience*, which manifests itself in the description of the workers' condition and in the critique of the political systems of socialism and liberalism.

This threefold argumentation gives the text a persuasive depth that transcends mere moralism. The implied author thus appears as a Catholic intellectual conscious of his time, who seeks to give faith a *public function* and to define the Church's place. The conviction of his social thought derives not only from doctrinal content but from the coherence between his spiritual vision and his realistic reading of society.

On the other hand, although this implied author is rhetorically effective, his conviction encounters limits when dealing with modern social complexity. *CSC* starts from a hierarchical and organic view of society, in which each class has a defined role and social harmony depends on Christian charity and justice. This conception, though well-intentioned, presupposes a stable order that nascent capitalism was already beginning to erode.

To the contemporary reader, such a stance may sound paternalistic or insufficient, as it avoids questioning the deeper economic structures of capitalist logic. Thus, the implied author retains his moral force, but also reveals the limitations of the Catholic discourse of his time, founded on a "Christian social order" based on fixed roles (employer/worker) in the face of industrial modernity and emerging socialist thought.

Even with these historical limitations, the figure of the implied author in *CSC* retains an effective ethical and pastoral force. Dehon constructs a model of the religious communicator who teaches through pastoral authority and charity, seeking to reconcile doctrine and social life. His conviction is both rational and affective, grounded in compassion and the desire to restore human dignity in the light of the Gospel. From this perspective, Dehon emerges as a precursor of modern Christian social thought, whose implied author serves as a bridge between tradition and the demands for justice of the new century.

In *CSC*, Father Dehon constructs an implied author who is simultaneously convinced and compassionate, orthodox and attentive to social reality. His voice combines the authority of the teacher with the tenderness of the pastor, becoming deeply persuasive in the Catholic

context of the late 19th century. Although limited by a hierarchical and non-revolutionary view of society, Dehon achieves a rare balance between doctrine and humanity. Thus, his work stands as an example of moral eloquence and pastoral fidelity, in which the implied author proves fully convincing—not only through his logic, but above all through his spiritual integrity and his ability to interpret social reality.

2. The mock Reader of *the Social Catechism*

In this second section, the question that should guide our literary analysis is the following: to whom does the implied author address himself?³⁴ This section is organized around three parts: (1) Dehon: a writer addressing a mock reader; (2) the identity of the mock reader; and (3) the mock reader of a catechism as a literary genre.

Identifying the mock reader of a text requires attention to various elements: the presupposed prior knowledge, the shared values, the arguments presented to gain adherence, the anticipated objections and how they are addressed, and, finally, the tone and register of the language employed. For example, a text that constantly appeals to papal authority without the need for justification presupposes a reader who accepts it. However, this text also presents economic and technical arguments, presupposing a reader with some knowledge of these subjects.

2.1 Dehon: a writer addressing a mock reader

Dehon presupposes a particular readership. The Founder believes that doctrine is always valid (*“The Church will give us its social doctrine”* [CSC5]), but historical developments raise new questions, as can be seen in the expression *“d’autres fois”* [*“other times”*] in CSC 2³⁵; these words suggest a certain break in the text. They remind us that the Church’s mission to preserve, explain, and define revelation is not without its setbacks.

³⁴ The concept of the mock reader was developed primarily by Wayne C. Booth in his work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and later refined by theorists such as Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco. The implied reader is not the actual reader who opens the book. Rather, it is a discursive construction: the image of the reader that the text itself presupposes through its rhetorical choices, its level of argumentative complexity, its ideological assumptions, and its strategies of persuasion.

³⁵ *“At times, the explanation of Scripture and traditional beliefs has been carried out peacefully through the Church’s ordinary teaching and especially through the writings of the Holy Fathers. At other times, it was in the context of a doctrinal struggle, a growing heresy, or an error raised and spread in a region, that the Church,*

Father Dehon has in mind a sensitive reader capable of contemplating the architecture as a whole and marveling at every detail. *“Désormais, il restait peu à faire”* [Henceforth, there was little left to do] (CSC 4). Everything is in place; every detail has been thought through. Father Dehon, an attentive reader, invites the imagined reader of his work to contemplate what he himself contemplates: a solid doctrine. Thus, Dehon’s reader seems to leave no room for the reader’s criticism, since everything is perfectly articulated: *“we were in possession of the truth about God, the Trinity, the Incarnate Word, redemption, the Church, its authority, its sacraments”* (CSC 4).

Continuing the reading of the Preface (CSC 1-13), Father Dehon identifies a historical shift: *“But with the 18th century, civil society was shaken to its foundations. The philosophical fantasy of the Social Contract gave rise to the Revolution”* (CSC 5). The “but”³⁶ introduces a new historical-theological scenario: in the face of “philosophical fantasy,” the author sets forth the truth. The reader is called to contemplate the revelation of a doctrinal “treasure” that the Church will make explicit through recent magisterial teaching: *“The Church will give us its social doctrine”* (CSC 5). The invitation is, therefore, not to be ensnared by ideological, socialist, anarchist, collectivist, or liberal narratives³⁷, but to recognize that Catholic social doctrine develops historically in response to concrete crises, *“in accordance with the times and circumstances”* (CSC 1). Thus, the reader does not merely receive information but is led to perceive how contexts pose new questions to the faith and how the Church responds to them with criteria for discernment and action.

2.2 Identity of the Target Reader

Father Dehon addresses primarily a Catholic with a certain level of education, present in France at the end of the 19th century, but not exclusively: as demonstrated earlier, CSC is a

through its councils or its supreme head, and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, defined its dogmas, explained its beliefs, and condemned the error” (CSC 1-2).

³⁶ *“But with the 19th, it is civil society that is shaken to its very foundations. The philosophical fantasy of The Social Contract gives rise to the Revolution”* (CSC 5).

³⁷ On the other hand, Father Dehon was no stranger to the development of socialism in Europe. For example, in *the Chronique du Règne*, in addition to highlighting the social progress of the Germans and the contribution of the socialists, he cites an article by Franz Lutgenau published in the journal *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, in which he highlights the Catholic Church’s contribution to social action: *“The Catholic Church has always held a different position; it has always followed a different code of conduct. It is the most powerful organization of the present. But the broad vision of the Roman Church or of those who govern it extends into the future. Leo XIII is a politician and an economist of great caliber. His encyclical on the labor question should be studied as a social and economic catechism”* (*Chroniques du Règne, Allemagne* [CHR 1898/140]).

more universal and less geographically situated book than MSO. Some traits of this mock reader: s/he may be a Catholic priest, educator, or worker; s/he may belong to the upper-middle class or be a worker committed to the social cause.

In *CSC*, the reader's identity can be traced through the various social actors cited by the author, especially in the third part of the work. The "implied addressee" is a Christian situated in various spheres of social life³⁸. It all begins with the family, "prior to social life," a nucleus that society must protect, respecting its autonomy, the stability and authority received from God (*CSC* 19–21), so that public citizenship ordinarily passes "through the head of the family" and society is structured into organic groups (families, communities, professional associations, etc.) with their own interests (*CSC* 64–65).

The text also addresses *magistrates and public authorities*, who "must show themselves to be Christians as such", recalling that obedience to civil power is valid only "within limits," never against God's law, and that the faithful must refer, in difficult matters, to the discernment of those who have authority in the Church (*CSC* 248–250). *CSC* speaks to *voters*, but also to *legislators and administrators* when it defines taxes as a "required contribution" toward government expenses (*CSC* 69) and when it criticizes the imbalances and wastefulness of modern budgets (*CSC* 75–77). It also addresses *teachers and cultural educators* by maintaining that education has the mission to "instruct the reason," "form virtue," and "create the habit of obeying authority," and that teaching cannot do without a religious reference (*CSC* 81–83). He addresses *journalists* by affirming that there is no "natural right" to use the press to erode the moral and religious foundations of society; the press must not be allowed to destroy religion, authority, property, and public morality (*CSC* 84–86). Finally, addressing *workers, employers, and social leaders*, he regards professional associations as "natural" (*CSC* 65) and links state action to social justice (*CSC* 75–76). This brief overview demonstrates the broad range of social actors addressed by the author in *the CSC* and who are also the intended audience of the work.

Giuseppe Toniolo, who wrote the preface to the Italian version of *CSC*, seems to point in another direction. He described Father Dehon's project and presented his view on who the intended reader of this work would be. "*It is true that it is more difficult to present the bread of truth in a way accessible to uneducated minds than to expound scientific theories to scholars*

³⁸ It is prophetic to note that in beginning the chapter on the duties of Christians, Father Dehon starts with the "duties of the priest": "What are the duties of the priest regarding social life? There are three: to study, to teach, and to act" (cf. *CSC* 241–247). This theme will return in section 3.3 (Congregational Dimension).

³⁹. Toniolo's statements reinforce the identity of the intended reader as a Catholic layperson; however, it is questionable whether someone with little education would understand the work. If CSC was not intended for the intellectual elite, it was also not easily accessible to the masses.

This Catholic reader was immersed in diverse doctrinal and moral realities, as well as in equally challenging political and social contexts⁴⁰. From a religious perspective, a reading of the text reveals the ecclesial profile of the audience to whom Father Dehon addresses himself: a reader capable of understanding basic Christian doctrine, somewhat familiar with ecclesiastical history and the major councils, and able to follow the social language of papal encyclicals – especially those of Leo XIII, but also those of Pius IX – and aware of the consequences of the French Revolution and its repercussions. Therefore, while on the one hand the implied author imagines a reader situated in a world of social tensions, on the other, he envisions a reader capable of navigating the complex apologetic journey of the fourth chapter.

CSC is a book with a dialogical character, in which Father Dehon envisioned a curious and interested reader, formulating questions. This was a reader with very specific questions (perhaps distressing, given the polarization of that moment), and the author offered a practical book of answers, a “complete social catechism” (CSC 12). In a way, CSC is a kind of moral tutorial for understanding the new world through doctrine, a sort of “Catholic compass.”

The hypothetical reader was concerned about the threats the family faced from state centralism (Caesarism), from laws that granted the state control over the education of children, and from pressures to sell his small property and migrate to the big city: *“Society must not interfere with the organization of families, since it finds them established by nature and*

³⁹ TONIOLO, G., *op. cit.*, p. 410. The author continues the text by presenting a profile of Father Dehon: “This did not prevent Father Dehon, author of a series of well-known and widely circulated writings in Italy, such as the *Christian Social Manual*, the *Pontifical Guidelines*, *Christian Social Renewal*, in which the clarity of the French genius, combined with the logical coherence of the Italians, among whom Father Dehon lived for a long time, contributes to giving these works an absolutely original popular character.”

⁴⁰ The *moral and doctrinal tension* is marked by the threat of socialism and communism, by the spread of social atheism, by the proliferation of conceptions of “independent morality”—detached from any religious foundation—and by the advance of multiple forms of contemporary liberalism. This is also a reader situated in the midst of *political and social tension*, characterized by consequences stemming from the revolutionary spirit of the 18th century. One observes the crisis of the *Ancien Régime* and the strengthening of the Third Republic, as well as the progressive confrontation between State and Church, resulting in the loss of ecclesiastical authority over education. Furthermore, there are instances of social injustice, economic disorder, and imbalances in the social sphere.

religion” (CSC 20)⁴¹. The author imagines a *family man* reading his work and therefore insists on the defense of the family and small property⁴².

The study of the Founder’s rhetorical *strategies* reveals new aspects of the reader to whom he addresses himself. The author adopts a tone of institutional authority, presenting the Church as a sure guide in the transmission of truth. He employs a doctrinal parallelism that draws a connection between theological heresies and “social heresies,” interpreting socialism as a new form of deviation that demands discernment and a Christian response (CSC 5). Furthermore, he frequently uses numbers and dates, building credibility through documentation (cf. CSC 74, 77, 132...).

This is a reader motivated toward social commitment, receiving tools to act according to Christian principles and to transmit them to others. The author reinforces his convictions in a work of “vaccination” against socialism, communism, and materialism, understood as diseases to be combated.

In summary, the implied reader envisioned by Father Dehon is an educated, consistent Catholic with a certain degree of social engagement and a critical stance toward socialism and materialism in late 19th-century France. His duty is to strengthen Christian commitment within the context in which he lives, through an understanding of Catholic tradition, offering doctrinal responses to the political and social challenges of his time. He is someone who values doctrinal precision, respects ecclesiastical authority, and is motivated both by the search for doctrinal, social, and economic truth and by the struggle against what he perceives as modern heresy.

⁴¹ “*The family precedes social life. It constitutes for man a more essential and more intimate support than that of civil society. It also serves as a sacred bond, a source of life, and his necessary sustenance. Civil society comes into being after the family. It unites families just as it unites individuals. And it is intended to help them, to protect them, and to promote their well-being within its bosom. It must respect families as sacred institutions that God has seen fit to endow with a religious character. Society must not interfere with the organization of families, since it finds them established by nature and religion. Families are the axis of society and its strength. Society draws upon their virtues, discipline, riches, and fruitfulness*” (CSC 19-20).

⁴² In this context, where the reader is imagined as the “head of the family,” it is interesting to note the central place of the family in CSC. Father Dehon presents the family as the “first social unit, willed by God and sanctified by Him,” endowed with natural rights that the State does not create but must protect. For this reason, he affirms that “families are the axis of society,” defending the “law of authority that God has established in the family” (CSC 12). Corporations are interpreted as families: “*It is a professional family or a small republic with its own legislation, its magistrates, and its territory*” (CSC 432). Within this moral and historical framework, the author interprets the Fourth Commandment (“honor your father and mother”) as the theological foundation of social morality: he argues that theology textbooks should develop this precept alongside treatises on laws, justice, and contracts, in order to provide a basis for “Christian politics and economics,” that is, a social morality (CSC 12). From there, Dehon also derives the duties of employers and owners from the Fourth and Seventh Commandments, establishing an analogy between home and workshop: the employer is presented as the “head” of a “working family,” and the employment contract creates a moral bond that also implies protection and responsibility, going beyond wages to encompass the morality, health, and education of the worker’s children, in a form of “social paternalism” understood as an extension of fatherhood and a model principle for other authorities (cf. CSC 12).

2.3 The mock reader of a catechism (literary genre) in the late 19th century

During the time when Father Dehon lived, other catechisms were available to readers. The presence of this literary genre reflects a society seeking greater conceptual clarity amid intense cultural and social transformation. This is why the “catechism” genre had expanded beyond ecclesiastical circles⁴³, addressing topics on the margins of faith, such as in *the French Republican Catechism*, the *Constitutional Catechism*, the *Patriotic Catechism*⁴⁴, and various others⁴⁵. These projects demonstrate an effort to consolidate new ideas, create social groups with coherent doctrines, and develop well-founded responses to common debates during periods of great social upheaval. Father Dehon writes with this reader in mind—one who, lacking access to specialized books and time for in-depth study, seeks clarity and synthesis.

Among the catechisms similar to Father Dehon’s *CSC* and written during the same period, the following stand out: “*Le Catéchisme Social du Catholique*”⁴⁶, by Théodore Garnier, and the *Catéchisme de l’encyclique*, published by Monsignor Lecot in July 1891⁴⁷. The latter sought to make the teachings of the encyclical *Rerum novarum* accessible to all, especially to

⁴³ The literary genre of the “catechism” emerged in antiquity, with the Church Fathers, and was part of the initiation of candidates into the world of faith. During the Reformation, this tool was adopted as a means of transmitting what they believed to be the true doctrine, in opposition to what they considered Catholic errors. We thus find the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) and, later, as a Catholic response, the *Roman Catechism* (1566), published by Pius V.

⁴⁴ The *French Republican Catechism* (19th century), which consisted of pamphlets teaching principles of citizenship and civil rights in a question-and-answer format. The *Constitutional Catechism* was used in various countries as an instrument of political education for citizens (It included questions such as the following: a) What is the foundation of government? The will of the people freely expressed; b) What are the duties of the citizen? To participate in public life and defend the constitution, etc.). The *Patriotic Catechism*, which was used to teach history, geography, and civic education.

⁴⁵ In the economic and social sphere, we have the *Liberal Economic Catechism* (19th century), with authors such as Jean-Baptiste Say, who explain political economy, the theory of value, and the advantages of the free market. The *Catechism of Solidarity Economy* (contemporary) consists of pamphlets produced by fair trade and social economy organizations for popular education. Gabriel Deville’s *Socialist Catechism* (1883), whose aim was to systematically popularize Marx’s ideas among workers. Friedrich Engels’ *Communist Catechism* (1847) was a draft preceding the *Communist Manifesto*, in a question-and-answer format (cf. note 18). Sergei Nechayev’s *Revolutionary Catechism* (1869) was characterized by its radical and extreme nature, intended for dedicated revolutionaries. Louis-Auguste Blanqui’s *People’s Catechism* (1866), which emphasized the class struggle.

⁴⁶ GARNIER, Théodore. *Le Catéchisme Social du Catholique*. Paris: Maison de la Bonne Presse, 1894. Written four years earlier, this work bears several similarities to the *CSC*. Fr. Garnier’s text has a pedagogical and apologetic character that systematizes the principles of the Church’s Social Doctrine following *Rerum Novarum*. Also structured in a question-and-answer format, the work aims to instruct the clergy and the Catholic working class in the socio-economic “third way,” refuting both individualistic liberalism and collectivist socialism. Garnier defends, in accessible language, the social function of property, wage justice based on family needs, and professional associations (guilds) as instruments of social harmony and the re-Christianization of the urban masses.

⁴⁷ LECOT, Victor-Lucien-Sulpice. *Catechism of the Encyclical*. Bordeaux: Catholic Union of Bordeaux, 1892.

workers⁴⁸. Organized into 136 questions and answers, Lecot's text is described as an honest and strictly faithful reading of the original, functioning as a didactic translation that emphasizes the Pope's authority and maintains a prudent and traditional tone⁴⁹.

In conclusion, the mock reader constructed by Father Dehon in his work is revealed to be a Catholic from late-19th-century France, who finds in the authority of the Church a "compass" to navigate safely through the waves between Christian tradition and modern ideologies, such as socialism, communism, or liberalism. By drawing on the literary genre of the catechism, Father Dehon employs a communicative dynamic with which readers of the time were already relatively familiar. Dehon establishes a pedagogical dialogue that presupposes an interlocutor capable of engaging with themes of a certain complexity, inviting him to move from doctrine toward a more effective social commitment.

Having understood the identity of this interlocutor, the next section will be devoted to discussing the possible relevance of the CSC in the contemporary context.

3. The Relevance of *the Social Catechism Today*

In light of the analyses conducted above, it is appropriate to highlight certain aspects of the relevance of *the CSC* in the contemporary context. Although drafted during a historical period marked by the social transformations characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the text presents principles and insights that, through sound hermeneutics, continue to offer important criteria for reflection on the life of the Church and society. In this sense, the relevance of CSC today can be analyzed from three complementary perspectives: (1) the social dimension, (2) the ecclesial dimension, and (3) the congregational dimension.

3.1 The Social Dimension

⁴⁸ Cf. AGOSTINO, Marc. *Two Readings of Rerum Novarum: Monsignor Lecot's "Catechism" and Father Dehon's "Christian Social Manual."* In: LEDURE, Yves (Ed.). *Leone Dehon and Rerum Novarum*. Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 1992. pp. 169–178.

⁴⁹ Comparing Lecot's work with that of Father Dehon, it is evident that CSC does not merely explain the papal document but breaks its rhythm, reorganizes it, expands it, and integrates it into a much broader and more innovative overall reflection. While Lecot's work is seen as a "faithful" reading, Father Dehon's work is more dynamic, broader, and linked between history and the future (Christian Democracy and the Reign of the Heart of Jesus), offering a program of social action that, in a certain sense, brings to fruition the potential of Leo XIII's text.

The value of human dignity and fundamental rights, a relevant theme in modernity, appears in *CSC* as early as the first chapters of the work, when Father Dehon addresses the human *telos* and the reason for society's existence. The fundamental argument is that society, and the State that organizes it, exist for the sake of the human person and must value their integral development (*CSC* 15–17).

The basis for this argument, so highly valued by contemporary philosophy, is theological in Father Dehon's view. The individual precedes society because this is the divine plan. God did not create human beings subordinate to a social structure; on the contrary, social institutions arise as means to foster the individual's development in the formation of social bonds, of which the first and most fundamental is the family. In this sense, the *CSC* affirms that "*it was not society that God had in mind first, but man,*" adding that God "*did not make man for society, but made society for man*" (*CSC* 15).

Based on this principle, the *CSC* elaborates on the purpose of social life. In summary, civil society is presented as a necessary instrument for individuals and families to achieve fuller development. In isolation, individuals would be unable to overcome the various obstacles that hinder human progress. For this reason, society is called to bring people and families together, protect them, and foster their integral development (cf. *CSC* 16).

Within this same perspective, *CSC* spells out the fundamental rights of the person that must be protected by society. Every person has the right to find in society "daily bread," that is, the means of subsistence (cf. *CSC* 17). They also have the right to their own dignity, to access to education, to freedom, and to the possibility of living out their religious dimension without any kind of external hindrance (cf. *CSC* 16, citing *Immortale Dei*).

The text further insists that society has a specific mission regarding these rights: it must protect them and prevent them from being violated or oppressed by others. For this reason, it is affirmed that society has "*the mission to protect the human person in his dignity and rights, not to enslave him*" (cf. *CSC* 17). This affirmation rejects any conception of social organization that reduces the human person to a mere instrument of economic, political, or ideological interests.

From a contemporary perspective, these principles are highly relevant to the global social and political debate, though with particular force in the Latin American, African, and Asian contexts. The defense of the right to a dignified livelihood, education, freedom, housing,

among others, proves particularly significant in societies where a large portion of the population faces conditions of vulnerability.

Thus, the reflection found in *the CSC* significantly anticipates principles that would later be developed more systematically by the Church's Social Doctrine, especially in the social encyclicals and in contemporary magisterial documents. The centrality of the human person and the moral responsibility of society and the State in promoting fundamental rights constitute, therefore, structural elements of a Christian vision of social life that remains profoundly relevant today.

The function of public authority, according to the *CSC*,⁵⁰ consists in guaranteeing social peace, protecting order, and creating conditions so that individuals and families may fully develop their human and social lives (cf. *CSC* 47). Thus, the exercise of authority is not a privilege and must never be exercised as the domination of one group over others, but rather as a service to the community.

However, this purpose of political authority is often undermined when state structures fail to fulfill their fundamental mission. One of the most serious factors compromising the functioning of public institutions is corruption, the perversion of the state's public function. Corruption also generates a structural effect: it compromises the functioning of the institutions that should protect citizens' rights. Inefficient administrative systems, excessive bureaucracy, and patronage practices hinder the population's access to the most essential public services, such as education, health, security, and justice.

This situation reveals a contradiction with the conception presented by the *CSC*. If political authority exists to protect the person and ensure the common good, any form of corruption or malfunctioning of public structures represents a distortion of the very purpose of the State (cf. *CSC* 50). In this sense, the reflection proposed by the text remains relevant today, as it reminds us that the legitimacy of political power depends on its genuine commitment to justice, transparency, and service to the citizen.

CSC presents society as a complex reality, composed of different levels of organization that work together to promote human development and the common good: education, the press⁵¹, the organization of state powers, etc. In this context, the text recognizes the importance

⁵⁰ Addressing the themes of the "Concordats" within the magisterium of Leo XIII, in accordance with the encyclical *Immortale Dei* (cf. *CSC* 47–49).

⁵¹ Although we have not explicitly addressed the topic of education in the preceding paragraphs, it deserves attention because, when *CSC* discusses education (and the press) as a force that shapes consciences (*CSC* 81–86), it anticipates a current issue: who educates, informs, and shapes public opinion? Father Dehon emphasizes that

of so-called “**corporate regimes**,” that is, the various forms of association that exist between the individual and the state. Among these social structures, the following stand out in particular: the family, local communities (such as municipalities)⁵², and professional associations (unions), which have their own role in the organization of social life (cf. CSC 117).

This understanding stems from the idea that social life cannot be reduced to the direct relationship between the individual and political power. Society is constituted by a network of relationships and institutions that foster cooperation, solidarity, and citizen participation. For this reason, *CSC* recognizes that these organizations have a legitimate right to exist and to defend the interests of their members, provided they are guided by the common good (cf. CSC 120). The appreciation of these intermediate structures also helps to avoid two equally problematic extremes: on the one hand, individualism that weakens community life, and on the other, the excessive centralization of power in the State.

3.2 The Ecclesial Dimension

CSC also offers significant contributions to understanding the Church’s **mission** in society today, a theme embedded in the central question that runs through much of *CSC*’s text: what is the Church’s place and legitimacy in this new world?

Although developed within a specific historical context, the reflection presented offers principles that continue to illuminate ecclesial action, especially in realities marked by profound social inequalities. In this sense, several elements stand out from *CSC*: the prophetic dimension of the Church’s mission; the centrality of the family in the organization of social life; collaboration between the Church and society in promoting the common good; and the importance of the social formation of the faithful.

CSC clearly affirms that the Church possesses not only the right but also the duty to take a stand against the injustices present in social life (cf. CSC 349). The Church’s moral authority leads it to denounce unjust laws, condemn forms of tyranny, and defend the dignity of the human person whenever it is threatened. This perspective reveals an understanding of the

education and communication always produce moral and social effects and, therefore, demand responsibility. To update this point today means recognizing that the same problem has shifted to the digital environment (networks, platforms, and algorithms), but without changing the core: the formation of public conscience requires criteria of truth, the common good, and respect for human dignity.

⁵² The concept of “municipality” in *CSC*, it seems, has a much less sophisticated interpretation than the current one.

ecclesial mission that transcends strictly cultural or spiritual boundaries— —recognizing that the Christian faith has concrete implications for the organization of social life. This dimension has acquired particular relevance in the Latin American context. In various historical situations, ecclesial communities, pastoral agents, and Church bodies⁵³ have played a significant role in the defense of human rights, the struggle for democracy, and the denunciation of injustices⁵⁴.

A second relevant aspect of *the CSC* is the defense of **the family** as the fundamental nucleus of society. Father Dehon affirms that the family precedes the State and constitutes the primary space for human, moral, and religious formation (cf. CSC 19). It is within the family that the person develops their identity and establishes the first relationships of solidarity and responsibility.

This reflection remains highly relevant in the Church's pastoral context. Throughout the world, many families face significant challenges arising from economic crises, migration, social violence, wars, and the fragility of social protection structures. In the face of these realities, the Church continues to recognize the family as a privileged space for evangelization and human formation, seeking to accompany it pastorally and strengthen its capacity to transmit fundamental values for social and Christian life. The Church is one of the few institutions that still values the defense of the family despite the multiple ideologies surrounding this issue.

Another important aspect that emerges from *CSC* is the value of **the formation of Catholics**. The text does not limit itself to presenting theoretical principles regarding the organization of society, but seeks to form the moral conscience of the faithful in the face of social realities⁵⁵. In this sense, Father Dehon demonstrates a pedagogical concern: he seeks to offer Christians tools for reflection that allow them to understand the challenges of the world in the light of faith and the Tradition of the Church. This initiative reveals the author as a *social educator*, aware that the transformation of society also involves the formation of consciences.

The emphasis on formation is particularly evident in the emphasis placed on knowledge of Christian social morality. For Father Dehon, Catholics cannot remain indifferent or uninformed regarding social issues⁵⁶. This concern for formation also reveals a pastoral

⁵³ By way of example, one can point to the important role of the CNBB, especially in the actions of some bishops, in confronting the dictatorship established in Brazil between 1964 and 1985.

⁵⁴ The Church's social commitment finds resonance in the guidelines of the Latin American episcopate, especially in the reflections arising from the Medellín Conference (1968) and later deepened at the Puebla Conference (1979) and, more recently, revisited at Aparecida (2007).

⁵⁵ Recall that the *CSC* aims to foster active Christians in society (the theme of the mock reader).

⁵⁶ Father Dehon's insistence on promoting a Christian formation deeply attentive to social issues, in harmony with the Tradition of the Church, contrasts with a contemporary tendency that, in various ecclesial settings, favors

dimension of the work. Father Dehon writes not only as a theologian or sociologist, but as a pastor attentive to the concrete needs of the people of God.

CSC, in general, justifies the **Church's presence in social life** and clarifies its role in various fields, such as education, social assistance, and the defense of human rights. In many countries, the Church plays a fundamental role in promoting social, educational, and charitable initiatives that seek to address the needs of the most vulnerable populations. According to the Church's Social Doctrine, this role embodies the principle of subsidiarity⁵⁷.

The fourth part of *CSC* (297–521), by taking on an apologetic character—that is, defending the **legitimacy of the Church's social mission** in history—is particularly relevant today. Father Dehon demonstrates that the Church is not merely a “private” spiritual reality, but an educational force that, from the earliest days of Christianity, through the Roman Empire and the various stages of history, has contributed to forming consciences, protecting human dignity, and guiding society according to the truth of the Gospel.

This defense remains relevant because, even today, criticism arises—including within ecclesial circles—that distrusts the Church's social action, as if it should be limited to the liturgy, private morality, and internal life. Father Dehon asserts the opposite: when society is “shaken to its foundations” by ideologies and crises, the Church is called to offer criteria, discernment, and action in favor of the common good (*CSC* 5). For this reason, a renewed apologetics is necessary: not only *ad extra*, in the face of currents that seek to delegitimize the public presence of the faith, but also *ad intra*, to reaffirm that the proclamation of the Kingdom necessarily includes the social dimension of the faith.

3.3 The Congregational Dimension

Reading the *CSC* is also an important tool for reviewing the apostolic life of the Dehonian Family. In considering the relevance of this work for Dehonians today, perhaps rather

moralizing approaches centered primarily on themes related to sexuality and behavior. This contrast can offer fertile ground for critical reflection on the priorities of Christian formation today.

⁵⁷ “Just as it is unjust to take from individuals what they can accomplish through their own strength and initiative in order to entrust it to the collective, so too is it unjust to attribute to a larger and higher society what can be accomplished by smaller and lower communities.” (*Quadragesimo Anno*, 79). The principle of subsidiarity is one of the foundations of DSI. It affirms that higher levels of society should not replace or absorb what lower levels can accomplish on their own, but should support and assist them when necessary.

than discussing its contents in detail, it is appropriate to reflect on certain aspects that directly challenge the life and mission of the Congregation in the current context.

CSC recalls the importance of **the social formation of the faithful**. Father Dehon demonstrates a clear concern for teaching the Christian people the principles of social morality and the organization of society. In this sense, *CSC* reveals the Founder as a social educator, as mentioned above. In light of this perspective, it becomes inevitable to recognize that, in many current contexts, the Dehonian religious exhibit a certain deficiency in the systematic teaching of the Church's Social Doctrine to the Catholic people. Such a pastoral stance stands in stark contrast to the Founder's common practice.

Another aspect worthy of attention is the **waning interest in social issues** in some sectors of congregational life. Dehonian spirituality has always been deeply linked to sensitivity to social and economic realities. For Father Dehon, contemplation of the Heart of Jesus led to a commitment to transforming realities of injustice. When interest in social causes wanes, there is a risk of reducing the Dehonian charism to a misguided devotional or spiritual dimension, causing it to lose its historical strength and transformative power.

Looking back at the history of the Congregation, it is enlightening to see how Father Dehon's social apostolate sparked controversy even in our "early days," as is well documented in the letter that Fr. Germano Blancal⁵⁸ and other religious from the House of St. Quintino sent to Fr. Dehon in 1897, in which they criticized "*Fr. Dehon's presence at meetings where the major issues of the day are discussed*"⁵⁹, asserting that this did not belong to the charism of the Work. In light of this criticism of the Founder's social apostolate, is it not possible to imagine that today there is a new "Blancalism," that is, a tendency to exclude "major issues of the day" from ecclesial and congregational debate? Is *CSC* not a testimony to a courageous process of contemplating issues "apparently" distant from Christianity—such as stock market investments and tax systems—from the perspective of the Christian faith? In this sense, Father

⁵⁸ Germain of the Blessed Sacrament Bernard BLANCAL (1826–1905): He joined the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart in Toulouse and became superior of the house in Montauban. He filed a lawsuit in Rome against the superior general, Father Jean-Baptiste Causette, causing a schism. In 1887–1888, he attempted to merge the dissident faction of his congregation with that of Father Dehon, but the effort failed. Nevertheless, he joined the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in May 1888 and made his profession in August 1889. He was superior of the house at Saint-Quentin from 1895 to 1901. As second assistant (1893–1896) and general councilor (1893–1902) of the congregation, he led the internal opposition against Father Dehon, whom he hoped to replace as superior general, and attempted, unsuccessfully, to provoke a schism.

⁵⁹ Letter from Fr. Germain Blancal and others to Fr. Dehon, July 6, 1897 [LC1 78711].

Dehon acts as a disciple of Leo XIII and addresses “new issues,” showing that “*there is no truly human reality that does not find an echo in the heart*” of the Church (GS 1).

Coincidentally, the letter from Fr. Blancal and his companions was written in the same year that *CSC* was drafted (1897). That is, even in the face of adversity, Father Dehon chose to continue in the apostolate and in social formation. In *Souvenirs*, possibly his most important Circular Letter, when addressing the social apostolate, Father Dehon states: “But here too the work must continue”⁶⁰. Many of the questions answered by Father Dehon in *CSC* remain relevant today, but many new issues have arisen, and the theological examination of these topics lies at the heart of the mission of Father Dehon’s disciples.

CSC reveals the Founder’s concern not only with the social formation of Christians, but also with a **solid formation of the Church’s ministers**⁶¹. Currently, in various contexts, it is evident that social themes have a limited presence in the formation journey of Dehonian seminarians and religious. Insufficient reflection on contemporary social issues hinders the preparation of religious capable of critically understanding reality and acting pastorally in the face of the challenges presented by today’s world.

Related to this is also the imbalance that sometimes arises between the various dimensions of apostolic life, especially when liturgical and sacramental activities end up receiving almost exclusive attention, while social apostolate initiatives occupy a secondary place. Evidently, the liturgy constitutes a central element of the Church’s life. However, when it becomes the sole or primary reference point for pastoral action, there is a risk of weakening other equally essential dimensions of the Church’s mission.

Reading *CSC* can serve as an invitation to rediscover a foundational dimension of the Dehonian charism. The work recalls the social dimension of the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus. Reintroducing social themes and actions into formation and the apostolate does not mean abandoning the spiritual or liturgical dimension of Christian life, but rather integrating them in a way that is more consistent with the Founder’s intentions.

⁶⁰ SVN 48.

⁶¹ “*What are the duties of a priest regarding social life?*”

- There are three: to study, to teach, and to act.

‘*Does the priest really have a duty to concern himself with these matters?*’

- Yes, because social life must be Christian, just like private life.[...]

‘*But aren’t these studies difficult, complicated, intractable, and often without solutions?*’

- The Church needs pastors and teachers (cf. Eph. 4:11). Those whose mission is to be teachers must study the issues in depth and seek solutions to the difficulties. Those whose mission are to be nothing, but pastors must undertake more concise and practical studies. No one is exempt from reading the encyclicals” (*CSC* 242–243).

Conclusion

The analysis of *the Social Catechism* (CSC) brings us back to the question that guides its composition: how should a Catholic understand and reorganize social, political, and economic life in the wake of the modern rupture, in the face of the advance of ideologies and practices that exclude God and the Church from the public sphere, and what is the place of religion in this reordering?

In response to this challenge, the first section of this study revealed an implied author who acts simultaneously as a catechist, popular theologian, advocate, and apologist, assuming the role of defender of the rights of God and the Church in society. Drawing on an argument that articulates moral reason, ecclesial doctrine grounded in the magisterium, and concrete social experience, Father Dehon constructs a sober and comprehensive framework for various “new things.” This effort is directed toward the mock reader, explored in the second section: a Catholic with a basic knowledge of Catholic theology who needs a reliable “compass” to navigate between Christian tradition and modern ideologies, such as socialism and liberalism, and who is called to move from the assimilation of doctrine to an effective social commitment in confronting the “new heresies.”

In the third section, as we examine the relevance of *the CSC* today, we find that Father Dehon’s insights, though presented in a dated manner, transcend the limitations of the 19th century. Structural principles advocated in the work—such as the centrality of the human person, whose rights must be protected by the State; the defense of the family as the formative nucleus that precedes society itself; the defense of small community units; and the prophetic mission of the Church in the continuous denunciation of injustices—continue to offer guidelines for contemporary debates. The work also highlights the urgency of a solid formation in social morality for both the laity and religious, warning that distancing oneself from “the major issues of the day” compromises pastoral action.

The author’s opening statement - “*The Church will give us its social doctrine*” (CSC 5) - indicates part of the Church’s social mission. *CSC* translates, in a pedagogical format, what the Church offers to history when circumstances demand it: principles for ordering public life without losing sight of man’s ultimate destiny. In *CSC*, this “social doctrine” is presented as (i) a framework of principles for social and political life, (ii) as the moralization of the economy,

(iii) as the translation into concrete duties, and finally, (iv) as the historical-apologetic legitimization of what the Church has to offer.

Ultimately, the strength of *the Social Catechism* lies in its ability to demonstrate that the Christian faith has concrete implications in the public sphere. In this sense, the work remains, even today, a challenge for the construction of a more just social order, grounded in human dignity and illuminated by the Gospel.