

WHO IS

Leo John Dehon

lawyer... writer... son...
teacher... friend... explorer...
founder... activist...
Priest of the Sacred Heart

CHAPTER ONE

How far back can you remember? What is the earliest memory you have about your life? Maybe it doesn't seem important, but sometimes when you look back you can see things that help you understand yourself right now.

When you learn about someone else—maybe someone a lot of people know, like the inventor of the light bulb, or someone a few people know, like your grandmother—it's fun to hear their stories. What was it like growing up? Did they ever get in trouble? Did they like school? Did their words or actions surprise people? Did they surprise themselves?

This is a story of someone who lived in France over 100 years ago. What he did continues today in 40 countries around the world, including the United States. His influence is felt even in your school. His name is Fr. Leo John Dehon and he began a religious community called the Priests of the Sacred Heart. Do you remember seeing his picture in your school?

Let's take some time to hear his story. Because Leo Dehon wrote about his life, we will be able to hear some of his own words. "I was born on March 14, 1843," he noted, and "I was baptized on March 24 in the poor church of La Capelle." That's not so interesting, but he gives us some interesting clues.

Leo was born in France in the middle of the 19th century. The French Revolution happened only 50 years earlier, but the people were still struggling with the change from being ruled by a king to being ruled by elected representatives.



The Dehon family home

Over an 80-year period, starting with the French Revolution, there were 7 different ruling governments.

This was not an easy time to live in France, but other things made it exciting. Life became easier and faster with the invention of the steam engine. As railroads began to connect cities all across the country, young Leo Dehon was fasci-



La Capelle, the birthplace of Leo Dehon, is in the north of France. Hazebrouck, where the young Leo attended high school, is about 100 miles northwest of La Capelle.



Leo's father



Leo's mother

nated by the idea of speed and all the changes that trains were making possible.

One of the changes, however, was that cities with factories became more valuable than farmland. Although Dehon's family came from rich landowners, who specialized in breeding racehorses, this source of wealth began to decline. At the time of Leo Dehon's birth, La Capelle was a large town in northeastern France where farmers in the area brought their goods to market.

Leo's father, Alexander Jules Dehon, owned a farm and worked it himself. He married Adele Belzamine Vandelet and together they had three sons. They named their first son Leo, but he died at the age of four. Next came Henry, and then the youngest, whom they named after the child's godfather and their deceased son.

"I was given the names of Leo Gustave. For patrons, I took St. Leo the Great and St. Augustine [Gustave comes from Augustine]. How happy I am to have such noble and great patrons, two of the greatest Doctors of the Church!" In his adult years, Leo would renew his baptismal promises on the anniversary of his baptism, and "On every one of my vacations, I used to make a pious pilgrimage to the sacred font of my baptism."

Like many adult children, Leo would look back on his parents and discover what they meant to him. "My father learned the spirit of fairness and kindness which characterized his whole life. In high school, he stopped practicing his Christian faith, but retained a respect for it." Leo knew that his father loved him and was particularly interested in giving him the best education. "I thank you, O God, for having given my father to me."



When he was four, Leo suffered a brain concussion and fever.

Leo's earliest memories, however, were of his mother. Perhaps this was because Leo suffered a brain concussion and high fever when he was four, the same age that his eldest brother died. You can imagine how this worried his mother and why she might have been over-protective of him. "I did not leave my mother in my childhood. While my brother went and came with my father and shared his tastes for agriculture and horses, I remained at the house and followed my mother everywhere."



Leo Dehon's family church in La Capelle

He credits his mother with the gift of faith. "The beautiful soul of my mother passed, to some degree, into my own." She taught him his morning and evening prayers, devotion to Mary and the saints, and later helped him learn his lessons from religion class. "I want to thank our Lord for having given me such a mother, for having initiated me, through her, in the love of his Divine Heart."



Leo was a smart boy and generally had marks at the top of his grade school class.

Through her influence, he "gradually took a liking to piety and religious things. Attraction for pious objects is often considered to be the first seed of a vocation. People sometimes told me that in my childhood, but I never thought then that it would be true for me." His mother was also very involved in charitable work among the townsfolk.

As a grade school student, Leo was smart and didn't need to study a lot to stay at the head of the class. At times, this made him proud, lazy, and even moody. After three years of religion class and with the help of his mother, he was ready to receive his First Communion. He memorized the answers to all the questions. "I understood that it was a question of something big," he said, "I prepared myself well."



Hazebrouck School, the boarding school Leo attended.

That was not the case when he received Confirmation. "I received graces in this sacrament and yet this day has always left me with regrets. My preparation was poor. It was like a time of crisis; I had companions who weren't the best."

When Leo was 12, his father took him to Paris for the Second Universal Exposition at the Palace of Industry. This was like a World's Fair. For a young boy from the country, this first contact with a big city and a world filled with new ideas was "like a great lesson in learn-

ing about things.”

Just after this experience, Leo’s parents sent him to a boarding high school in Hazebrouck, where they hoped he would learn self-discipline. Many years later, Leo wrote in his diary, “The rule was strict: early to rise, little heat, a lot of work, and little free time. The studies were demanding.” Because it was a long distance between La Capelle and the boarding school, Leo came home only at Easter and during the summer. He spent short vacations with local families.

During his first year in high school he joined the St. Vincent de Paul Society, which helps people in need. One of his jobs in this organization was to serve as its treasurer. He learned a lot at the group meetings. “They went to my heart which was by nature compassionate.”

Dreaming about his future, Leo sometimes thought of being a priest. In his second year of high school he made a decision. “It was strengthened on Christmas night. What is astonishing is that since then my resolution was never seriously shaken.”



Leo at age 16

In August of 1859, Leo graduated from high school. He was 16 years old. “My success filled my father with delight. He was not ambitious for himself but he was for me. He wanted to see me attain some high position.” His father started dreaming about his son as an engineer, a mayor, or a diplomat. “After a short vacation, I spoke to my parents about my vocation. They could have suspected it, yet it was like thunder out of a clear sky. My father tried to convince himself that I would change my mind, and yet scarcely dared hope I would. Finally, he told me to put aside my plan altogether.”

Leo did not give up. When asking for permission to enter a seminary, his father replied, “that he would never consent. From that very beginning, I let him know that I believed firmly in my call to the priesthood and that I intended to remain faithful to that calling even if I had to wait until my coming of age, when I would be free to do as I pleased.” Indeed, Leo would have to wait.



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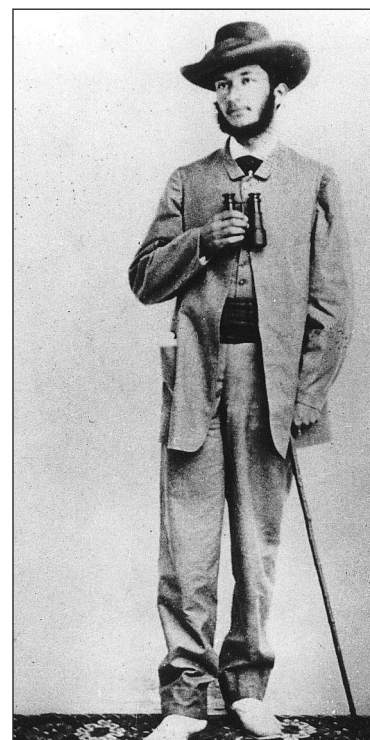
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CHAPTER TWO

What's the connection between spending time in school and spending time on vacation? What does sitting in a classroom and taking a trip to a place that you've never been before have in common? For Leo Dehon, it's the opportunity to learn. Because his father had the financial means to make it possible, Leo attended college in Paris and traveled through Europe and the Middle East by the time he was 22 years old. Wherever he found himself, however, he was always a student taking good notes.

After graduating from high school, Leo wanted to enter the seminary. His father firmly refused and insisted that Leo attend a technical school in Paris to prepare for a career in science, engineering, or architecture. Within a year, however, Leo changed his focus and began studying law as his brother Henry was already doing. Many years later, Leo reflected on this time in his life. "I was to spend five years in Paris. Although I had greatly dreaded this, I received many graces there and experienced a great intellectual development. The study of law was to develop my judgment and prepare me for philosophy."

While in Paris, he lived with his brother, who "always encouraged and protected me. I am extremely grateful to him." The two brothers were not completely alone in the big city. They often visited their uncle, who "always gave us good advice."



Leo Dehon as a young traveler



The neighborhood of St. Sulpice.

Leo was a member of the local parish of St. Sulpice. He attended Mass regularly, became involved in the Vincent de Paul Society, and taught catechism to the children of the neighborhood. He was very serious about helping the poor in an area that "was crowded, old, dirty, and glutted with moral and physical miseries" but he sometimes found it difficult when people resented that he was better off than they were. "Poverty here was hideous," he wrote. "I became particularly interested in two old men who lived in a small attic that had nothing in it. In their miserable room, I could not even stand up straight." Although he helped them as best he could, he recalls that they were an inspiration to him.

Every two weeks, the parish gathered between two and three hundred children for catechism classes. One of the attractions might have been

that each meeting ended with a raffle. Leo remembers, "I became one of the catechists. It was here that I first spoke in public. I had more good will than talent."

He also joined a club called the Catholic Circle. As a member of this group he enjoyed spending time with friends, but also learning about literature and law, and reading newspapers and magazines. In his free time, he took lessons in piano and painting. "I devoted quite a bit of time to these arts" he admitted, "but without much profit."

During the break following his second year in law school, Leo and his cousin spent three months in London learning English. Living with a local family gave him the opportunity for constant practice. By the time he returned to Paris he was able to say, "I could carry on a conversation without revealing my foreign accent too much."

Successfully passing the necessary examinations, Leo received his first degree in law. He would continue studying until he obtained a doctoral degree. His third year in law school "hardly differed from the preceding one," he wrote. "I followed the law courses until April and then returned to England for the summer."

Leo planned to continue practicing his English and begin writing a major paper for his next degree in law, but his plans changed when he met Leo Palustre, who was planning on travelling throughout England, Scotland, and Ireland. It didn't take much convincing for Leo and his cousin to join the adventure. Because of his ability to speak English, Leo Dehon was the guide and treasurer of the trip. This was the beginning of a life-long friendship with Leo Palustre, who, noted Dehon, "exerted a great influence on my life for many years, especially by giving me a taste for travel and a love for fine arts."

Dehon knew the history of Ireland, including hundreds of years of religious persecution by the English and a recent famine that left a million people dead and two million people fleeing to other countries. Knowing facts and experiencing them, however, are not the same. "Although our visit through Ireland was rapid, we were able to notice the extreme misery of the people. The Irish are poor families living in thatched cottages of only one room and no furniture, a common bed for all. They eat potatoes which they plant in a nearby field. Such misery is repugnant. Is not such an oppression of a people one of the

great crimes in the history of nations? Despite her miserable conditions, Ireland has remained attached to the Catholic faith. She had given to the Church many Catholics in the United States and Australia."



In Ireland, Dehon saw great poverty.

After this three month trip, Leo returned to Paris, finished writing his paper called a "thesis," and received a second degree in Law. "I defended my thesis successfully. I was only 19 years old. I was highly praised and complimented—not without some obstacles to humility."

During his fourth year of studying law, Leo worked some hours every day in an attorney's office. "I managed to pass my two examinations for the doctorate during this year. That seldom happens." Because he was succeeding so well, his fa-

ther gave consent for another trip with Leo Palustre, this time to Germany and Scandinavia. "I made this voyage as a serious tourist and a zealous student. I acquired a certain knowledge of the German language, imperfect and rather miserable. I returned with a multitude of historical and archeological bits of knowledge."

After five years of school work, he admitted, "I no longer had any taste for the study of law. I was eager to finish with it. My thesis for the doctorate absorbed me. When I defended my thesis, I was refused. This failure did not disturb me. My family did not know about this. I went to see the vice-rector and he allowed me to present myself again one month later. I successfully defended my thesis and all was over. I was a doctor. This was an important stage in my life. I had promised my father that I would go this far. I could now hope that he would allow me to pursue my vocation."



Leo Dehon the lawyer

Although his father was happy with his son's success in law, he was not ready to give permission for Leo to begin studying for the priesthood. Leo Palustre, who was visiting Leo for a few days, suggested a yearlong trip to the Middle East. Leo Dehon's father was more than willing to support this plan because he thought the worldly experience would finally change his son's desire to enter the seminary.

Yet the opposite happened. Many years later, Leo wrote, "It was to lead me to the seminary. I was filled with zeal and enthusiasm to visit so many places at leisure: the Black Forest, Switzerland, Italy, Dalmatia, the Ionian Isles, Greece, the Aegean Sea, Asia Minor, Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, Syria, the Bosphorus, the Black Sea, the Dardanelles, and Hungary. I was to see nature, ancient civilizations, and finally the two holy cities of Jerusalem and Rome."

The two friends travelled by train, horse and buggy, canoe, camels, donkeys, horseback, stagecoach, and steamer. They endured bothersome insects, an earthquake in Greece, windstorms, overflowing rivers, stifling heat, seasickness, sandstorms, and clouds of grasshoppers.

"The mountain passes in Greece are real death-traps," he wrote in his diary. "On one occasion, my horse tumbled into a ravine. I succeeded in dismounting just in time. Often during this journey, I escaped grave danger, thanks to divine Providence. As for me, I had braved all the dangers of a long trip with the casualness of a 20 year old."

In Egypt, the two friends visited a French diplomat, who provided them with an experience they would not forget. "The festivities lasted until late in the evening. We had to observe the formality of smoking the long-stemmed Turkish pipe. Musicians sang to the accompaniment of tambourine, bagpipe, and a kind of harp. A group of young dancers concluded the entertainment. While we ate, servants, who were motionless as statues, held up big lanterns. After the soup course, we were served fried turkey stuffed with rice, pumpkin, cold meats, pastry, fruit, nuts and this washed down with cham-



Dehon losing his horse on a mountain trail in Greece.



Visiting a French diplomat in Egypt.

pagne, crème de mocha, brandy, and two cups of coffee. We smoked the pipe again and had some more music. It was midnight when we took our leave.”

Traveling in the Holy Land, Leo noted, “The great days of Holy Week in Jerusalem are more moving than one can express. You follow all the stages of the Passion and the Resurrection. At every hour of the day, you contemplate the sacred mysteries and can say it happened here, this is where Jesus gave us the sign of his love; this is where he suffered, where he shed his blood. I received deep impressions which have always helped me in my meditations.”

In Rome, the last portion of the trip, Leo was able to meet with Pope Pius IX. “I spoke to him about my pilgrimage to the Holy Land, my vocation, and my indecision as to where I should make my studies. He advised the French Seminary in Rome. I had completed in Rome what I had wanted to do.” Through all his travels he learned that his dream was as strong as ever. With confidence, he could say, “My vocation was settled; it was the crowning of my voyage.”

Leo’s mother was relieved to have him back home. She had worried that she would never see her son again. Unfortunately, her joy did not last long. “My mother, upon whom I had completely relied, abandoned me altogether. The priesthood scared her. She thought I would no longer belong to the family and that I was lost to her.” His father simply could not understand his son’s desire to study for the priesthood.

Although Leo’s grandmother advised, “He will be happy if that’s his vocation,” her wisdom could not resolve the conflict. “I had to become hard of heart to resist all the storms of opposition I experienced,” Leo recalled. “I told my parents that I was of age and expected to be free. It was finally agreed that I could leave, but tearful scenes occurred often.”



In Rome, concluding his travels



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CHAPTER THREE

What happens when you work hard and finally get what you want? After waiting for a long time, how do you feel as your dream comes true? When Leo Dehon arrived at St. Clare Seminary in Rome, after experiencing his parents' strong opposition to his dream of becoming a priest, he felt relief.

"At last I was in my right element," he wrote, "I was happy. The seminary was an old building, narrow and very high, with a dark and gloomy interior. Regardless, I was happy. The room was small and bare, the bed was hard, but I was happy." Yet reaching a dream always involves leaving something behind. When his friend Leo Palustre came to visit, they toured Rome together. But at their parting, Leo Dehon felt the sacrifice. "I had lost my freedom and Palustre visited southern Italy without me. It bothered me very much at the time."



St. Clare Seminary

In preparation for his study of theology, Leo spent his first year in Rome earning a doctoral degree in Philosophy. He was then ready to take the first formal step toward priesthood, which was the ceremony of tonsure. In this ceremony, a bishop cuts off a little of a seminarian's hair to symbolize his total dedication to God. From this point on, the seminarian wears the cassock as another sign of his commitment. Leo's father, however, did not want his son to wear the cassock when he came home for vacation. To please his father, Leo did not receive tonsure with his classmates even though it "had been a great sacrifice for me."



Dehon as a seminarian.

Returning to Rome for his second year, Leo began his study of theology. In December of this year, he received tonsure as well as four additional steps toward priesthood called the "Minor Orders" of Porter [or doorkeeper], Lector, Acolyte, and Exorcist. The following December Leo received the Order of Sub-Diaconate. Today, when a man prepares to become a priest, he is first admitted as a Candidate for priesthood and then receives the ministries of Lector and Acolyte. Tonsure, Porter, Exorcist, and Sub-Diaconate are no longer steps toward the priesthood and lay people share in the Ministries of Lector and Acolyte.

In addition to theology, Leo also studied Church Law. Privately, he read books on economics. In his free time, along with other seminarians, he

taught catechism to children in a local parish. Remembering his experience of teaching catechism in Paris, he and his fellow seminarians “held periodic contests, organized feasts, and gave rewards to the children.”

Leo considered his third year of study in Rome to be “one of the best of my life.” He felt that Jesus was helping him, step by step, to grow closer to his divine Heart. Leo prayed he would do only what Jesus wanted him to do. The future was beyond his reach. “Right now,” Leo wrote in his diary, “all that God asks of me is to be the best student I can be.” He wanted to be holy and realized that this could happen if he did ordinary things with great love for God. At the end of this school year, Leo took the last step before priesthood and was ordained a Deacon.

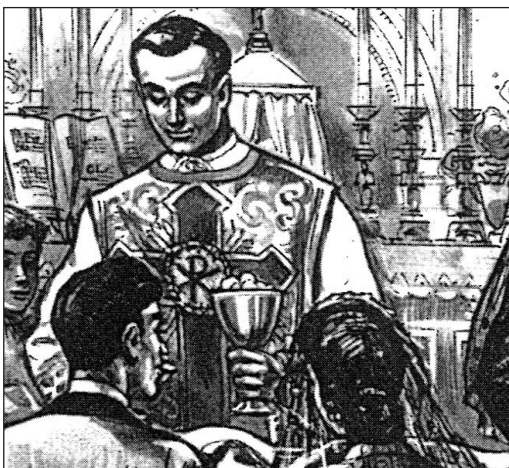
Leo spent his summer vacation with his parents in La Capelle. During this time he convinced his parents to visit Rome. They left home in late October and planned to stay in Rome through February. Leo pursued his fourth year of study, but in his free time he showed his parents the sights of the city, particularly the religious ones. When he was unable to be with his parents, Leo asked a French priest, who was a good friend, to be with them. Gradually, Leo’s father was getting used to the idea of his son as a priest.

Although Leo was not scheduled to be ordained a priest until the following June, his spiritual director thought that it would be good for his parents to be present at the ceremony. In a private meeting with Pope Pius IX, Leo’s father asked if his son could be ordained a few months earlier. The Pope granted his request and Leo was ordained on December 19, 1868.

Recalling that special day, Leo wrote, “My good parents were behind me weeping. My father could not eat that day. After the ordination ceremonies, my mother knelt at my feet to receive my first blessing. It was too much; I burst into tears. My father was completely won over. He promised to receive Holy Communion the next day at my First Mass at the seminary.”

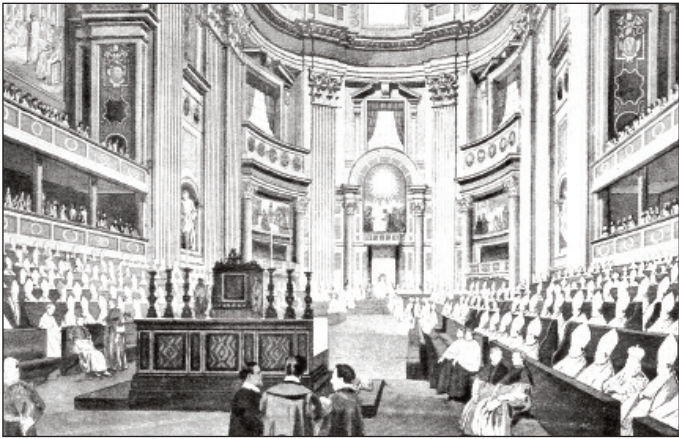
In July of the following year, Leo was at home to celebrate a First Mass at the parish church where he was baptized. “The feast was very beautiful and touching. My family and parishioners were moved as

much as I was. I believe there was an increase of faith in souls that day.” While on vacation, Leo helped at local parishes and heard confessions. “I can hardly describe the impressions I felt when I gave my first absolutions. I felt the effects of grace in all their intensity.”



Fr. Dehon's First Mass in Rome.

His fifth year of study provided the opportunity of a lifetime. The Pope invited bishops from all over the world for a meeting. This was called Vatican Council I. Perhaps you have heard of a similar type of meeting held in the 1960s, called Vatican Council II. Since electronic recording devices had not yet been invented, secretaries, called stenographers, had to write out by hand all of the discussions and decisions of Vatican I. Leo was one of the twenty-three



Opening of the First Vatican Council.

seminarians selected to be stenographers.

Leo met many interesting people and expanded his limited vision of the Church. Reflecting back, Leo notes, “The Council had taken up half of my time that year. This caused some delay in my studies, but on the other hand I reaped a precious harvest of various kinds of knowledge. I was able to feel at my fingertips the very life of the Church, and I acquired more experience in one year than I could have in ten ordinary years of life.”

This was an exciting time for Leo, but also a sad one. In July 1870, his beloved France, relying on misinformation, declared war with Prussia. Fr. Dehon returned to his hometown where he served as a chaplain to soldiers. Regarding the military conflict, he wrote, “The war lasted six months. It was like a long and terrible nightmare filled with anguish and suffering.” In September 1870, Italy invaded the territory governed by the Pope and captured Rome. A month later, the Pope was forced to suspend Vatican Council I.

After the Franco-Prussian War ended and when the situation in Rome seemed safe, Fr. Dehon returned to Rome in March “for a short year of studies.” On his way back, however, he stopped to visit with two priests whom he met during the Vatican Council. These priests were members of a religious community and wanted to establish in France a Catholic University of advanced studies for priests. Because Fr. Dehon thought that his vocation “was perhaps to enter a religious community dedicated to study and education,” he considered joining them. Over the next few months, the two priests kept encouraging Dehon to do so.

For the moment, however, Dehon had to stay focused on his studies that “were coming to an end.” Without difficulty, he passed his final examinations. The evaluation of Leo Dehon in the records of St. Clare’s Seminary states, “Character: excellent. Aptitude: very good. Piety and sense of duty: perfect. His success in studies has been very remarkable. In all respects he is one of our best students. Everything makes him well loved here. He gives great promise for the future.”

Leo wrote to his parents telling them, “I had obtained my doctor’s degree in Theology and in Church Law. Another stage in my life was over.” But now what? Should he place himself at the service of his Bishop or should he join the religious community? He made a retreat to help him decide, but the outcome was not clear. “I de-



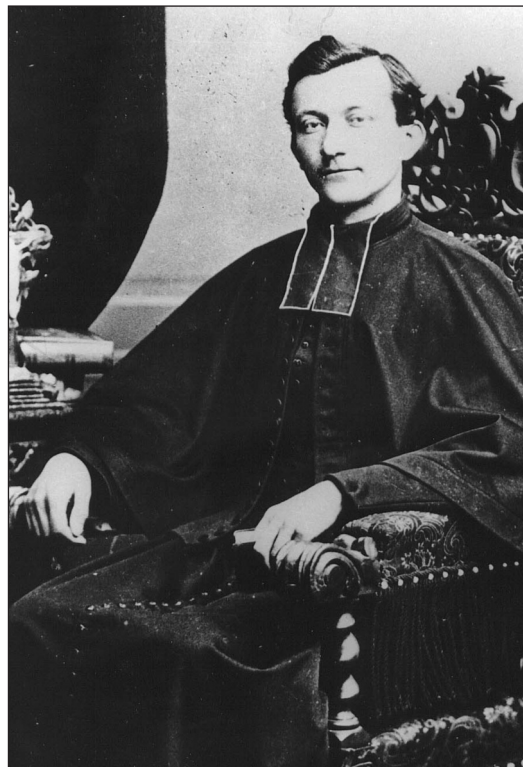
Dehon, second from left, with other stenographers who served at the First Vatican Council.

cided to join the religious community, but had misgivings and objections.”

Fr. Dehon returned home to La Capelle but took a few days to visit the Catholic University in Louvain, Belgium. The well-organized university impressed him, but made him wonder how easy it would be to begin an institution like this in France. To complicate things, he received an offer to teach at another university, which was being planned elsewhere in France. Dehon grew more uncomfortable thinking about this. Finally, he asked his Bishop for an assignment in his diocese.

He received a letter that said, “The Bishop has assigned you to the parish of St. Quentin. Personally, I am happy to inform you of this decision. Be so kind as to place yourself as soon as you can at the service of the pastor and bring him the help of your knowledge and your piety.” This meant that Fr. Dehon would be the seventh and youngest priest in a huge parish of mostly factory workers. The thought took his breath away. “This assignment was absolutely contrary to what I had desired for so many years—a life of recollection and study.”

As a seminarian, Leo Dehon prayed to do only what Jesus wanted him to do. At this moment, however, God’s plans did not seem to match Fr. Dehon’s dream for his priesthood. With great faith he responded, “Fiat,” a Latin word that translates Mary’s response, “Let it be done,” to the surprising message she received from the angel Gabriel. [*You can read this story in Luke 1:26-38 and Mary’s full response: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word!”*] Throughout the rest of his life, when his plans or dreams did not work out as he intended, Fr. Dehon always replied, “Fiat.” Very slowly he would learn that God’s dreams for him were bigger and better than he could imagine.



Fr. Dehon, a parish priest in St. Quentin, France.



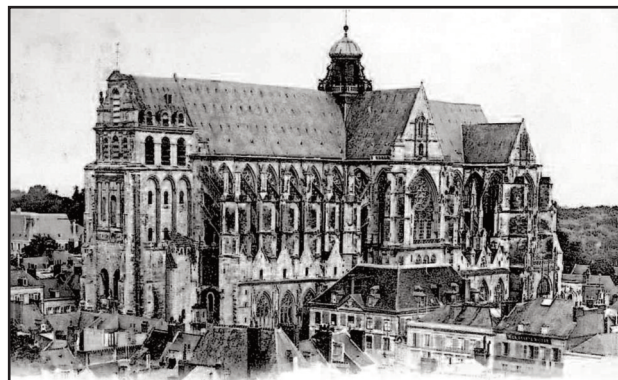
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CHAPTER FOUR

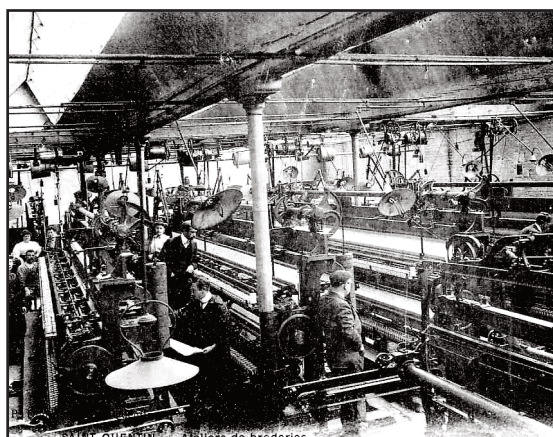
Do you know how many members belong to your parish church? The church of St. Quentin, in northeastern France, where Fr. Dehon began his ministry as a priest, had 30,000 parishioners! Even with seven priests working at this church, all the visits to the sick and the many funerals took up a lot of time. As Fr. Dehon wrote, “Unfortunately, all the rest of the town rarely sees a priest, if at all. When the funerals are over, the day is almost done; and the unfortunate priest gets home dead-tired.”



The Basilica of St. Quentin

The pastor of this large parish introduced Fr. Dehon to the leaders of this city, including the mayor. But because Fr. Dehon believed that “the shepherd must know his sheep,” he asked the members of the local St. Vincent de Paul Society to help him understand the lives of the rest of the people, especially factory workers.

He learned that most of these workers came from the countryside, attracted to the city by the promise of work, even if the wages were low. The only housing they could find was outside the city in what we would call slums. Six days a week, and often, in unhealthy conditions, men, women, and children worked between ten and twelve hours. Added to this was the time it took to walk to and from the factory. Exhausted and discouraged, very few factory workers went to church.



Factory in St. Quentin

In his strong desire to correct this sad reality, Fr. Dehon preached a Christmas sermon that was not what the pastor or the parishioners expected. In a forceful tone that Fr. Dehon later regretted, he accused factory owners of “exploiting the worker, often without giving him a sufficient share in the profits of his sweat.” But he also found fault with the worker, who disrespects his employer and the law by wanting “to obtain justice by force and seize the fortune of his masters by social revolution.” He explained that the birth of Christ has come to heal these wounds. “Christ is the light that the world needs.”



Boys playing at St. Joseph's Youth Center

Convinced that the Church must be involved in correcting the social injustices of the day, Fr. Dehon very quickly made plans. "For the good of the ministry in St. Quentin," he wrote, "we are badly in need of a Catholic high school, a youth center, and a Catholic newspaper." Although it would seem that these projects have nothing to do with the struggles of factory workers, Dehon believed they were the first steps in addressing their concerns. It would take some time, but Fr. Dehon initiated all three.

Besides the work shared by all the priests at St. Quentin, the pastor gave Dehon the particular responsibility of teaching catechism to the primary grade students in the

public schools. In the first year at the parish, Fr. Dehon prepared about 100 boys for their First Communion. He soon realized, however, that this instruction was not helping very much to prepare these boys for their future.

He wanted to create a place where young boys and teenagers could gather outside of school or work for fun and for learning practical skills. At first, Fr. Dehon invited a few boys to join him in his office on Sunday afternoons. Soon, the pastor rented a building and Fr. Dehon established St. Joseph's Youth Center.

Eventually, Fr. Dehon himself bought property and built a youth center that had recreation rooms, classrooms, a gym, a library, a bank in which to deposit savings, and a chapel. It even sponsored a band and a choir. As the youth center grew, it provided an employment agency as well as lodging for young workers. Soon, over 500 young men were coming to St. Joseph's Youth Center.



Fr. Dehon learns the needs of factory workers.

Fr. Dehon clearly understood, however, that all the activity at the youth center would be wasted if the situation in the factories didn't change. He warned employers, "You tear down, during those long dark nights of six workdays, what we so laboriously build up on these blessed Sundays. You do not behave as Christians should in dealing with the workers."

To address this problem, he organized a Workers' Union at the youth center to help the young men understand their rights and duties as laborers. He wanted to help them fight for a living wage and healthy working conditions. But he met regularly as well with those factory owners who were willing to consider their responsibilities to workers. He also set up a study club for young men who were planning to become employers in the future. Fr. Dehon

wanted everyone to know that the Church was interested in the needs of the workers. This was one of the reasons he published a local Catholic newspaper.

In Fr. Dehon's day, most priests gave all their attention to children, the elderly, the sick, and the poor because they believed hardly anything could be done for the men and women working in factories. Dehon could not understand these priests, who "distort the true Christ when they depict him as a timid apostle to children and the sick."

To help priests and everyone else appreciate that being a Christian was not just about going to church, but also about improving people's lives, he convinced his bishop to establish a Diocesan Office of Social Concerns. The bishop appointed Fr. Dehon to lead this Office. In order to gather needed information, Dehon asked every priest in the diocese to answer a list of questions about parish activities.

Although it was not a surprise, the answers saddened Fr. Dehon. In most parishes, there was little concern for workers and in many cases, the factory workers believed that the Church was not interested in them and that practicing their religion was not important. In fact, this was true all over France. This situation only made Fr. Dehon more determined to get priests involved in social issues.

At a meeting of priests, Fr. Dehon not only reported on all the answers he received, but also suggested that each parish start groups for young people and workers. The Diocesan Office of Social Concerns became a place where priests could share resources, experiences, and make contact with other like-minded ministers.

Fr. Dehon wrote, "The Diocesan Office carried on a lot of activity until 1878. During those five years I kept up a fairly sizeable correspondence and saw to the printing and distribution of various documents and reports. I initiated and organized large conventions in three cities." The theme of one of these conventions was, "Christianize the factory," which encouraged factory owners to pay just salaries and provide for the health and safety of their workers. If this happened, then workers would have time to spend with their families, they would have money to save for their future, and they would have opportunities to practice their faith. These conventions also suggested that as part of their preparation for priesthood, seminarians should study social issues.

In all of this activity, Dehon sought the help of laity. From the financial support of donors and the work of volunteers at the youth club, to the promotion of social action on local, regional, and national levels, he praised the Catholic laity "because they have worked with so much zeal, consistency, and self-sacrifice that they deserve all our praise."

Fr. Dehon truly wanted to be able to say the same thing about his fellow priests, but generally found the clergy in France to be lacking in the needed intellec-



Fr. Dehon meets with members of the Office of Social Concerns

tual and spiritual qualifications for their ministry. “I wanted to do something for the clergy,” he wrote, “because if they are holy, they are the best apostles.” In addition to all his other work, he interested five priests in forming a support group that would meet once a month to pray, share, and encourage each other to be the finest and holiest priests that they could be. By attending to their personal and spiritual lives, this group hoped to set an example for all the priests in the diocese.

For a time, this small gathering of priests answered Fr. Dehon’s desire to live with other like-minded ministers and stay focused on his spiritual values. Indeed, because of his love for God, he was doing good and necessary work, but he felt something valuable gradually slipping away. “My present busy life is too intense for me,” he admitted. “The work is becoming too much for me to handle. I can no longer find time for solitude.” He was not afraid of work, but wanted to balance it with a regular practice of prayer.

He often thought that joining a religious Congregation might help him keep that balance. Yet, he did not want to break the commitments he had already made. “I threw myself entirely into the work at St. Quentin,” he wrote, “work which tied me down more and more as time went on, so that it became harder and harder to escape.” He had already accomplished two of his goals—a youth center and a Catholic newspaper. He had yet to organize a Catholic high school. Although that would mean even more work, it would prove to be the first ministry of a religious Congregation called, “The Priests of the Sacred Heart.”



Fr. Dehon as the seventh assistant priest at St. Quentin Parish



WHO IS Leo John Dehon?

lawyer... writer... son...
teacher... friend... explorer...
founder... activist...
Priest of the Sacred Heart

CHAPTER FIVE

How difficult do you think it is to start a Catholic school? Of course there has to be a need; there have to be enough students who would attend the school. Then there has to be a building to house the school, good teachers, and enough money to keep it all going. If these were not enough challenges, Fr. Dehon also had to deal with a resistant French government.

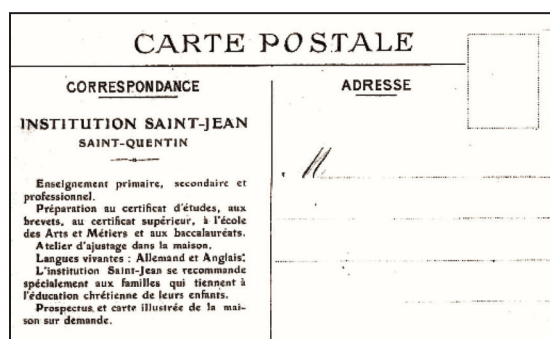
The Third French Republic, formed in 1870, struggled to gain power over those who preferred having a king. By 1875, there was a president and a parliament, which gradually weakened the influence of the Catholic Church that still supported having a king. Among other policies, the anti-Catholic government favored public schools over private, Catholic schools. Just three years after Fr. Dehon began his school, the French government did not allow religion to be taught in public schools, and members of religious communities could not teach in them.

So when Fr. Dehon began his school in 1877, not everyone supported his efforts. His bishop, however, wanted a Catholic school in his diocese and this project was the first ministry of a new religious community, which Dehon founded, known as the Priests of the Sacred Heart.

With great faith and only 500 francs, Fr. Dehon rented and eventually bought a house that already had been used as a private school. He added onto the house, and bought additional land nearby to build a chapel and meeting rooms. All this cost 25,000 francs! He named this new Catholic school, “St. John Institute,” because John was the well-beloved disciple who was close to Jesus’ Heart. The symbol of the school, like that of St. John, was the eagle.

Before the school year began, Fr. Dehon gave a speech on Christian education. He spoke about his responsibility to parents and society in training their children “whom God loves so much and wishes to see treated with utmost respect.” Father Dehon intended not only to teach the regular school subjects,

but also to form Christians as “persons of heart, of sacrifice, and of commitment.” Whatever the students would eventually do in life, Fr. Dehon believed they must always be “the living image of Jesus Christ. Such is the purpose of Christian education,” he concluded, “such is our purpose.”



Postcard advertising the new school

This type of education was important for Fr. Dehon because he believed it could help address and solve the social problems of the day. Dehon wanted to train future

leaders, thinkers, and factory owners, who would put into practice the principles of Christian justice and charity.

To advertise the new school, he sent out a post card. It explained that St. John Institute offered junior high school education as well as training for job skills, like carpentry and home repair. The school also taught English and German. “St. John Institute,” the postcard stated, “is especially recommended for families who value Christian education for their children.”

Although some of the students lived nearby, most came from a distance and lived at the school. All the classes and other activities focused on helping each student do his very best. The classes were divided into teams who competed against one another for the highest grades. Once a week, the principal announced who was ahead. Students who were first for four weeks in a row could eat Sunday dinner at the teachers’ table. If this same student was first for five week in a row, Fr. Dehon took him to the rectory to have dinner with the parish priests.

Monthly and quarterly exams took place on Saturdays. On this day, students also took part in contests that proved their ability to memorize a famous poem or speech. The school published a weekly newsletter called, *St. John’s Eagle*, which listed the names of all the winners in school work and printed the best of the student’s written assignments. Parents read this newsletter with much interest because they expected to see their son’s name in print.



St. Leo Festival poster

In addition to the school activities, there were also daily religious practices. Each morning began with a short, spiritual talk followed by the celebration of the Mass. Before dinner there was another short, spiritual talk. Once a week, the students went to Confession and received Communion. The school supported two religious organizations that students could join if they wished. One was dedicated to Mary and the other was the St. Vincent de Paul Society, whose members visited and helped people in need.

150 years ago, schools were different from today, but St. John Institute was not all work and seriousness. There were special days set aside for fun. On the feast day of St. John [December 27], and on other special days, the students put on plays, and there was always music and singing.

The biggest celebration took place on Fr. Dehon's name's day, the Feast of St. Leo [April 11]. Teachers and students took the train to spend the whole day away from the city. The newsletter, *St. John's Eagle*, published a special edition to describe the fun. Fr. Dehon remembers, "Our young teachers brainstormed heaven and earth to make the day interesting. Mr. Godet let us borrow a large field where the boys found a merry-go-round and every imaginable fairground game. There was a big meal with wine and we returned home very late. It helped to create a family spirit."



St. John Institute

One year, the poster announcing the celebration of the Feast of St. Leo, complete with students' drawings, notes that everyone was on the train by 6:00 AM. After the boys went sightseeing in the morning, the afternoon was filled with games and entertainment. The students enjoyed rifle shooting, stilt races, sack races, and one-foot races. They could ride in a balloon and on the merry-go-round. They listened to a drum and trumpet band and took turns breaking open a piñata. They only began their hour-long trip back to school at 8:00 in the evening.

One celebration, however, did not end very happily. While watching a play in celebration of the Feast of St. John, at the end of December 1881, a fire broke out in the school. One of the teachers had left a strong fire burning in the heating stove in his room on the third floor of the new building. The fire spread to the floor, then to the furniture, and then to the roof. Because the fire trucks could not pump the water high enough, the fire destroyed the second and third floors.

Insurance on the building was not enough to cover the cost of repair. Although Fr. Dehon was very discouraged, he noted, "There was an extraordinary, if not miraculous fact. The entire second floor was burned except at the point where the statue of the Sacred Heart stood. The window panes in front of the statue remained in place."

With the decision to rebuild, classes began soon after on January 15 with an additional fifteen students. Everyone had to adapt while the builders repaired the damage. Fr. Dehon writes, again with amazement, "Reconstruction work lasted until Easter and during all this time it never snowed or rained."

Even with this setback, Fr. Dehon could write about the first years at St. John Institute, saying, "They were especially beautiful years, full of activities, prosperous, joyful, and fruitful for the Christian formation of youth." St. John Institute attracted students from the public and private schools in the area, and the school continued to grow.

At the center of the school was Fr. Dehon, himself. One of his former students said, "While Fr. Dehon was in charge, the school progressed very well. This was the high point of St. John's. The Institution enjoyed an excellent reputation among the families, not only at St. Quentin but also in a

large area outside the town, and even in Paris.”

Fr. Dehon was a tall and thin man, who wore glasses. People’s first impression was of a very serious and strict man. It didn’t take long, however, especially for young people, to realize that he was much more than that. “He knew how to charm and win hearts,” a priest recalled. “Above all young people felt drawn to him. They felt that he loved them. Until his death he was called, ‘Very Good Father’.”

One of his former students wrote, “What we loved was to see him mixing among us and finding out about our lives in a familiar way. We loved to talk with him. He put himself on our level and was interested in all the boys.” Another man recalled, “He was a good Father for the students and was much loved by them, in spite of his strictness. He was spontaneous, lively, teasing, affectionate, above all with young people.”



Fr. Dehon, the “unforgettable educator.”

“I have a particular affection for him, another former student wrote, “because, although strict, he was good and just.” Other remembrances confirm this image. “He was firm without being rough.” “He was loved by everyone.” “Nobody was afraid to approach him.” “We still miss him a little.”

When a reporter interviewed former students, who had attended St. John Institute during the time when Fr. Dehon was directing it, he noted, “It is moving to hear them speak about Fr. Dehon. Certainly they also remember other professors they had at St. John’s, but Fr. Dehon is someone special and above them all. They cannot compare him to any other person. They are all unanimous in saying that it is to Fr. Dehon that they owe the best of their Christian formation, that it is thanks to him that they have remained Christians through life.”

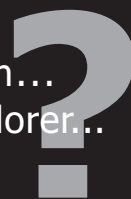
Over the years, this “unforgettable educator” spent eight hundred thousand francs of his own money on St. John Institute. It was a sacrifice that he willingly offered to God in order to help create a just and loving world. There would be many more sacrifices for Fr. Dehon as the Priests of the Sacred Heart grew into an international religious community.



WHO IS

Leo John Dehon

lawyer... writer... son...
teacher... friend... explorer...
founder... activist...
Priest of the Sacred Heart



CHAPTER SIX

Do you ever get an idea in your head that just won't go away? Maybe it's something you would like to have or something you would like to do. It might seem impossible, but you keep dreaming about it anyway. You find ways to work toward your goal and sometimes you find other people who will help you.

Fr. Leo Dehon had lots of ideas and he was never afraid to try to put them into action. One idea seemed more important than all the rest, but he struggled to make it happen. Fr. Dehon dreamed of being a member of a religious community of men, who supported each other not only in their work, but also in their relationship with God.

He looked for a religious community dedicated to the Heart of Jesus. For Fr. Dehon, this meant daily being reminded of God's unconditional love for people and finding ways to love God in return. Loving God, he knew, meant loving God's people and helping them with their needs. In 19th century France, social reform was needed to address the abuse of factory workers, political involvement was needed to limit the influence of an anti-Catholic government, and spiritual renewal was needed to help people practice their faith.



Fr. Dehon as a young, parish priest

Fr. Dehon couldn't find what he was looking for, but the idea wouldn't go away. He wrote in his diary, "Finally, I began to wonder whether it might not be the plan of Providence that I should start something on my own." But what would that "something" look like? In 1877, Fr. Dehon traveled with his Bishop for a meeting with the Pope in Rome. On their way, they stayed overnight in several cities and did some sightseeing.

In the city of Loreto, Italy, they celebrated Mass in the Holy House, which pious legend says angels moved from Galilee to Loreto in 1294. In this house, Mary was born and received the angel Gabriel's message that she would become the mother of Jesus. [*You can read this story in Luke 1:26-38.*]

While praying in the Holy House, Fr. Dehon experienced a special grace. He noticed the words carved in stone above the altar, "Here, the Word was made flesh" [*see John 1:14*]. That God, in the person of Jesus, decided to become a human being is called the mystery of the Incarnation. Fr. Dehon received an insight into how this mystery came about and he wanted to be a part of it.

For Fr. Dehon, the Incarnation involves the meeting of two oblations. The word, "oblation" means "of-



Fr. Leo Dehon speaks with his bishop

fering.” Jesus offers himself to God, the Father, saying, “Behold, I come to do your will” [see *Hebrews 10:7*]. Jesus becomes human so that he can tell us about God and help us be God’s faithful sons and daughters.

When the angel Gabriel asks Mary if she is willing to be the mother of Jesus, she offers herself to God by saying, “Behold, the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word” [see *Luke 1:38*]. Fr. Dehon felt a call to make the same generous offering of himself that Jesus and Mary made. Many years later, he wrote, “Here [in the Holy House], the Congregation was born in 1877.”

With the permission of his Bishop, Fr. Dehon made preparations for a new religious Congregation that he named, “Oblates of the Heart of Jesus.” The spirit of oblation explained how he wanted to live. Speaking to God, he says, “Behold me ready to do, to undertake, to suffer what you wish, and to sacrifice whatever you ask of me.” He made his first public commitment on June 28, 1878, the Feast of the Heart of Jesus. He took the religious name, “John of the Heart of Jesus,” wishing to become a beloved disciple like John the Apostle.

On that same day, a priest joined him. Another early member was a former soldier and tax collector. Soon, others joined. In addition, a group of Sisters, called Servants of the Heart of Jesus, supported Fr. Leo John Dehon in many ways. Sharing the same devotion to the Heart of Jesus, they encouraged this new work with their prayers. They also donated a house in which the new religious community could live, and worked at the school and youth club that Fr. Dehon had established.

A lot of excitement and enthusiasm surrounds the beginning of something new, and these were the feelings of Fr. Dehon, those who joined him, and the Servants of the Heart of Jesus. Sometimes, however, people can get so enthusiastic that they exaggerate or make mistakes. This was true for the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus.

Fr. Dehon believed that he was doing God’s will, but in his desire to be sure, he looked to others to confirm his work. One of the Servants of the Heart of Jesus told Fr. Dehon that in her prayer, she understood that God was blessing him. She even passed on some advice that she heard in her prayer. It is common to get insights during prayer, but people started calling these insights “revelations,” which gave the idea that they were as important as the words of the Bible. Wisely, the Bishop asked Fr. Dehon to be careful how he talked about this.

A more serious problem arose when Fr. Dehon accepted into his community a priest who came from another religious community without a positive recommendation. Fr. Dehon was young, inexperienced, and trusted others too much. Because this priest had teaching degrees, Fr. Dehon put him in charge of a high school seminary.

In a position of authority, this priest began to make plans to expand the Oblates with many different

kinds of groups of men and women. Believing he was receiving revelations from the angels, he wrote instructions and prayers for these imaginary groups. Realizing the possible damage this would cause, Fr. Dehon wrote to him, saying, "Please distrust your own judgment and be obedient. For more than a year now, you have let yourself be misled by mere imaginations." But it was too late.

All of this was reported to the highest Church authorities in Rome. After reviewing all the facts, Fr. Dehon received a judgment on December 8, 1883. Neither the prayerful insights of the Sister nor the writings of the priest may be considered as revealed by God. In addition, the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus can no longer exist.

Fr. Dehon considered this harsh judgement to be the end of his dream. "God knows how much I suffered in those terrible days." Since he always wanted to follow God's will, he wrote to his Bishop, saying, "The Master asks me now to destroy what he has asked me to build. I have not the slightest wish to resist. That would be foolish. What torments me most is this thought: the Master willed this work and through my fault it has failed."



Fr. Leo John Dehon accepts a painful judgment

The Bishop, who knew that Fr. Dehon had acted in good faith, went to Rome to ask the Church authorities if anything else could be done. In reply, the Church authorities told the Bishop that he could form a new community, with the same people, but under a new name. This is how the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus became the Priests of the Heart of Jesus.



Fr. Rasset and Fr. Charcosset walk through the streets of St. Quentin

In spite of these difficulties, the community continued to grow. Many of the first members were teachers at St. John's Institute, but others were involved in different kinds of ministry. Two priests, dressed in their cassocks, simply walked through the city's neighborhoods. Because of the anti-Catholic French government, priests usually stayed near their churches. The sight of these two priests was so strange that people laughed at them. After a while, however, people began to greet them with respect. The "Church" was coming to them!

In another interesting ministry, two priests worked as chaplains in a large industrial factory. The owner of the factory was a faithful Catholic, who insisted on treating his workers justly. He made sure they received a fair wage, health care, educational opportunities, and spiritual support.

The Bishop asked Fr. Dehon and his community members to preach and lead retreats in the local parishes. Three Priests of the Heart of Jesus worked in a school for persons who were deaf. Others staffed the local parishes of St. Eligius and St. Martin. Whatever their ministry, many members continued to support factory workers and their struggle for social justice.

Four years after the Oblates became the Priests of the Heart of Jesus, Pope Leo XIII acknowledged their growth with an official letter of approval called the *Decree of Praise*. The letter praised the purpose of this new congregation and all the good work it was doing. Although very pleased, Fr. Dehon wrote in his diary, “This is more praise and encouragement than we deserve.”

Fr. Dehon traveled to Rome to thank the Pope personally for this affirmation. The Pope talked about many things in this private meeting, but what most inspired Fr. Dehon was the request to, “Preach my encyclicals.” An encyclical is another kind of letter in which the Pope addresses the urgent needs of the day. Specifically, the Pope had been writing on contemporary issues of employment, the economy, and the need to protect the rights of workers.

Fr. Leo John Dehon took to heart this request, which would determine the direction of his work for social justice during the next fifteen years.



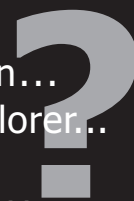
Fr. Leo John Dehon speaks with Pope Leo XIII



WHO IS

Leo John Dehon

lawyer... writer... son...
teacher... friend... explorer...
founder... activist...
Priest of the Sacred Heart



CHAPTER SEVEN

When you hear the word, “church,” what do you picture in your mind? How would you describe a “holy person?” What do you think God wants you do to with your life? These are important questions. Even after you answer them, you may want to ask again and see if you can add more to your response. Your answer will make a difference in your life and in the world.

Fr. Leo John Dehon asked himself these questions many times, particularly after he began his priestly ministry in the factory town of St. Quentin and then again, when he founded his religious Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart. Gradually, his experience taught him that “church” was more than a building, a “holy person” did more than pray, and that God most wanted him to proclaim God’s love through devotion to the Heart of Jesus and to promote Christian social action.



At first glance, devotion to the Heart of Jesus and Christian social action seem to be completely separate activities. In Dehon’s day, many priests and bishops saw no connection between them and even believed that the Church should not be involved in social issues. However, as the Industrial Revolution continued to create wealth for a few and poverty for many, Fr. Dehon looked for solutions that were inspired by God’s love symbolized in the Heart of Jesus.

In one of the many meditation books that Fr. Dehon composed, he imagined what Jesus wanted us to know, writing, “My Heart was filled with love for all, and when this love encountered misfortune, it became compassion: for mercy overflows when a very loving heart confronts overwhelming misery. This profound and active compassion was one of the underlying motives for my actions. This is why I came to earth.”

For Fr. Dehon, devotion to the Heart of Jesus involves recognizing and responding to God’s love. Yet, this devotion is not a private relationship between Jesus and an individual, but includes an awareness that a person can best respond to God’s love by loving as God loves. Treating others with love helps them experience God’s love in every part of their lives—within the family, at work, and in the larger society.

Fr. Dehon felt a calling to become one with the Heart of Jesus—to feel with his Heart and to act with his Heart—particularly to defend the underprivileged, who have a right to social justice. In the *Christian Social Manual*, a practical handbook he wrote for churches, Dehon said, “All people are deserving of respect and justice, and they have a basic right to enjoy, here on earth, the conditions which nourish their



A meeting of the Association of Christian Employers.

intellectual, moral, and spiritual life. They have a right to daily bread for themselves and their family. They have a right to humane treatment, to a sufficient degree of education and liberty, and to the opportunity to worship and serve God.”

And so, after Fr. Dehon received official approval for the Priests of the Sacred Heart, he once again focused his attention on bringing God’s compassion to people in need. Writing in his diary, Fr. Dehon expressed, “some joy in fighting in order to make our Lord rule in souls; in taking up and leading a campaign to establish the reign of love of the Sacred Heart. What is needed is to give oneself, to fight, to go to the people, and act as if everything depended upon us. Only then will God help us and act as only God knows how.”

Although it seems obvious to say that you cannot know the real issues in a person’s life without listening to him or seeing where she lives and works, this was not the Church’s usual practice in Fr. Dehon’s day. Certainly, most priests and bishops responded to the immediate needs of people who came to them, but usually they did not seek to understand the causes of people’s misfortunes.

By “going to the people,” Fr. Dehon visited them where they lived and worked. Being among them, he could understand their struggles and assist them in looking for solutions. Fr. Dehon found it helpful to form or join many different groups called “Unions,” “Associations,” “Circles,” and “Congresses.”

For example, the Workers’ Union was a group of people who shared the experience of working at the same job. Fr. Dehon helped these laborers understand their rights and duties so that they could demand a living wage and healthy working conditions. The Association of Christian Employers was a group of like-minded factory owners. Fr. Dehon wanted to challenge, but also support their efforts in creating industry policies based on Christian principles.

The Catholic Youth Circle was a group of young people who meet regularly with Fr. Dehon to study issues of social justice and take appropriate action to improve the quality of life. The Congress of the Workers Movements was one example of large regional gatherings of people who met yearly. They shared their successes and failures, learned new approaches, and supported each other’s continuing efforts to encourage much needed change in the unjust working environment created by the Industrial Revolution.

It was not unusual for Fr. Dehon to promote and participate in several regional Congresses each year. In a newspaper article, he wrote, “The reform of society requires multiple and persistent efforts. More than one instrument is necessary: prayer, study, action. We are not exempted from acting because the evil is great and our capabilities limited. Let us organize ourselves.”

Fr. Dehon spoke at several Congresses of the Third Order of St. Francis, a lay group that promised to live by the spirit of St. Francis. He challenged this group to commit themselves to more than a private prac-

tice of spirituality. "St. Francis," he proclaimed, "had the good of society in mind as well as the sanctification of souls." Explaining further, he said, "Purely private and personal Christianity is a false, or at least seriously incomplete Christianity. We must be social Christians who bring about the reign of Christ in social life as in private life; and the Third Order must assist in this."

For ten years, Fr. Dehon organized a Congress of Social Studies specifically for seminarians, who were open to learning about labor issues. The Congress took place at a textile factory, where the rights of workers were respected and where several Priests of the Sacred Heart served as chaplains. These Congresses were an onsite study of practical social initiatives.

Fr. Dehon explains why these meetings for seminarians were so important. "The priest must speak the language of his times and must not neglect the study of those grave problems which arouse the nation. The clergy will do holy work if it lovingly studies the problems of today in order to be in a position to meet the steadily growing needs of the people."

For several months in Rome, Fr. Dehon gave seven lectures, which he later published under the title, *Christian Social Renewal*. In these lectures, Dehon analyzed the social problems that began with the French Revolution and the economic problems that developed with the Industrial Revolution.

"Christ had been dismissed from political life and economic life," Dehon stated. "Christ wants to return with the reign of justice and charity. If we want Christ to reign, no one must surpass us in our love for the people. We must act. The remedy is in our hands."



A Congress of Social Studies for Seminarians. Fr. Dehon is seated in the front row, second from the left.

In addition to his involvement in Congresses and other types of meetings, Fr. Dehon also published a monthly magazine, entitled, *The Reign of the Sacred Heart in Individuals and in Societies*. In each issue, he reported on and analyzed important events in France and in the Church. He also composed meditations on the Heart of Jesus and articles on social issues.

At one point, this magazine had two thousand subscribers. “It was,” he explained, “the testing ground for my social studies before I published them in books.” Because some people did not like the emphasis on the “social reign of the Sacred Heart,” he lost some of the original subscribers. His intention, however, was clear from the beginning. “For us, devotion to the Heart of Jesus is a true renewal of all Christian life. This idea dominates all the efforts of our apostolate and is moreover the reason for this magazine’s existence.”



Fr. Dehon speaking at a Congress of Social Studies.

In 1912, Fr. Leo John Dehon wrote to the members of his religious community reflecting on his life of ministry. “Among the general works of the apostolate,” he noted, “I attempted two great undertakings. The first was to lead both priests and laity to the Heart of Jesus that they might offer him a daily expression of adoration and love.” He promoted this devotion through his magazine, *The Reign of the Sacred Heart in Individuals and in Societies*, the meditation books he composed, and a group of laity who associated themselves with the spirituality of the Priests of the Sacred Heart. “This apostolate needs to be continued, expanded, and intensified,” he wrote.

“I also wanted to better the conditions of the common people through the establishment of justice and Christian charity. I have spent a great part of my social writing on behalf of this cause. Pope Leo XIII was kind enough to consider me one of the faithful interpreters of his social instructions. But the work must continue in this area also. People are not yet convinced that the Church possesses real and practical solutions to all the social problems.”

Indeed, these “two great undertakings” would continue in the worldwide ministries of the Priests of the Sacred Heart.



WHO IS

Leo John Dehon

lawyer... writer... son...
teacher... friend... explorer...
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Priest of the Sacred Heart

CHAPTER EIGHT

Have you ever met someone from another country who was visiting the United States? Usually, people want to know what the visitor thinks of their country. It's fun and surprising to listen to the answer. Sometimes, however, it's also challenging because a visitor can see things—both good and bad—that citizens of the United States either take for granted or don't see at all.

Fr. Dehon had the opportunity to visit the United States and Canada in 1910. Because he kept a diary of his impressions throughout his travels, we have a good idea of what he thought of Americans. Even though his comments are over one hundred years old, most of them remain a good description of people who live, in what he called, "the American style."

Initially, Fr. Dehon planned to travel to Montreal, Canada, to attend the International Eucharistic Congress. This Congress brings together Catholics to celebrate their belief in the real presence of Jesus in the bread and wine of communion, and to explore how this belief influences the way they live their lives.

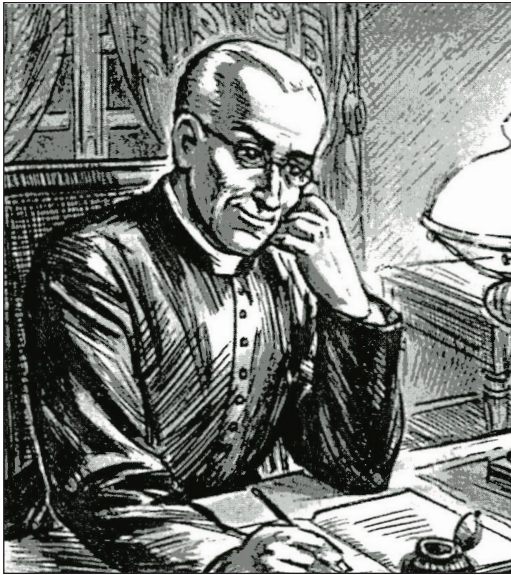
While in Canada, he also wanted to visit his missionaries, who had recently begun serving French-speaking Catholics in Alberta. Although the Priests of the Sacred Heart were not ministering in the United States, Fr. Dehon saw this trip as an opportunity to explore future possibilities. A bishop in Iowa

had offered him some property to build a school and children's home, so Fr. Dehon made a special trip to Dubuque. Nothing came of this offer, but by 1923, the Priests of the Sacred Heart began ministering among Native Americans in South Dakota.



Fr. Dehon's travels through North America.

From France, Fr. Dehon crossed the Atlantic by steamer ship and arrived in New York. Traveling down the East coast, he stopped in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington DC, and Atlanta. In Alabama, he toured the Tuskegee Institute. He visited New Orleans and headed north to St. Louis and Chicago. Then east to Detroit, Niagara Falls, Toronto, and



Fr. Dehon writing in his diary.

Montreal, where he attended the International Eucharistic Congress. After the Congress, he traveled to Quebec City, and then headed west to visit with his missionaries in Wainwright and Edmonton, Alberta. He continued on to Calgary and Vancouver and went south to Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Tijuana, Mexico. Returning to San Francisco, he boarded another steamer ship to visit counties in Asia.

His diary entry for August 19, 1910, reads, “We greet the Statue of Liberty, a true and sincere symbol at the entrance of a free country. As we are approaching New York, we can see the skyscrapers, the endless number of bridges and the immense mass of buildings. It is clearly the most astonishing city in the world, a city of giants.” After three days of touring the churches, parks, museums, and schools, he noted, “I had come with the notion that I would find nothing of interest, but now I must admit that no city has impressed me so much.”

To save time, Fr. Dehon did most of his traveling by train at night, “in a sleeping-car of the Pullman Company. During the day a rear car serves as a lounge, an observation deck, and a place to read and write. It’s like a hotel on wheels. They say that there is only one class of travelers in America, but the Pullman cars with all their extras provide a truly superior class. American democracy is not averse to the comforts and privileges of wealth.”

In Philadelphia, he visited Independence Hall. “This is where the Continental Congress met in 1774 and proclaimed independence on July 4, 1776. Each year Americans joyously celebrate this anniversary.” When it was time to leave, he returned to the train station and observed, “On a street corner, large sheets of newsprint announced the results of a baseball game which had been played on the other side of town. The crowd was curious and anxious. Americans are great fans of baseball, as Parisians are of races.”

While in Baltimore, he visited with Cardinal Gibbons, who many years before had attended the First Vatican Council at which Fr. Dehon served as a stenographer. They recalled their experiences of this great event for the Church. Of all the sites in Washington, DC, Fr. Dehon was most impressed with the Library of Congress. “These Americans,” he wrote, “whom we presume to be single-mindedly devoted to ‘business,’ spare no expense on their libraries.”

To his surprise, Americans always seemed to be in a hurry. “In every city you will find restaurants for busy people where they can eat a ‘quick lunch,’ a pre-prepared meal. They eat standing up or on high stools at a counter. They gulp down ‘today’s special’ and then go back to work.”

While traveling from Atlanta, Georgia, to Tuskegee, Alabama, where Booker T. Washington established a school for Blacks in 1881, Fr. Dehon witnessed a difficult truth about the United States. When changing trains for Tuskegee, he wrote, “There were two waiting rooms, one for Whites and one for Blacks. The small train that brought me had only two cars, one for Whites and one for people of color. The *Consti-*

tution proclaims equality, but customs dictate otherwise. The car for the Blacks was disgusting; half of the seats were torn and the horsehair was falling out of the cushions. America needs to raise the public self-esteem of the Blacks if they want them to become free citizens.”

Continuing his journey, Fr. Dehon visited New Orleans and St. Louis, two cities whose population was over half Catholic and still reflecting their French beginnings. He took note of the many religious Congregations of men and women, and the many ministries they undertook to address the education and social needs of the people.

“Chicago,” he wrote, “is not simply a great business center, as many think, it is also an intellectual and cultural center, as well as a lively hub of religious activity.” He toured the University of Chicago, the Art Museum, the Field Museum, the Public Library, and the stockyards. Of particular interest was the Catholic Church Extension Society, whose purpose is “to build churches and schools for the Catholic immigrants who are flocking to the United States.” It even had its own Pullman car “which serves as a chapel on wheels and it goes all throughout the country bringing missionaries to carry out their work.”

Fr. Dehon had already experienced enough of the United States to comment, “Read the signs and ads in the newspapers and you will see countless towns or businesses claiming to offer you ‘the best’ or ‘the greatest in the world.’ It might be a theater, a hotel, a store, or a circus. Modesty is not an American trait; but it must be said in all fairness, they really do have a lot of big things.”

From Detroit, Fr. Dehon did some sight-seeing at Niagara Falls, and then headed to Toronto on his way to Montreal. After attending the International Eucharistic Congress, he spent time in Quebec and Ottawa before heading west across the great plains.

In his diary, Fr. Dehon called Wainwright, Alberta, “home,” because that’s where two of his missionaries, Fathers Gaborit and Charpentier were renting a house. On Sundays, they said Mass in a grocery store. “Our priests have begun their work here in great simplicity,” Fr. Dehon writes. “They have no one to help them. One of them does the cooking; it’s not very fancy, just a milk soup, an omelet, and potatoes. It’s the same menu every day.”



Fr. Gaborit, first SCJ missionary in Canada.

Indeed, there was much work to do in this newly developing territory. “Our priests have not been satisfied with working in Wainwright. They have already formed committees in several other villages where they go to say Mass. They are going to establish parishes there.” His other two missionaries, Fathers Steinmetz and Soyez, were stationed in Edmonton, the capital of Alberta.

While traveling by train to Calgary, he could see some Indian reservations “where the people live lives of real poverty in their huts of bark with dry skins over the entrances.” Reflecting on the unjust treatment of Native Americans, Fr. Dehon observed, “The Anglo-Saxons have relentlessly hunted down the people who owned the land and gradually these tribes disappeared. They slaughtered them, and most of all, they swindled them. The Indians were granted their own territories and little by little these were taken back from them.

“They were pushed off the land and overwhelmed by the rising flood of immigration. Deprived of their

hunting grounds, confined to crowded reservations, tricked by businessmen, poisoned by the purveyors of alcohol, infected with diseases and vices by the merchants of progress, the Indians languish and are vanishing. In general, they were noble races. They walked straight and proud, they were strong, skilled as horsemen, and brave hunters.”

Spending only a day crossing the Rocky Mountains, Fr. Dehon writes, “My only regret was that we didn’t have a week to spend in this American Switzerland.” After touring Vancouver and Seattle, Fr. Dehon arrived in San Francisco, the land of palm trees and pomegranates. “In three days,” he noted, “we’ve gone from a Scandinavian climate to the Riviera.” Three American priests, who as seminarians studying overseas lived as guests of the Priests of the Sacred Heart in France, greeted Fr. Dehon and treated him to a four-day sightseeing tour in an automobile.



Fr. Dehon traveling in America.

As his trip to North America was ending, he still had time to visit Los Angeles, San Diego, and the Mexican town of Tijuana. He returned to San Francisco, and on the evening of October 6, 1910, he boarded a Japanese-American ship, which sailed out into the Pacific Ocean headed toward Asia.

Midway through his trip to Canada and the United States, Fr. Dehon sent a letter to a member of his community in France. “What beautiful ministries I have seen,” he wrote. “All religious orders prosper over here and they take on the American spirit of vitality. We should have an American Province later on.”

Years later, Fr. Dehon got his wish. The North American Province was established in 1934. Twenty-eight years later, this Province was divided into three: the United States Province, the Anglo-Canadian Vice-Province, and the French-Canadian Vice-Province.



WHO IS

Leo John Dehon

lawyer... writer... son...
teacher... friend... explorer...
founder... activist...
Priest of the Sacred Heart

CHAPTER NINE

How would you describe the way something grows—like a tree, a flower, a pet, or even yourself? What helps a tree, a flower, a pet, or yourself to grow? What happens when what is needed for growth is missing, even just for a short time? Growth is not always a smooth or easy process, but sometimes what looks like an obstacle turns out to be an opportunity. Sometimes, the difficulties that you experience help to make you grow stronger.

As Fr. Leo John Dehon encouraged the growth of his religious community, called the Priests of the Sacred Heart, he experienced many happy moments and many disappointments. It was not easy for him to see it at the time, but the events that negatively affected his Congregation eventually opened up new possibilities for growth. Slowly, the Priests of the Sacred Heart, who began as a small, local group, became a world-wide religious community.

Although Fr. Dehon wished that his religious community would serve the needs of his own country of France, the French government increasingly opposed the influence of the Catholic Church. In 1880, the government forced all religious communities of men that it did not approve to turn over their property to the government and leave the country. At the time, the Priests of the Sacred Heart were so small that the government did not notice them. However, to be safe, Fr. Dehon decided to establish new religious houses, first in Holland, and then in Belgium, Luxembourg, and Rome.

The Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart was only ten years old when Fr. Dehon received a request from a priest in Ecuador, who wished to merge his religious community with Dehon's. The proposal interested Fr. Dehon because it offered the chance to



SCJ missionaries traveling in Congo

do missionary work among the Indians of the Andes mountains. After sending two missionaries to Ecuador, Dehon learned that the plans had changed. Since there would be no merger, the missionaries worked for the local bishop for eight years until the anti-Catholic government forced the priests to leave.

As disappointing as this was, the two returning missionaries were soon headed to the Congo. This was a difficult mission because of the humid climate and tropical diseases. Fr. Dehon's counselors were opposed, saying, "We have neither men nor means." Dehon, however, was certain that this was God's work, replying, "God gives to founders the

graces he does not give to their counselors.” This mission succeeded and the Priests of the Sacred Heart minister in the Congo to this day.

Again, there was trouble with the French government, which in 1902, denied approval for any religious organization. This meant closing 135 schools and several thousands of religious institutions. The Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart was forbidden in France, but Fr. Dehon, remained to fight government plans to take possession of the religious community’s properties. As a civil lawyer, Fr. Dehon defended himself, saying, “I shall fight as long as possible, for the right of ownership, in order to show my fellow citizens what is prescribed exactly by the civil law.” Eventually, Fr. Dehon bought back two properties with his own money, which made him the personal owner. Since it was not church property, the government could not take it away from him.

Outside of France, the Priests of the Sacred Heart continued to grow steadily, with foundations in Brazil, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Italy, Spain, Cameroon, Sweden, Denmark, Canada, and Austria. By 1912, there were 450 members.

Then came the destruction of World War I. From 1914-1918, Fr. Dehon worried about his religious community and its members who were forced to serve in the French and German armies. Many would be killed. By the end of the war, 23 members of the Priests of the Sacred Heart from Germany and 10 from France lost their lives. Many buildings and ministries would be ruined. St. John’s High School was almost destroyed and other buildings heavily damaged. With so much debt, how would the religious community ever be able to rebuild after the war? Fr. Dehon answered his own worries by saying, “I must trust in our Lord’s generous guidance. He has taken care of me a thousand times and will do it again: he sets everything right again.”

In 1919, several months after the war ended, Fr. Dehon returned to St. Quentin, where he had begun his religious community and established St. John’s High School. He wrote, “The sight devastated me. I



The city of St. Quentin in ruins

had never seen anything like it in my life. It was a desolate pile of ruins. There are 4,000 or 5,000 inhabitants who looked like the survivors of a shipwreck. Before the war, the town had 40,000 inhabitants.”

Thankfully, after the war, anti-Catholic laws in Germany and France were withdrawn. The Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart could now establish houses in Germany and were also able

to return to France. It would take a lot of time to recover from the destruction of the war, but gradually, the Congregation began to grow once again.

Fr. Dehon was very pleased to see his great lifework affirmed when the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart received its final approval from Rome on December 5, 1923. At the time, he wrote, “This is the end of forty-five years of striving and toiling in the face of innumerable difficulties, and

much opposition.” A few years earlier, he had written to all the members of the religious community, saying, “To found a Congregation is quite an undertaking. We have been working at it together. I know that I have made very many mistakes. It is a miracle of Christ’s kindness that he has consideration for us and lets us do his work.”

The religious community continued to expand. With 772 members, the Priests of the Sacred Heart were able to begin ministering in South Africa, Indonesia, the United States, and Norway.

Less than two years later, the age of 82, Fr. Dehon caught a stomach flu which was making many people sick in the city. This illness was weakening Dehon’s heart and soon he lay dying. Before he breathed his last, he pointed to a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and said clearly, “For him I live and for him I die.”



Fr. Dehon in his last moments of life

In his funeral sermon the bishop said, “Like all good priests, Fr. Dehon did not shut himself up in the ivory tower of his intellectual superiority, but threw himself wholeheartedly into work, especially in work among laborers. In his case, the man of action was never at odds with the man of learning.”

Since the death of their founder, the Priests of the Sacred Heart have continued to grow and expand their ministry into many countries throughout the world. How many countries can you identify on the map? In addition to those countries already mentioned, look for Poland, England, Argentina, Uruguay, Mozambique, and Portugal. Find Chile, Venezuela, Scotland, Lesotho, Croatia, and the Philippines. Search for Belarus, Moldova, Albania, India, and Slovakia. Locate Ukraine, Angola, Vietnam, Paraguay, and Chad.

You will find the Priests of the Sacred Heart in all these countries, mostly among the poor and disadvantaged. Despite difficulties of learning new languages and customs, of facing unfriendly governments or dangerous circumstances, they commit themselves to preach with their words and actions the infinite love of Jesus for all people. Fr. Dehon’s dream continues to grow strong.



**Learn more about the Priests of the Sacred Heart at
www.dehoniansusa.org**

Can you find where the Priests of the Sacred Heart are present today?

