

## **THE DEHON STUDY CENTER**

**Father Leo Dehon: Sermon for Christmas Day**

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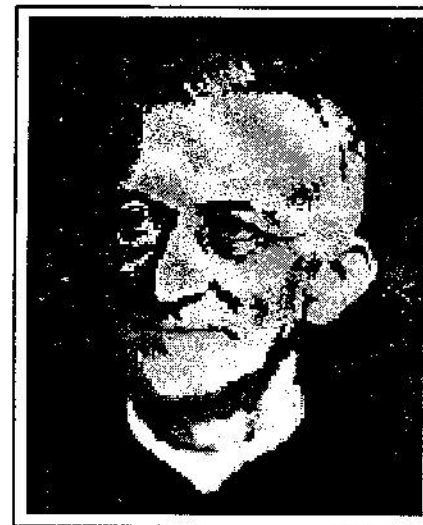
**SCJs in the USA: The Early Years**

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## **FATHER DEHON: THE EDUCATOR**



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## INTRODUCTION

On August 11, 2000 I gave a talk on "Father Dehon: The Educator" to the faculties and administrators of Sacred Heart School in Southaven, Mississippi, and Holy Family Catholic School in Holly Springs, Mississippi. The talk was subsequently posted on the SCJ web site ([www.scj.org](http://www.scj.org)). Beyond that I had no intention of giving it any further distribution. In the meantime a couple people who had read it on the web site expressed interest in seeing it made available in traditional print form and noted that its appearance would be timely in view of the conference on this theme that is being held in Salamanca, Spain, in July 2001.

Although most of the members of the province are not directly involved in education, the talk may have a more general appeal if it is read in the context of "youth ministry." Father Dehon lays out the challenges, means, and goals of the Christian formation of youth. His principles seem applicable beyond the strictly instructional setting of a school and may rightly be considered as an embodiment of

his charism in an apostolic activity.

Aside from a few editorial adjustments no changes have been made to the text of the original talk. I wish to extend my appreciation to Charles Yost, S.C.J., and the community at Nesbit, Mississippi, for their excellent-as-usual hospitality and to express my gratitude to those who encouraged the publication of this material.

Paul J. McGuire, S.C.J.  
Feast of the Sacred Heart  
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## FATHER DEHON: THE EDUCATOR

I would like to examine Father Dehon's experience as an educator and bring to your attention some of the ideals and principles that motivated him to make the ministry of education one of the principal occupations of his life. Shortly after Father Dehon died, his bishop eulogized him in these words: "All who came to him were won over by the breadth of his knowledge, his fascinating conversation, his perfect grasp of the way things worked in the world, and especially by his pleasant disposition . . . The feelings he inspired were lasting, as demonstrated by the affection his former students have maintained for him . . . Father Dehon belongs to the line of the great educators of youth."<sup>1</sup> It is remarkable that this aspect of his life has attracted so little interest and that very little has been written on it. I consulted the periodical *Dehoniana* and I found only one article on Father Dehon the educator.<sup>2</sup> However, education

<sup>1</sup> Cf., André Perroux, *Leo Dehon: A Passion for Christ, A Passion for the World*. Hales Corners: Priests of the Sacred Heart, 2000, pp. 55-56.

<sup>2</sup> Luis M. Mora, "Christian Education in the Thought of Father Dehon." *Dehoniana* 81 (1994) n. 3, pp. 97-109.

was one of his great passions and it was his major preoccupation for long periods in his life, so I would like to examine some of his ideas on this topic.

The first six years of his priestly ministry were spent as an associate pastor at the large basilica church in Saint Quentin. In addition to the normal round of sacramental services -- saying Mass, hearing confessions, visiting the sick, weddings, and funerals -- he also became involved in what we would call today "social outreach programs." He built and directed a youth club, he founded a Catholic newspaper, provided housing for young workers from the countryside, and he organized diocesan-wide social service programs. Towards the end of his sixth year in parochial ministry his bishop presented him with a new challenge: establish a Catholic high school in the city.

If you simply looked at Father Dehon's resume he would seem a very unpromising candidate for this task. He had never been employed as a full time teacher and he had no experience as a school administrator. But a closer examination of his background reveals that, aside from his

extensive schooling and four doctorates, he had developed a deep and abiding concern for educational reforms, and he was passionately and personally interested in becoming involved in bringing them about. As a seminarian in Rome he filled an 84 page notebook with his ideas for the renewal of priestly formation and even entertained the possibility of founding a religious congregation to realize this ideal.<sup>3</sup> After his ordination he seriously considered joining a religious order devoted to higher education in France, and only withdrew from this project at the last minute. And twice during his years as a parish priest in Saint Quentin he was invited to join the faculty of the new Catholic university at Lille. So for almost two decades educational issues had been prominent among his concerns, and the bishop's invitation to start up a Catholic high school would give him the opportunity to test his principles and to put the passion of his convictions into practice.

To fully appreciate the situation we need to be aware that education was the central and most contentious issue

in French politics at the end of the 19th century. Schools were the principal battlefield in the culture wars between the militantly secular government and the traditional values of the church. Twice in the space of 25 years the government attempted, and was largely successful, in gaining a monopoly over education by expelling religious congregations and confiscating their properties and goods. At stake was control of the minds and hearts of the French people; the government wanted to mold their allegiance to the ideals of the secular state where religion would become privatized by being driven from the public forum. The first crucial step of this agenda was the absolute control of education and the exclusive establishment of schools without God. The church, on the other hand, claimed its right to free association and struggled to maintain schools that would foster Christian values even in the midst of a hostile secular environment.

So when Father Dehon accepted the challenge of starting a new Catholic high school he was stepping to the forefront of the most hotly debated political issue of the day.

He wrote in his *Memoirs* that before he had opened the school everyone in the town and the diocese thought well of him and supported his works, but afterwards he met constant hostility and was rejected by half of his former friends.<sup>4</sup> It cost him in other ways too. One of his biographers estimated that he spent over 800,000 francs of his own money to support the school. Even his own father, who had been reluctant to accept his son's priestly vocation, was further disappointed that his "career" in the church would be over now that he was a mere headmaster of a boarding school.<sup>5</sup> But Father Dehon didn't see it that way. He seized the opportunity to direct a Catholic high school confident that this work would provide future leaders who would espouse the church's cause for justice and morality in an increasingly secular society.

As an educator, and in most other aspects of his life, Father Dehon was not a theoretician, he was a man of action who was practical, pragmatic, and focused on getting the job done. His approach to education was quite

<sup>4</sup> Cf., NHV, XIII, 22.

<sup>5</sup> NHV, XII, 185.

traditional, emphasizing the basics and demanding discipline. His originality consisted in his ability to adapt tradition to the realities of the current situation.<sup>6</sup> Though he was not a theoretician, we are fortunate to have a series of lectures he gave at the close of each school year in which he expounded his vision of Christian education and detailed its content, its methods, and its goals.<sup>7</sup> To acquaint you with some of his ideas about education I will draw from those lectures, in particular the first one that he gave, on August 4, 1877. I would add parenthetically, that back in those days before the internet, MTV, and video games, people had a much higher tolerance for long speeches. The printed text of his talk runs twenty tightly printed pages, and I estimate that it took an hour and a half to deliver it. But here I'll give only an abbreviated version.

He begins by stating what seems obvious: the direction that any system of education takes depends on its ideal of what it means to be human (OS, IV, 276). As Aristotle said: "The brave are found where bravery is

<sup>6</sup> Henri Dorresteijn, S.C.J., *Vie et Personnalité du Père Dehon*. Malines: H. Dessain, 1959, p. 303.

<sup>7</sup> *L'Éducation et L'Enseignement selon L'Idéal Chrétien* in *Oeuvres Sociales*, IV, pp. 263-394.

honored" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. III). In other words, students are trained and formed so that they will embody and live out the values that are most prized by the educational system. He then gives several examples. For instance, in the societies of ancient Rome and Sparta the ideal man was a valiant soldier who was tireless in battle and obedient to authority, therefore as far as these peoples were concerned education began and ended with the development of physical skills and strength. Another example he gave was the then-current system of education in France which considered human beings as political animals whose chief purpose was "to know, love, and serve the Constitution" of the State. The goal of national education was to produce faithful citizens who would abide by the laws of the country; all other matters -- religion, morality, the cultivation the soul and the spirit -- were relegated to second place, or were completely disregarded. A third example, also taken from modern society, considers humans as merely physical beings who have only material needs. For them education is reduced to acquiring the

physical or industrial skills needed to make a living; everything else -- morality, intellectual life, spiritual or personal development -- is of no practical importance.

He used other examples as well, but even this short list clearly makes his point: educational systems that have a distorted or incomplete understanding of human beings can provide only limited skills and formation that do not satisfy the needs of the human person. Father Dehon does not disagree with the goals of any of these other educational systems, rather he judges them to be partial and unsatisfactory for the holistic task of educating human beings. I believe that if we were to examine some of the educational policies that are currently being promoted, we would discover that Father Dehon's list has as much validity today as it did 125 years ago. Athletics and health, patriotism and good citizenship, job training and vocational skills -- these are all necessary components of a good education but by themselves they are not sufficient goals of the educational process.

According to Father Dehon, the Christian does not

exclude these things from his educational program but, for the Christian, education entails much more. Since the goal of any educational system depends on its understanding of the human person, then Christian educators must set standards that are compatible with lofty dignity of each human being who is a child of God and has a right to develop his talents to their full potential so that he may achieve his maximum fulfillment in this life and ultimately attain his goal of happiness with God forever. The word that Father Dehon uses most often to describe the goal of Christian education is "perfection."<sup>8</sup> For example, he said that Christian education means bringing the child who has been created by God to the height of perfection, and that "the immense superiority of a Christian education over other kinds of education derives from the fact that it sees the total and supernatural perfection of man, in both this world and the next, as its purpose and ideal" (276).

What he means by the word "perfection" is fullness or completeness or, as we might say today, a well-rounded

<sup>8</sup>Cf., Luis M. Mora, "Christian Education in the Thought of Father Dehon," *Dehoniana* 81 (1994) n. 3, p. 98.



and balanced education. A Christian education is a complete education which takes into account the various faculties of the human personality and gives full justice to each of them in all their variety and distinctiveness: the physical, the intellectual, the moral, the artistic, and the spiritual. He wrote: "Educating a Christian does not mean only giving him the ideas of human science that may be useful to him in gaining a position in life; it also and above all means forming in the pupil a noble and great character, honest behavior, and solid virtues. It means cultivating in his soul the faith that will open doors to the understanding of the invisible world, the hope that fortifies the heart with the prospect of the happiness we long for, and the love that makes God perceivable [even] in the cold shadows of life" (278). Addressing his audience directly he said: "Such is the goal of Christian education, and it is ours as well. And if our expectations are not mistaken, our students -- at least those who respond thoroughly to our care -- will find in the spirit that imbues our school . . . a special grace enabling them to be pure, gentle, pious, and eager to do good. Such

is our ideal, and is it not yours as well?" (278)

When he criticized other philosophies of education, he did not object to what they affirmed and held as a value, rather he found fault with them because of what they left out. For example, regarding the role of physical education and health he said, of course "Christian education . . . includes hygiene and bodily exercise" (277). Years later during his visit to the United States he made frequent favorable comments about the American dedication to sports activities, cleanliness, and a healthy environment. When he visited Tuskegee Institute he noted that the students' dorms and clothing were cleaned regularly and diligently, and that personal hygiene was strongly encouraged. At Trinity College in Washington, D.C., he marveled at the spacious grounds and the student quarters, each with its own private bath, and how this was so much more attractive and healthy than French boarding schools which, he said, resembled dismal army barracks. At the seminary in Baltimore he was impressed that the priests -- "even the older ones" -- took off their cassocks and played a



game of baseball.

For his own part, when he began the youth club at the parish in Saint Quentin the first facility that he obtained was a playground, and Sunday afternoons were completely given over to games and sports. A teacher from the local public school organized a program in gymnastics, and some soldiers stationed at a nearby garrison instructed the boys in marching and drills. This seems to have been a fairly popular activity in those times. Even Leo Dehon, who was never particularly robust or athletic, was an enthusiastic "marcher" when he was a boy, and later in life he enjoyed hiking and trekking in the Alps. During World War I when he was confined to Saint Quentin for three years, he kept active by working in his garden every day and chopping wood.

In the area of academic formation and the curriculum, Father Dehon held to the highest standards of intellectual quality and integrity. When he had served as a stenographer at the First Vatican Council he had the opportunity to listen to bishops from all over the world. He

felt humiliated by the intellectual inferiority of the French hierarchy. He said that "they were not great theologians. This was clearly evident. France had no Catholic universities . . . We were behind in our theology and the Council revealed this fault." In the same vein, years later he wrote to his seminarians studying at the University of Lille: "You must study diligently. How will you be good priests, capable of pleasing our Lord, if your ignorance causes you to act stupidly in his service?"<sup>9</sup>

He also believed that the course of studies ought to be comprehensive and practical. As a traditionalist in education he gave great emphasis and pride of place to the humanities, but he also noted that the progress made in the sciences required that they be given a more prominent place in the curriculum. Although he could speak, read, and write Latin fluently, he no longer thought it necessary to attain this degree of proficiency, and instead he recommended acquiring knowledge of living languages to facilitate communication with the rest of the world. In

<sup>9</sup> *Lettere Circolari*, n. 328, January 4, 1893.

addition, he observed that recent developments that had taken place in industry called for the creation of new areas of study in order to be able to deal with all the new technologies that were coming into existence (288--289). All these suggestions come from a man who was a traditionalist, but he was a traditionalist who could adapt because he believed that Christian education consists of everything that enhances intellectual and cultural development, and that allows for greater participation in the vital issues of one's times.

Above all he believed that education must have a social purpose and that Catholic schools should prepare the minds and hearts of their students to take up their mission in life. He said: "Whatever career he may embrace one day . . . the person who receives a Christian education will bring to it this ardent and profound conviction: that by word and example he can exercise a life-giving influence in his chosen profession" (278). In order to prepare students for their future role in the world, Catholic schools should begin initiating them in apostolates of service and social

concern. In all the schools and seminaries that Father Dehon founded he always organized a Saint Vincent de Paul Society or a similar social outreach program. One year when the boys in his minor seminary put on a Passion Play during Lent and the entire town came to the performance, he commented: "Our children have seized upon a great means for spreading the gospel in a simple way."<sup>10</sup>

It was a bedrock conviction of his that education must have a social value. He was not a devotee of art for art's sake or of the pursuit of learning for its own sake. He believed that all the talents that an individual possessed and everything that education transmitted in terms of intellectual and moral development should not just be a means of bringing honor and prestige to a person's life, but that these means should "also be an instrument for doing good. In whatever sphere of activity that divine Providence places him, the student should become a missionary for virtue and the living image of Jesus Christ" (278).

<sup>10</sup> NO, VI, 24r, March 12, 1893.

But if the goal of education is to turn out young people who will be active Christians, this can only come about if their action is based on a thorough knowledge of their faith. And in his own times Father Dehon found religious education to be seriously deficient. He said that one of the principal reasons for the disappointing results in religious literacy is that the quality of the instruction is neither adequate nor complete. In some schools hardly an hour a week was devoted to religious instruction, and frequently the teachers were ill-prepared for this task and their methods were outmoded. It is not enough to inform students about past trials and triumphs in church history, they must be equipped with solid Christian doctrine in order to confront the challenges that face the church in the modern world.<sup>11</sup>

In order to bring about this marriage of intellectual competence and social conscience, it is essential that character formation be an integral and prominent component of the educational program. Father Dehon

<sup>11</sup> Cf., Dorresteyn, pp. 309-310.  
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observed that educational officials discussed at great length what role to give the sciences or the humanities, and whether dead languages or living languages should be taught, but he asked how much are they concerned to see that their students develop personal qualities like reliability, moderation, dignity, respect, courage, and initiative? He said that their individual lives will depend more on the quality of their heart and the content of their character than on the knowledge they have accumulated in their mind.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most effective means to promote the development of character is the reading of good books. Reading good stories allows the pupil to experience all kinds of adventures and travel to far away places that awaken his imagination and make it possible for him to try on different roles, and vicariously live out various vocations in advance. This will help him later in life to follow his calling and to take the right road.<sup>13</sup> Good writers quite naturally fill their stories with lessons about character, morality, and

<sup>12</sup> Cf., *Discours sur L'Education du Caractère*, in OSp, VII, 183.

<sup>13</sup> Cf., Luis M. Mora, "Christian Education in the Thought of Father Dehon," *Dehoniana* 81 (1994) n. 3, p. 103.

virtue. They paint word pictures of role models at different ages and in different situations of life, and they contrast them with undesirable and disreputable characters who remind the readers of the shadow side of every personality. Father Dehon noted that the ancient Greeks went to the theater in order to model their behavior and attitudes on the characters who were presented on stage.<sup>14</sup> So the way to uplift or ennoble our character is to frequently read about and reflect upon noble and uplifting characters.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, one of the most challenging tasks in education is choosing the stories that will capture the child's imagination, challenge his mind, and move his heart in such a way that he will begin to find the resources within himself that will be the building blocks for his personal growth in wisdom and virtue. But Father Dehon warns that the reading material must be appropriate to the child's age. And with regard to recreational reading special care should be taken that you do not sin either by being excessively serious or by being too infantile. He said: "We do not care

<sup>14</sup> OSp, VII, p. 191.

<sup>15</sup> OSp, VII, p. 206.

for superficial minds, but we do not want them to be overly precocious scholars either. Childhood is the springtime of life, it is the age of blossoming rather than fruition. With childhood go flowering and freshness rather than maturity." (284).

But if good reading material is crucial in the character formation of the students, of even more fundamental importance is the role of the teacher. More than merely dispensers of information, teachers reveal who they really are to their students and they share their personal identity with them. They do this by word, communicating their thoughts, their standards, and their values, but even more profoundly they do it by example. Unlike individual courses in the curriculum -- English, math, science -- which are taught for an hour or so a day, teachers are revealing themselves throughout the entire school day; they are communicating the traits of their character and the qualities of their personality and they are opening a window on their soul by everything they say and do in the presence of their students (279). Teachers will be effective and their

influence will be positive only to the extent that their behavior and attitudes reflect those of Christ. The more an educator resembles the one he or she is presenting as the ideal of human excellence, the more the teacher will be credible and capable of inspiring the students to imitate him.<sup>16</sup>

At the heart of the whole educational process are the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship. Father Dehon posed this question: What should our guidelines be if we are going to nurture their innate tendencies towards goodness? What is the dominant thought or principle that will encourage the child in his work and the performance of his duties and in the pursuit of virtue? (284) And he goes on to list several possible means that might motivate a student to work. First of all, there is fear. That's not a totally bad thing, and in any case it can never be completely eliminated from the educational process. However, to make it the pupil's principal motivation, particularly in the beginning, would lead him to distrust the teacher and even school

<sup>16</sup> Cf., Mora, *Dehoniana* 81 (1994), n. 3, p. 103.  
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itself. He would construct a facade to placate the authority figures, but his true self would never emerge because of the threat of being punished. Ultimately, fear is a very destructive motivator.

Secondly, he mentions honor and shame as motivations. These emotions, too, will always be inherent in education: if you do well and receive awards, you are honored, and if you do poorly, you are embarrassed and ashamed. But, he said, these are not really Christian principles of education. The quest for honors encourages vanity and it often rewards the mere appearance of virtue, while gaining honors leads some students to a false sense of superiority and smugness.

Thirdly, he mentions love and affection as motivations for the student to excel. Parents most often endorse this approach and they tell teachers that their child will do his work and will respond best to those who love him. And Father Dehon does not disagree with this. But he asks, Is this sentiment always enough? It is very effective with younger children, but when students enter puberty their

need for independence and their own confused emotions make them less responsive to the solicitous affection of adults (285).

Father Dehon believed that the effects of education would be most enduring and persuasive when they were solidly grounded on Christian principles. He said that communicating Christian truths by word and example is the first step to changing the hearts and minds of individuals, and this is the necessary prelude to bringing about a more just and humane society. *Communicating the Christian truth by word:* There is simply no substitute for knowledge of the basic Christian teachings. How can people be led to live like Christ if they do not know the mind and will of Christ? So Father Dehon emphasized that students must be taught the fundamental Christian truths: that God is our Father, Creator and Lord of all; that He is all justice, goodness, and mercy; that Jesus Christ is his beloved Son, our brother and savior; that he is present to us in the power of his life-giving Spirit, in the sacraments, and in the fellowship of other believers.

But *Christian truth must also be communicated by example:* Father Dehon offered very sound advice about how Christian truths should be translated into practical classroom behavior. He said: "Study the character of the children in order to be able to direct them well." Each student has the right to be recognized as an individual and every teacher has the duty to know his students well and to educate them according to their individual needs. "Seek to be loved rather than feared. Speak to them reasonably and make it comfortable for them to be sincere. Train them in good manners and behavior. Make learning pleasurable. And above all instill a sense of respect in them, for this sums up and contains all the dispositions of a good heart" (289).

Father Dehon believed that the formation of character meant training students so that they could make good choices on their own; if they were trained to be puppets, they would fall flat on their face once the strings binding them to the school had been cut. One of his favorite sayings was: You turn boys into men not by constraining



them but by inspiring them.<sup>17</sup> When he visited a Catholic high school in Los Angeles he commented favorably on the fact that "the students come and go freely; they can attend the theater. Saturdays and Sundays are free days. Americans insist that children learn the use of freedom at an early age."<sup>18</sup> He believed that exposure to the gospel truths in an atmosphere of Christian nurturing would produce adults who were convinced of the wisdom and goodness of Christ's way of life and who would strive with all their energy and creativity to make that ideal a reality in their world.

But for this to happen the school must be staffed with teachers and administrators who are convinced of the power and the wisdom of the gospel way of life. In addition to recommending that teachers continue their education by regularly participating in courses at the university, Father Dehon also insisted that all school personnel -- both priests and laity -- take part in periodic spiritual retreats. It is interesting to note that he wanted these retreats to be made

<sup>17</sup> Cf., Dorrestein, p. 307.

<sup>18</sup> NQ, XXVII, 66.

privately and away from the school grounds, even during the academic year. He considered this an indispensable means to prevent spiritual stagnation and the way to infuse new vitality and depth into the interior life of the teachers.<sup>19</sup> This regulation was rather flexible and imprecise, and we do not know how it was applied in practice, but its intention is unmistakably clear: Since teachers are the single most critical factor in the formation and education of the students, it is absolutely essential that their own spiritual life be vigorous and refreshed if they are to give their students the moral and spiritual nourishment that they require.

Father Dehon never had the opportunity to read any of the currently popular Harry Potter books, but I am certain that he would have appreciated them for their realism regarding parental pressure, fear of failure, mean teachers, hazing and bullying, as well as for their whimsy and sheer inventiveness. And I am sure that he would have recognized his own ideals in the wisdom of one of Harry's teachers who said: "It matters not what someone is born,

<sup>19</sup> Cf., Dorrestein, pp. 311-312.



but what they grow to be!" "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." And that is the goal of Catholic education: to equip children with the skills to make choices that enlarge their capacity for life and bring out the goodness in themselves and others.