

An interview with Fr. Leo John Dehon

Transcript of an interview with Fr. Leo John Dehon, founder of the Priests of the Sacred Heart, presented by David Schimmel (Director of Dehonian Associates for the US Province) and Mary Gorski (Director of Communications for the US Province) which took place at Sacred Heart School in Southaven, Miss., October 10, 2016, during the Mission Education Conference.

Mary (interviewer): Welcome, Fr. Dehon! We're happy that you could join us. Some of those gathered here are already familiar with you, but others are meeting you for the first time. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Fr. Dehon: I like to say that I was born in interesting times. I believe the Chinese consider that a curse, but I don't. The challenges were difficult, the answers were unclear, and I had a lot to learn, but through it all I had the beautiful vocation of proclaiming God's merciful and unconditional love. This image, used here at Sacred Heart Southern Missions, suggests God's mercy and love overflowing from the Heart of Jesus.

Mary: Please, tell us more about yourself!

Fr. Dehon: Well, I was born in 1843 in the northeastern French town of La Capelle. This was approximately 50 years after the French Revolution and just over 10 years since the Industrial Revolution took hold in France. In many ways, the consequences of these two revolutions shaped my life and ministry.

Mary: You must have witnessed a lot of significant change.

Fr. Dehon: Indeed. Partly inspired by your own American Revolution, France struggled for many years—and some of them bloody—to move from a monarchy to a democracy. This was not simply a change of government, but a change of mindset. You see, a monarchy sustains a privileged class of people. Yet, as nobility, these people had the duty to attend to the welfare of the lower classes. This “top-down” charity is often called paternalism. Now, my family was not of the nobility, but they did own land and were well off. I grew up thinking that having a king was the best guarantee of social order, and paternalism was the surest means of providing a safety net for the poor.

Mary: But you gradually changed your opinion.

Fr. Dehon: Yes. The ideal seldom became a reality. Although I did not approve of the destruction and anarchy of the French Revolution, the goals of liberty, fraternity, and equality were praiseworthy. I began to see that charity was insufficient and that justice was a necessity.

All people should have equal access to a decent life that includes a healthy environment, a good education, a living wage, quality time with family, and freedom to worship.

Mary: So you eventually regarded the French Revolution as something valuable for the people of France?

Dehon: Not completely. The French Revolution set off an anti-Catholic Church sentiment that only grew more virulent during my years of ministry. The Catholic Church was slow to distance itself from the monarchy and many people mistakenly considered the Catholic Church as oppressive as the monarchy. And so, by the early 1900's priests and religious were prohibited to run French institutions such as schools and hospitals. The French government wanted to wipe out any religious influence over its people. And sadly, many priests were ill prepared to respond and simply stayed inside their churches and waited in vain for people to come to them.

Mary: And how did the Industrial Revolution change France?

Fr. Dehon: The change was enormous and quite frightful. Before the Industrial Revolution, most people lived off the land and produced everything they needed by hand. Almost overnight, industry and machine manufactured goods dominated the economy. Most people left farms in the countryside for factories in the city.

Mary: We were taught that machines made peoples' lives easier. You don't sound like you considered this progress.

Fr. Dehon: Not in my experience! The families who came to work in factories were crowded together in unhealthy housing. They worked 12-hour days in hot and unsafe working conditions. They were paid a changing but always meager wage, and were dismissed if injured or ill. I'm talking about men, women, and children, as you can see in this photo. There was no real possibility for family life or for practicing religion. Alcoholism was high and morals were low. And priests were nowhere to be found!

Mary: That sounds depressing. How in the world did you deal with this?

Fr. Dehon: By the grace of my vocation. In one of my published meditation books, I imagined that Jesus was speaking directly to us. He said, "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: to give glory to my Father and to save those who were lost."

Notice in this stained glass window that Jesus' left hand points to his very loving Heart while his right hand offers us his compassion. Those whose mission it is to devote themselves to the works of mercy ought to be inspired by this tender compassion of the Heart of Jesus and share in the sufferings of our brothers and sisters.

Mary: Your words remind me that Pope Francis has dedicated this year as the Year of Mercy and that this Holy Year logo shows Jesus as the Good Samaritan.

Fr. Dehon: I give thanks for the Holy Father's insight and challenge, which is needed as much today as in my time.

Mary: I wonder if you would be willing to share with us some of your personal experiences of mercy.

Fr. Dehon: I'm happy to do so. But as I do, I hope all of you will call to mind your own experiences of mercy. This is, after all, the way we humans begin to understand God's mercy and practice it more and more in our lives.

One of my earliest memories was when I was four years old. Most likely, I contracted encephalitis, a viral inflammation of the brain. My mother, who had already lost her firstborn son, was beside herself with worry. I recovered after a few weeks, but I always remember my family's care and concern for my well-being. I have always felt much loved.

And then there was a particularly humiliating experience when the Church authorities in Rome decreed that the Congregation, which I founded only five years before, could no longer exist. Mistakes on my part and misunderstandings in Rome brought this about. Although it was painful, I accepted the decision completely, but I was tormented by the fact that God had willed this Work and through my fault it had failed. Soon after, however, the major issues were resolved and the Congregation was allowed to continue. Of course, through the years there were additional difficulties and setbacks. But, I truly believe that it is by a miracle of mercy that our Lord has allowed us to continue our mission.

And during the sad days of World War I, the Germans ordered the evacuation of St. Quentin, the birthplace of the Priests of the Sacred Heart. At 75 years old, I was herded onto a freight train with standing room only. After a day of travelling, we arrived in Belgium. I was exhausted and racked with pain. While getting off the train and crossing the railroad tracks, I tripped and fell. My heart was beating wildly and I thought I was going to die. The local Jesuit community tirelessly cared for me and all the evacuees. Their compassion touched me deeply.

Mary: I imagine that those personal experiences of mercy shaped your own approach to people in need.

Fr. Dehon: That's definitely true! And it all began by watching my mother serve the poor. In my hometown, she founded a charitable organization of women called *The Work of St. Joseph*. This inspired me to join the St. Vincent de Paul Society in junior high school. We visited families in need and found ways to help them as best we could. This experience went to my heart which is by nature compassionate.

When I studied Law in Paris, I continued my association with the St. Vincent de Paul Society. This is a photo of a Paris neighborhood that was overcrowded, rundown, infested with disease, and overflowing with physical and moral misery. In this neighborhood I had the responsibility of caring for two elderly men. They were living in an attic that was so cramped I couldn't even stand up straight! They had nothing. I did what I could to help and they, in turn, edified me. But the poverty of this sprawling slum was absolutely hideous! I was well dressed and stood out like a sore thumb. I was taunted by the wretchedly poor who resented my good fortune. I couldn't blame them because industrialization had discarded them and widened the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Mary: Did that experience discourage you?

Fr. Dehon: No, but it certainly made me realize that something was very wrong. The problems seemed so huge and unfair, and charity was not adequately addressing them. I still had a lot to learn. So, when I was studying theology in Rome—when I looked like this!—I also took time to read about economics and social issues. I wanted to find answers to the great problems that faced society. I had to do this in my free time. Unfortunately, economics and social issues are studied much too little in seminaries.

Mary: You certainly seemed to have a capacity for study. You ended up with four doctoral degrees—in Civil Law, Philosophy, Theology, and Church Law. Sounds like the perfect preparation for a teaching career in the seminary or university.

Fr. Dehon: I thought so too. I was attracted to the possibility of teaching at a Catholic university in France, but circumstances made me hesitate. Instead, I decided to accept an assignment from my bishop, who made me the seventh assistant priest in a huge parish in the factory town of St. Quentin, pictured here. It was completely opposite of what I had wanted for so many years, which was a life of recollection and study!

Mary: What happened next?

Fr. Dehon: God's Providence was at work in me, although I could only see that in hindsight. The parish to which I was assigned had 30,000 members! There were seven of us priests—we could have used thirty. We were doing a lot, but it was still nothing compared to what we should

have been doing. The shepherd must know his sheep! Among other duties, I was assigned the care of the schools and this helped me focus on the needs of the youth. Within two weeks at the parish, I knew what needed to be done. The city needed a youth center and a boy's Catholic junior high school.

Mary: Those were two huge projects. How did you hope to accomplish them with everything else you had to do?

David: By stepping out in faith and trusting that if this was God's work, then God would guide me along the way. By working with the youth, many who were already employed in the factories, I knew that I was working for the future. The youth center began in my office, then in rented space, and then a building of our own—complete with gym, classrooms, library, bank, and chapel! We called this St. Joseph's Youth Center and this is a photo of its entrance. Eventually we added an employment agency as well as lodging for young workers. Soon, over 500 young men were involved at the center.

Mary: That's amazing! What did you hope to accomplish with St. Joseph's Youth Center?

Fr. Dehon: Although I received lots of support from city officials and factory owners, many people misunderstood my aim, thinking that I had no other motive than to give the youth some honest entertainment. I had much higher ambitions. I wanted to improve society through this Christian organization. You see, a youth center is of no use if the lives of factory workers don't improve. Employers, too, must cooperate and bring Christian principles into the factories. I wanted workers and employers to recognize their rights and duties.

Mary: And how did the boys Catholic Junior High School begin?

Fr. Dehon: That's a more complicated story. For some time as a young priest, I was so busy with work, that I was afraid my spiritual life was beginning to suffer. I joined a support group with like-minded priests, but this experience left me wanting more. I considered joining a religious community whose spirituality and ministry were bound together and mutually nourishing. I was particularly looking for a group dedicated to the Heart of Jesus—symbol of God's unconditional love. I wanted to join others who were willing to repair injustices that kept people from experiencing God's love. I couldn't find one. Finally, I began to wonder whether it might not be the plan of Providence that I should start something on my own. When I spoke to my bishop about this, he replied, "You want to form a congregation of priests; I would like to have a Catholic junior high school in St. Quentin. You could begin your congregation in the form of a school."

Mary: Here's a photo of the school, which I believe you called St. John's Institute. What did you hope to accomplish with this school?

Fr. Dehon: At the time, the French government wanted to erase all religious influence from its education system. I knew this to be a colossal mistake that would have repercussions for years to come. I wanted to form young Christians as persons of heart, of sacrifice, and of commitment. Whatever the students would eventually choose as a profession, I wanted them to be the living image of Jesus Christ. This is the purpose of Christian education and this was my purpose. Although the Priests of the Sacred Heart no longer run this school, I'm happy to say that it still is fulfilling that purpose to this day.

Mary: You were the Director of St. John's Institute for sixteen years. Then, due to misunderstandings and prejudices your bishop asked you to resign.

Fr. Dehon: Yes, it was a great sacrifice for me. I was tempted to lose heart, but pledged my trust and love to the Heart of the good Master. I was somewhat consoled by the fact that about a thousand young men had already received a good Christian education and about thirty became priests. In the end, my leaving was providential since I had more time to devote not only to the growth of the Congregation, but also to my passion for connecting spirituality with social action.

Mary: Can you tell us more about connecting spirituality with social action?

Fr. Dehon: Certainly. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus involves recognizing and responding to God's love. This is not something that happens just between Jesus and myself. This devotion must come down and enter the social life of people. Making God's love felt by treating each individual with dignity is the sovereign remedy for the cruel ills of our world. Helping people experience God's love in the circumstances of everyday life will win back the hearts of the workers and the hearts of young people. This carving of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is by a Canadian SCJ artist. For me, this image captures Jesus' care for every member of his flock, particularly those most in need.

Mary: Can you give us an example of how this spirituality was apparent in your ministry?

Fr. Dehon: To go back again to my first years as a priest in the factory town of St. Quentin, I quickly got a close hand look at the woes of society—in the confessional, in visits to the sick, and in the schools. With the local members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, I discovered how the ordinary worker really lived. Vast areas of the city were crammed with people. In such squalid living conditions there was one straw mattress for an entire family. During the winter, one third of the city was living on charity. Could the God of unconditional love be pleased with this deplorable situation? Could the God of mercy be satisfied with charity, which indeed was necessary, but which could not address the causes of this human misery?

Mary: And so your devotion to the Heart of Jesus propelled you to promote social justice?

Fr. Dehon: Propelled is a good word. The underprivileged have a right to social justice. This image, in an SCJ mission Church in the Philippines, is entitled, “The Christ of Justice.” It shows that Jesus’ mission is not only to bring good news to the poor, but also to commission us to join him in that work. For this reason, I experienced some joy in fighting to make our Lord reign in souls. 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.

Mary: What do you mean by “going to the people?”

Fr. Dehon: By finding out about people’s needs and helping to address them. For example, at St. Joseph Youth Center, I organized a Workers’ Union to help the young men understand their rights and duties as laborers, and help them fight for a living wage and healthy working conditions.

For five years I was the secretary of the Diocesan Office for Social Welfare. As a group we surveyed the needs and helped parishes address them. To support existing programs and to encourage new ventures, we organized Congresses, or large gatherings of priests and laity throughout the diocese. Together we wrote the Christian Social Manual, which received great publicity and sold more than 10,000 copies. And to keep informed, I regularly attended the Congresses of the Workers Movement.

For ten years, I organized an annual meeting of seminarians at a textile factory, where some Priests of the Sacred Heart were chaplains. This was an on-site study of practical social initiatives. Here is a photo taken at one of our meetings.

Mary: And you promoted Christian social action beyond France, didn’t you?

Fr. Dehon: Yes. Encouraged by Pope Leo XIII, I presented a series of conferences in Rome, and eventually published these conferences under the title of Christian Social Renewal. The book was translated into Italian, Arabic, Hungarian, and Portuguese, and became a classic in several French and Italian seminaries.

You see, practice worked hand in hand with theory. The projects begun in St. Quentin were reproduced in other parishes by priests whom I had trained. In this entire apostolate, I saw only an uplifting of the humble and the little ones according to the spirit of the Gospel. The Catholic Social Movement and the Reign of the Sacred Heart have been two great missions that Providence assigned to me—a role which I filled very feebly.

Mary: It strikes me that you fulfilled your mission very capably. It's certainly impressive to consider all the people whom you influenced and whose lives you touched. I know that all of us gathered here find the example of your life and ministry encouraging—after all, we are here because of what you began.

Fr. Dehon: Thank you; and I must say that I am very proud of how the Priests of the Sacred Heart are ministering in North America. This was a dream of mine that I prayed would come true.

Mary: In fact, you traveled to North America in 1910, partly to access the possibilities of starting ministries in the United States.

Fr. Dehon: Yes, it was a wonderful trip. Initially, I planned to travel to Montreal to attend the International Eucharistic Congress, which honors the Catholic belief in the real presence of Jesus in the bread and wine of communion. This is a picture of a monstrance that holds the Eucharistic bread for adoration, a contemplative prayer, which is part of the spiritual practice of the Priests of the Sacred Heart.

While in Canada, I also wanted to visit my missionaries, who had recently begun serving French-speaking Catholics in Alberta. But then I was easily convinced to extend my trip and tour portions of the United States, and particularly to visit a diocese where the German Province of the Priests of the Sacred Heart was considering a mission.

Mary: Was that in South Dakota?

Fr. Dehon: No, Iowa. The bishop there offered us property to build a training school. However, he was not in good health and unable to handle all the details. I thought we could establish this foundation later, but it never happened.

Mary: Did you visit any of the places where the SCJs now minister in the United States?

Fr. Dehon: Only in Chicago, where many of our students live and study. If it counts, I passed through Mississippi during the night dozing in the train's sleeper car!

Mary: Please tell us where your travels took you.

Fr. Dehon: From France, I crossed the Atlantic by steamer ship and arrived in New York. Traveling down the East coast, I stopped in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington DC, and Atlanta. In Alabama, I toured the Tuskegee Institute. I was very impressed, but disappointed that I was unable to meet Mr. Booker T. Washington who was away at the time. I visited New Orleans and headed north to St. Louis and Chicago. Then east to Detroit, Niagara Falls,

Toronto, and Montreal where I attended the Eucharistic Congress. After the Congress, I traveled to Quebec City, and then I headed west to visit with my missionaries in Edmonton, Alberta. I continued on to Calgary and Vancouver and went south to Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Tijuana, Mexico. I traveled back up to San Francisco from where I continued my trip to Asia.

Mary: The United States is a big country but you covered a lot of territory. What are your impressions of the USA?

Fr. Dehon: I have some impressions that are lighthearted and some that are critical. It was interesting for me to see signs and read newspaper ads for businesses claiming to offer “the best” or “the greatest in the world.” Modesty is not an American trait, but I must say in all fairness, you really do have a lot of big things.

Also, in every city, I saw busy people eating a “quick lunch” at restaurants. But they ate standing up or sitting on high stools at a counter! They gulped down “today’s special” and then went back to work.

And throughout my trip, I usually tried to save time by traveling at night in a Pullman car. In 1910, it was said that there was 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.

Mary: What are your critical impressions?

Fr. Dehon: When I bought my ticket for Tuskegee I saw two waiting rooms—one for whites and one for blacks. The train that brought me to Tuskegee had only two cars—one for whites and one for blacks. Your *Constitution* proclaims equality, but customs seemed to dictate otherwise. The car for the blacks was disgusting; half the seats were torn and the horsehair was falling out of the cushions. It seemed that the Catholics in the United States had become prejudiced against Black folks due to the influence of public opinion. They were not concerned enough to evangelize this disinherited race.

I’m now happy to see in Mississippi that the Priests of the Sacred Heart have helped to overcome the ravages of this long-enduring prejudice.

Mary: And what about Native Americans?

Fr. Dehon: I was sad to discover that the Anglo-Saxons relentlessly hunted down the Native Americans who owned the land. The Indians were deprived of their hunting grounds and

confined to crowded reservations. They were tricked by businessmen and poisoned by the purveyors of alcohol. The Indians languished and seemed to be vanishing.

Again, I'm very proud of the work of the Priests of the Sacred Heart, whose first mission in the United States was among Native Americans. It is particularly gratifying for me to witness how SCJ ministry to Blacks and Native Americans has gradually changed from simple charity to one that addresses the causes of inequality.

Mary: Of course, challenges remain.

Fr. Dehon: Yes, indeed. Over the years of my ministry, I was always learning. It is the same for those who have come after me as Priests of the Sacred Heart. The situations of life continue to change and so must our responses. It is important to do what we can in the moment, and to accomplish it with much love. This is the meaning of the SCJ cross with a heart shape cut out of it. From the Heart of Jesus I drew compassion for all the infirmities of my brothers and sisters. I pray that all Priests of the Sacred Heart, and those laity who collaborate with them, will remain united to this Divine Heart in order to practice the works of mercy with him.

Mary: Fr. Dehon, do you have anything else that you would like to say to us?

Fr. Dehon: I think that I'd like to conclude with something that I wrote in my meditation book, *The Retreat with the Sacred Heart*. I composed this meditation as a dialogue between Jesus and the reader. And so I invite you to gaze at this image of the Heart of Jesus and to hear these words as if Jesus were speaking directly to you this day: "The reign of my Heart in society is the reign of justice, charity, mercy, and compassion for the lowly, the humble, and those who suffer. I'm asking you to dedicate yourself to all these works, to encourage them, and to cooperate with them. Support those institutions which can contribute to the reign of social justice and which defend the weak against oppression by the powerful."

Or, in the words of the song we sang when we gathered this morning, "Who will speak so their voice will be heard? Who will speak if we don't?"

Mary: Fr. Dehon – thank you for being with us here today and sharing your insights on the United States, as well as the early years of your vocation and the Congregation you founded.