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Teach those who do not know and advise those who are in need

The celebration of life, of all life, is always an opportunity to fix the eye and the heart on what is important. Each life contains a story and is a school. We learn from both. To turn our eyes and heart to those who are part of our daily life, and to those who came before us, is a healthy and necessary exercise to discover part of a body that develops, that moves, which has a past, a present and a future. At the same time, it is an exercise which calls for humility and attention because it means accepting that we need inspiration and encouragement, instruction and counsel, in order to keep alive on our journey, with all the challenges and uncertainties confronting us in our time and space.

The anniversary of the birth of Fr. John Leo Dehon is a welcome moment because we continue to fix our eyes, our heart and our journey on the service of the Gospel. We thank God for the gift of his life, given and shared in a restless search for union with the Lord. His witness and his work, rooted in the contemplation of the love of the Father, in a commitment to Church and society of his time, are open areas for us of solid teaching and friendly advice. This is so true that we can say that Fr. Dehon continues among us the works of spiritual mercy, to teach those who do not know and to advise those who are in need.

The richness of his personality was not an unpredictable conquest, but the result of the good and absolutely free action of God, the contribution of many people, the desire to learn and the sincere will to be accompanied. If today we recognize in him a model of Christian life, it is because with his faith and commitment he lived a real ongoing formation, learning from one and all.¹ He squandered nothing through vanity. He used his talents to effectively understand and serve the world, living all its possibilities and contradictions.

Dehon accepted the challenges of his vocation and his time. In the area of education, he found a way to get involved with the Church in the society of his time. He did it extensively and creatively in a series of initiatives for young people, workers, believers, clergy and entrepreneurs. He organized study circles, the patronage of St. Joseph, and the Collège Saint-Jean. He promoted criteria and ideas through his conferences, sermons and writings. Without a

¹ NQR 37/68-70

doubt, he taught much through his intense work and his valuable advice. This was possible because he himself had received a good education. You cannot give what you have not received.

This is an invitation to look at some guidelines which he lived passionately and faithfully and which made it possible for his words and actions to become a source of life and hope for others. The wisdom tradition of the Bible, so dear to our founder, offers us a good guide: I have read and reread the Book of Sirach. I was totally amazed. The Book is too often overlooked. There needs to be a popular edition, a free translation, a reformulation, an adaptation to our customs.² In this reading, which excited him so much, we recognize the pillars that marked Dehon's life. In this letter, we will draw on three aspects that provide us with a short and concise route:

Associate with a godly person whom you know to be a keeper of the commandments, who is like-minded with yourself, and who will grieve with you if you fail. And heed the counsel of your own heart, for no one is more faithful to you than it is. For our own mind sometimes keeps us better informed than seven sentinels sitting high on a watchtower. But above all pray to the Most High that he may direct your way in truth. (Sir 37.12-15)³

These are clear guidelines. We will examine them briefly, with some reflections of the founder, inviting us to apply them to our personal and community journey.

1. **Associate with a godly person** (Sir 37.12)

The first guideline is to go out of oneself. We need others. When Fr. Dehon recalls significant persons in his history, he often gives names. He does it with gratitude. So, for instance, by way of an example, he recalls his mother Stephanie Vandelet: *My good mother helped me a lot (...) Her pious advice touched me daily.*⁴ He lived until the end of his days in captivating complicity with her. Somewhat later, he says of his spiritual director at the French seminary Santa Chiara in Rome, Fr. Melchior Freyd: *I still feel his advice and reproaches. For me it was a channel of great grace!*⁵ We recall as well those serving in ministry in Saint-Quentin, the Servants of the Heart of Jesus, especially their foundress, Mother Maria Ulrich: *She edified me with her fiery zeal for good.*⁶ And from the world of politics and economics, remember the industrialist Leo Harmel, the apostle of the social doctrine and of workers' circles, in which Dehon participated with such profit: *I have never been their spokesperson nor their speaker. I have spoken only in commissions to ask questions and to be instructed.*⁷ And in

² NQT 39/122.

³ NRSV translation

⁴ NHV 1/16

⁵ A letter to Fr. Eschback on November 25, 1880.

⁶ NHV 10/19

⁷ NHV10/118

the years of the founding of the Congregation, he recalled his bishop, Mgr. Thibaudier: *The one who had the authority to tell me the will of God.*⁸

From a very early age until his final days, Dehon showed a willingness to learn from others, sometimes through reading and study, always open to the many areas of theology and human affairs. He let himself be guided in his difficulties. He consulted in times of adversity and he took responsibility in more complex situations:

*When we had the extraordinary graces from 1878 to 1883, I remained stuck in them, I was pleased with them; I asked for them and it was a mixture of things. I did not know that I needed to use great prudence and caution. Mother Superior was too keen to accept everything. With the permission of providence, the saintly Fr. Modeste, who was guiding us, was not yet introduced to the rules of prudence in the face of such events. Bishop Thibaudier wanted to restrain us. We thought that he was wrong. Mistakes were made. We must atone for them. The Church intervened. The trial was a grace.*⁹

Despite the contradictions that he underwent, he did not become discouraged nor did he fall into pride. By keeping a proper distance, Fr. Dehon and those who profited from his help and counsel, would have found in the words of Pope Francis a summary of the stages undergone by those who through time have learned to their own benefit to welcome the help and counsel of those who do not stop being good companions despite their falls and failures:

*If you are wrong, you are wrong. This happens! Perhaps, when the letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine (of Faith) arrives which says this or that... Don't worry. Explain what must be explained, but go ahead.*¹⁰

2. Heed the counsel of your heart (Sir 37.13)

The second model is a look inside. In the text of Sirach what guides us is the heart – the most intimate and original reality of the person. It remains central between the just person and the subsequent reference to the Most High. It belongs there between the two, where it must remain, getting used to growing and living together. Without them the heart becomes isolated and loses itself. Cordiality does not happen. Dehon has put a guard on his heart and has learned to listen to it since his youth: *Grace moved strongly in my heart.*¹¹ In this interior, mysterious space it became attuned to his true vocation: *Our Lord asks of me more and more to have trust and abandonment.*¹² And here the desire is nourished to answer the call from within: *I hunger for the interior life, for peace, union with our Lord.*¹³ However, it was not always clear what

⁸ NHV 12/140

⁹ NQT 37/79.

¹⁰ CLAR, Audience with Pope Francis. Rome, June 6, 2013.

¹¹ NHV 1/57

¹² NHV 1/57

¹³ NQT 4/114

direction to follow: *At first, the will of God seemed to manifest itself miraculously in us. Now, we must grope towards it, asking every day not to be mistaken.*¹⁴

To give an appropriate answer it is necessary to come out of oneself, not as in a stampede, but as a patient pilgrim who discovers and follows the correct signals along the way. Far from carrying him to an innermost narcissism, his thirst leads him to the source where he was able to channel the social, pastoral, and spiritual impulses of his heart. A whole sequence of faces and interior voices questioned him: *What are lacking in Saint-Quentin as means of action are a college, a patronage and a Catholic newspaper.*¹⁵ Helped by grace and good counsel, Fr. Dehon did not betray his heart. Despite misunderstanding and adversity, his interior tension, his warm-hearted preoccupation, he was not disappointed. He found the key: *If the love of God and for souls abounds, peace and joy will reign in my heart.*¹⁶

3. But above all pray to the Most High (Sir 37.15)

The third model presents us with one of the strongest convictions of Fr. Dehon: *All apostolic life must be prepared from afar by prayer and study.*¹⁷ Knowing himself profoundly loved, he sought at all times to respond to the love of God. This love of the Father, often contemplated in the bowels of the Son, aligned him with the Kingdom, brought him to his neighbour, impelled him to mission: *The Sacred Heart always remembers us, always makes us remember him; we have no other love than his. In our daily prayer, we seek his kingdom and his triumph out of love for him, we pray for our neighbour, we love souls as Jesus loves them and we place them at his disposition in order to work and suffer for souls in the measure that is pleasing to Jesus.*¹⁸

Dehon's plea as well as the plea of his follower who recognizes in wonder the goodness of the master is this: *Come to the school of my heart, he tells us, and meditate the dispositions of my heart and you will see that humility and sweetness are its traits. Imitate this humility and sweetness and you will have found the secret of peace.*¹⁹ In the measure that the heart implores, Dehon learns and enters into the pedagogy of the Heart that loves so much: *It extends its rule over souls, not with force but with persuasion, faith and love.*²⁰ His life became a prolonged meditation on this love: *If you wish the favour of God, here is the way: follow Jesus faithfully, meditate on his mysteries, from the beginning to the end, allow me to penetrate the sentiments of his Sacred Heart and to reproduce its virtues.*²¹

And what about our time? We must continue the educational task of Dehon at the service of the kingdom. Men and women of today, children and youth from so many places and so

¹⁴ NHV 14/186

¹⁵ NHV 9/84

¹⁶ ASC 5/226

¹⁷ CAM 1/198

¹⁸ CAM 1/142

¹⁹ MSC 338

²⁰ ASC 3/269

²¹ ASC 2/232

many conditions, ask for our creativity and our boldness. There are no shortages of challenges, nor opportunities. Let us teach what we have learned: allow yourself to be accompanied, with the full attention of the heart, by the plea of the Almighty. Fr. Dehon again and again reminds us that what we are dealing with is an indispensable gift: *It is fitting that the priests dedicated to his love make education of youth their work of preference. Let us teach children the simple art of loving.*²²

Together, we give to life the style that Fr. Dehon has given us: Let us teach those who do not know and counsel those in need, visiting the right people, giving space to the advice of our heart and invoking the action of the Most High.

This itinerary, active on the individual and community level, will allow the Heart of Jesus to become the source of grace for all whom we meet.



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*Superior General
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²² ASC 4/215.