

*Making a Difference:
Fr. Dehon the Educator
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SCJ Schools in Collaboration
Feast of the Heart of Jesus
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Today, in the Catholic tradition, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Heart of Jesus. Symbol of God's unconditional love for all of creation, the Heart of Jesus is Fr. Dehon's favored image and serves as the principle motivation for his life. In fact, the Priests of the Sacred Heart officially came into existence on the Feast of the Sacred Heart in 1878 when Fr. Dehon publicly professed his vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience according to the Constitutions of the Priests of the Sacred Heart.

Today, we join with SCJs around the globe to celebrate the God of love, to renew our relationship with this God of love, and to recommit ourselves to make a return of love to this loving God. No doubt Fr. Dehon would not only encourage this celebration, but also remind us of the day-in-and-day-out hard work involved in returning love for love.

We need only to hear again the caution from the First Letter of John.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another...We love because God first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

I John 4:7-11, 19-20

The amazing point of God's unconditional love is that God loves us as we are, not as God wants us to be. This does not negate the challenge of continually growing into the persons whom God created us to be, but in this very moment, God loves us as we are. Indeed, being loved "as we

are” is the only effective motivation for our authentic conversion. Being loved “as we are” is the sacred space that nurtures our lasting transformation.

The distressing point of God’s unconditional love is that we can only make a return of love to God by loving our brothers and sisters as they are and not as we want them to be. This does not negate the necessity to correct, rebuke, cajole, model, or pray for our sisters and brothers, but our love for them is not contingent on the change we want to see. Indeed, loving our brothers and sisters “as they are” is the only effective motivation for their authentic conversion. Loving our brothers and sisters “as they are” is the sacred space that nurtures their lasting transformation.

When Fr. Dehon was preparing himself to profess the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as the first member of the Congregation that he was founding, he took, as was the custom in his day, a religious name. He chose, “John of the Heart of Jesus.” He wanted to model himself after the apostle John, who laid on Jesus’ chest during the Last Supper, who stood beneath Jesus’ cross on Calvary, who wrote eloquently on the love that God has for us, and who in his own life returned love for love.

As educators, you probably will be most interested in how Fr. Leo John Dehon returned love for love as founder and superior of St. John’s Institute, a residential high school for boys. There is nothing like an eyewitness, so these are the words of a former student of St. John’s addressing the Alumni Reunion three months after Fr. Dehon’s death.

Dominating above the students, the assistants, and the teachers, an amiable figure stands out, one who is smiling, always smiling, with that beautiful smile which is the reflection of the soul: it is the figure of our Superior. He is tall, slim, supple, and agile in his movements. Through his glasses one can see that his eyes are lively, sparkling, penetrating. His brow is relaxed. He looks you straight in the eye. His words are gentle. His gestures, a little lively, have an inborn distinction which is out of the ordinary. He is easy with everyone. He is obliging to everybody. One does not fear him; one venerates him. One loves him.

A great gentleman, a good Father, and a good teacher—he sees everything that is going on around him. He keeps himself informed regarding our progress. He never takes his eyes off of us. From his room he looks into the courtyard; a corner of his curtain is always raised and sometimes a long finger is lifted to warn the too daring delinquents.

He examines each of us from his place in the dining hall, and he makes sure we are aware of it by tapping the table, by winking.

He does everything for everyone. Both children and grownups understand him. His teaching is simple, luminous, and within the scope of the youngest. All classes of society enter his room. People love to consult him. Men of all ranks, of all conditions leave him with their spirit illuminated, their heart comforted, their conscience lightened and made serene.

Do you remember, gentlemen, how our Superior was worried and nervous when one of us was sitting for his diploma exams or his degree? Ten times, twenty times, he climbed and descended the staircase to see if the person bringing the documents had come. He delayed saying his breviary or reciting his rosary in the teachers' courtyard. At last the telegram arrived. He opened it and said, "Accepted. Accepted with special mention." He passed it around the community, which applauded the happy graduate.

Fr. Guillaume Crinon, former student at St. John's, addressing the Alumni Reunion on November 15, 1925

A student from St. Clement's high school seminary remembers how approachable Fr. Dehon was.

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 youth. He remained dignified and grave, while at the same time, he was very affectionate.

Joseph Monfourny, student at St. Clement's from 1898-1903

His affectionate nature, however, need not fool you. Another alumnus from St. John:

He had "an iron hand in a velvet glove," but he shone above all because of his goodness. He was eminently friendly, while showing great simplicity at the same time. In that period the Institution enjoyed an excellent reputation among families, not only at St. Quentin but also in a large area around the town, and even in Paris.

Dr. Louis August Painetvin, student at St. John's from 1889-1897

Other former students recalled that, "He was firm without being rough" [Jules Bobeuf, student at St. John's from 1891] and "He was a man to 'round off corners' rather than break them. He was loved by everyone" [Dr. Arsène Lecocq, student at St. John's from 1884-1895]. A close associate of Fr. Dehon, and the second Superior General of the Priests of the Sacred Heart noted, "He knew how to charm

and win hearts; above all, young people felt drawn to him. They felt that he loved them” [Bishop Philippe, SCJ].

The local bishop eulogized Fr. Dehon at his funeral liturgy, saying,

Rev. Fr. Dehon’s favorite work was incontestably the Institute of St. John. He had the noble and holy ambition of all the great Christian educators. He wanted to form, to fashion there a fine group of young people. Young people came to him with enthusiasm. With what veneration, what emotion, what pious devotion Fr. Dehon’s former students speak of him. Surely, was he not a truly great man, especially in his heart, when he is loved to this extent?”

Bishop Binet’s funeral eulogy for Fr. Dehon on August 19, 1925

This is what many people saw in Fr. Dehon, the educator. This is what they felt. Of course, there were others who did not appreciate him and who opposed him. The anti-clerical French government of the day did not approve of priests teaching in private schools and passed laws to disband all Catholic institutions. Sometimes students, who were disciplined or dismissed, falsely accused him of impropriety. Even one of his bishops severely criticized his leadership at the school and eventually forced him to resign.

As educators, you know all about the highs and lows of the teaching profession. What keeps you going, I believe, is your dedication to the possibilities of equipping young people with what they need to move into a future in which they can thrive. Usually, at the graduation ceremonies concluding each academic year, Fr. Dehon addressed parents and students. He took these occasions to elaborate on his philosophy of education.

With a broad and practical vision, he writes,

Character formation is the purpose of education. In many institutions which train young people, isn't most all of the attention focused on intelligence? Isn't almost all of the day's schedule devoted to exercise of the mind, which is, essentially, the great preoccupation of the teachers? Are they concerned enough about ways of fostering qualities like perseverance, moderation, dignity, respect, courage, and initiative in the youth? Yet their individual lives will depend more on what they are in terms of heart and character than in terms of the knowledge they have accumulated in their minds.

Dehon, *On the Education for Character Formation*, 1891

Insisting that the consequences of education are not purely personal, Fr. Dehon explains,

Everything that God has given [the student] in terms of talent or genius, everything which education has imparted to him in terms of intellectual and moral strengths; all of this will not only serve him in doing credit to this life; it will also be the instrument of the good which he must do. In the position in life which Providence has accorded him, he will be the missionary of virtue and the living image of Jesus Christ.

Dehon, On Christian Education: Purpose, Methods, Fruits

At one graduation celebration, Fr. Dehon focused his remarks on the study of geography. Appreciating God, “the great artist,” is a task that cannot be confined to books. He asks his audience,

Beauty! What reason can there be for keeping it away from the child’s soul? Were they not made for each other? Who can appreciate beauty better than the young person can? His soul thirst for it...A good trip, long or short, is worth as much as any other recreation or reward. It is a form of study, and one of the best. A liking for it is as valuable as a liking for the club, billiards, or the novel. Contact with beauty beautifies the soul; imposing sights elevate it.

Dehon, On the Study of Geography

Of course, it is the teacher, who facilitates the moral, intellectual, and spiritual awakening in students. Fr. Dehon elaborates on this sacred relationship. Since St. John’s was a boys’ school and its teachers were all male, Fr. Dehon’s references are exclusively masculine. Nonetheless, his perceptions are apropos to all educators. He explains,

The teacher, vis-à-vis his student, has the role of true spiritual paternity. He truly gives him life and the image of his own soul. Intellectual and moral life pours forth from the educator's soul into the soul of his student from two sources: word and example. He communicates his thoughts to him. He reveals the truth to him as his own intellect conceives of it; beauty, as he understands it and as he has learned to love it; good, as his conscience dictates. To point to such a mission is to describe his responsibility as much as his nobility. I also understand that Christian families have high expectations of those whom they accept as second fathers for their children's souls.

Dehon, On Christian Education: Purpose, Methods, Fruits

As he began the project of St. John’s Institute, Fr. Dehon addresses parents and students with the acknowledgment that,

We come before you as educational advocates. We fully realize the importance of the work that we are undertaking. We fully understand our responsibility towards parents

who entrust to us what they hold most dear, towards the society from which we shall train a few selected members, and towards God, who loves childhood so much and who wishes to see it treated with the utmost respect.

Dehon, *On Christian Education: Purpose, Methods, Fruits*

Fr. Dehon characterized the graduation ceremonies as a family celebration “where the teachers, in close union with the parents, take their place in order to give the children an education of the heart as well as cultivation of the mind” [Dehon, *On the Harmony of Science and Faith*]. To those students who will return after a summer’s recess, he says, “We hand you back with trust to the protection of the God who loves you; to the care of your parents who are your visible angels on earth; to the protection of your consciences which God enlightens and strengthens” [Dehon, *On Christian Education, Purpose, Methods, Fruits*].

Fr. Dehon created strong bonds with his students and continued to nurture these relationships long after graduation. Fourteen years after he left St. John’s, he still enjoyed gathering with its alumni. Ever the advocate for the working class and for a just distribution of wealth, he encouraged his former students to join what was called “Catholic action” in order to resist the injustices of the *status quo*. In a speech, Fr. Dehon rallies the alumni, advising,

Always stay young at heart, in action, in zeal! It may be that this zeal is sometimes a little excessive, bold, intemperate, or inconsiderate. Youth has the flaw of these qualities. But exuberance is preferable to inertia and indigence; excess is born of a fullness of life, a force, a vigor which is easier to reduce than to produce from nothing. Around us there are too many egoists, skeptics, pragmatists, and blasé people. In a word, be young!

Dehon, *Speech to Alumni of the Institute of St. John, September 8, 1907*

We have captured a glimpse of Fr. Dehon’s personality through the eyes of his admirers and have caught a sense of his educational philosophy from his speeches. Beyond his efforts to support Catholic education, he championed the role of the Catholic Church in shaping social consciousness. He also founded a religious community of men whose principle aim was to offer themselves completely to the will of the Heart of Jesus in a spirit of love and reparation, and to model this spirit for others to follow.

A critique, with some merit, suggests that Fr. Dehon was scattered, starting too many projects with too few resources. He could have dedicated his entire life to St. John’s high school. He could have poured all his energies into preaching the social encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII. He could have committed himself exclusively to leading the growth of the Priests of the Sacred

Heart. Indeed, some of his own community members accused him of deviating from the original aim of the Congregation by assuming too many commitments. Perhaps.

Fr. Dehon's words to the alumni of St. John's could well have been directed to his detractors within and outside his community. If his zeal is "a little excessive, bold, or intemperate," he explained, "it is an excess born of a fullness of life." No one could accuse Fr. Dehon of being blasé. What kept him young at heart—in zeal and in action?

The answer can be found in Fr. Dehon's faith experience. While this topic has spawned numerous articles, I would like to offer you a simple presentation of his spirituality. What got his attention, what got him going, and what kept him going? To answer these questions, I'd like to invite you into an interactive experience. The simple outline can be adapted easily to any age group. It might be something you can use in your schools.

I'm going to give each of you three cards. Even though you'll probably want to look at them all at once, I'm going to ask you not to do so. Hold the cards in your hands just as I give them to you. Don't flip through them or turn them over. I will give you instructions as we go along.



First Card, Side One: **Everyone wants to be loved.**

- ✓ What do you read and see on this first card?
- ✓ What does the image signify for you?
- ✓ How do you respond to the phrase, "**Everyone wants to be loved**"?

No matter what age, children and adults have a foundational need to be loved. Take the first card and flip it over.

First Card, Side Two: **You are!**

- ✓ The quote from St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians, "**Jesus loves me and gave himself for me**" is the foundational conviction or statement of our Christian faith. Fr. Dehon experienced this in his being. Jesus spent his life doing good to show people that God loved them. Fr. Dehon was so convinced that Jesus loved him that he wanted to return love to God by spending his life doing good in order to help as many people as possible experience that God loved them just as much.
- ✓ This was not always easy, especially for people who were poor, overworked, or unhappy. Fr. Dehon tried to help them by addressing their immediate needs [we call that charity] and by trying to change the system so that they would not be overworked or poor [we call that social justice].
- ✓ He did not always succeed, and others tried to stop him, especially those who rejected any role for religion in society. When he ran into troubles, what he called crosses, he placed his absolute trust in Jesus, saying, "**Since you love me, Jesus, why should I not confide myself to your loving Heart? You will take greater care of me than would a mother.**"

For us and for many people the **heart** is a foundational symbol for **love**. For Fr. Dehon and his religious community, the image of the **Sacred Heart of Jesus** focuses on the open side and pierced heart of Jesus on the cross as a sign of Jesus' total gift of self to us. Jesus loves us **completely and unconditionally**.

That's the good news. The "bad news" is God loves each person completely and unconditionally—including those we don't like, those we don't understand, those who hurt us in some way, even those we consider "enemies."

Now place this first card underneath the other cards.



Second Card, Side One: **Everyone wants to belong.**

- ✓ What do you read and see on this second card?
- ✓ What does the image signify for you?
- ✓ How do you respond to the phrase, "**Everyone wants to belong**"?

No matter what age, children and adults have a foundational need to belong. Take this card and flip it over.

Second Card, Side Two: **You do!**

- ✓ This quote, from the Gospel of John, "**I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who live in me and I in them bear much fruit,**" is the foundational identity of our Christian faith, that is, union with Jesus. This was Fr. Dehon's experience. Jesus taught that we are all connected to him. Jesus says if we stay connected to him, like branches on a vine, we'll be happy and have a good life.
- ✓ But some people act as if they don't want to be connected to others. They think that they have better ways to be happy. They think that if they get ahead of others, or have more than others have, they will be happy, or happier.
- ✓ Fr. Dehon tried to show that we need to be concerned about everyone, not just ourselves or those closest to us. That everyone is important, that everyone counts, that what we do to others we do to ourselves. To practice what he was talking about, he understood being "perfect" as staying united to God through love and by staying united to God's people by treating them with love. Although we may come with a different

definition, “**Perfection,**” for Fr. Dehon, “**is nothing other than union with God through love.**”

For us and for many people, **community** is the foundational experience of belonging. This may be the web of family relationships, associations based on personal interest or profession, or an affiliation with a religious tradition. It is not only acknowledging the presence of others around us, but being intertwined with their lives as the image on the card suggests.

For Fr. Dehon and his religious community, union with Jesus and with others is the way we belong in community—attentive to the needs of others. One of the SCJs’ mottoes is *Sint unum*—the Latin words of Jesus’ prayer at the Last Supper “that they may all be one” [John 17:11, 20]. We express this communion most clearly in the Eucharist, where the entire community shares the one bread and one cup of Jesus’ body and blood.

That’s the good news. The “bad news” is that we’re all connected—even when we don’t want to be. What happens to you happens to me—even if you’re on the other side of the world either literally or figuratively. We are called to share what we have with others who are in need and always to work together. For SCJs, this is a call to work for **justice and reconciliation**.

Now place this second card underneath the other cards.



Third Card, Side One: **Everyone wants to make a difference.**

- ✓ What do you read and see on this third card?
- ✓ What does the image signify for you?
- ✓ How do you respond to the phrase, “**Everyone wants to make a difference**”?

No matter what age, children and adults have a fundamental need to feel that they can make a unique contribution within their family, among their friends, and in the world at large. Take this card and flip it over.

Third Card, Side Two: **You can!**

- ✓ This quote, from the Gospel of Luke, **“The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves,”** is a foundational tenet of Christian service based on Jesus’ own ministry. This was Fr. Dehon’s experience. He believed Jesus who said no matter who you are, you can do something that makes a difference. Jesus called this serving one another.
- ✓ Although we usually hear these words addressed to the “greatest” and to the “leader” as a caution to be humble, this saying of Jesus is also an assurance to the youngest that s/he is just as important as anyone else, and that the one who performs the tasks that few people see or acknowledge are also leaders in the community. Making a difference is not about pride or being better than anyone else is, but rather about being the most loving person you can be in whatever you do, which the image of the **circle of diverse hands imprinted with hearts** depicts.
- ✓ But some people want to *be* served. They want others to do the hard work or the work that no one sees. Some people want to take all the credit or praise for the work that others do. There are those who think that some work is beneath them.
- ✓ Fr. Dehon thought that the best way to move through life and to really make a difference was to do *God’s* will, not his own. He believed that he could do great things, but if that’s not what God wanted, then he was only making a difference in his own life and not in the world. And so, he wrote, **“Let God’s good pleasure be your entire rule, your whole life, your only preoccupation: Lord, what do you want me to do?”**
- ✓ When Fr. Dehon was a student, he took the motto, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” And the answer that he heard was, “right now, to be the best student you can be.”

For us and for many people, this helps us answer the question, “Why am I here?” “What difference does my life make?” “What is my purpose here on earth?”

For Fr. Dehon and his religious community, this entails a fundamental attitude of self-offering contained in their motto, ***Ecce Venio***, the first two Latin words of what Jesus said when coming into the world, “See, I have come to do your will, O God” [Hebrews 10:7]. This self-offering comes from the desire to make a return of love to God who has shown compassionate and

tender love for us. It is the focus of the daily act of **oblation**, another word for self-offering. In living out this oblation, we collaborate with Jesus in building his reign on earth. In yet another motto coming from the prayer that Jesus taught us, the SCJs pray, *Adveniat regnum tuum*, Latin for “Your kingdom come!”

That’s the good news. The “bad news” is that I must always be careful not to confuse what I want or desire, even what I think is important, with what God wants of me. Although the word is scary to most people, Fr. Dehon defines the meaning of **abandonment** as “to want only what God wants.” That sometimes means bearing a cross we would rather not carry. At other times, it might mean to act as Mary did. She said, “yes” to God even though what was being asked of her made no sense. Luke’s Gospel tells us that each time Mary was confronted with experiences she could not understand, she was able to sustain her “yes” because “she treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” [Luke 2:19, 51]. God’s ways are not our ways. We are to make a difference by working for God’s kingdom, not ours.

To me, these three cards represent the spirituality of Fr. Dehon and the spiritual heritage he entrusted to the Priests of the Sacred Heart and educators like you who collaborate with them. I hope that you will draw from this presentation Fr. Leo John Dehon’s deep respect and admiration that he has for you as educators. He knows what’s involved and what’s at stake—nothing less than bringing about the reign of God in a world that in many ways pledges its allegiance to everyone and everything except God.

Knowing a bit more about Fr. Dehon will not necessarily give you pedagogical tools for your classrooms. I believe he respects you enough to trust your gifts as educators and your desire to develop continually your professional skills. What knowing Fr. Dehon can offer you is an awareness of why you do what you do, what gets you out of bed and into the classroom or office each day, how you are able to step over obstacles, and what keeps a smile on your face—in other words, your spirituality.

Clearly, Fr. Dehon is interested in the education and formation of youth, but he is also interested in educators, who willingly take up the sacred task of teaching and mentoring. He wants you to take care of yourself and not burn out. He wants you to recognize your wisdom and values that you naturally pass on to students. And he wants you to do it with love. If you are not doing it with love, he would suggest, you are not doing it for God.

SCJ Schools in Collaboration have rightly focused on educating youth. Perhaps it is time for an additional focus on educators. How can SCJ Schools in Collaboration support, affirm, and

challenge the entire staff at each of your schools? How can SCJ Schools in Collaboration not only nurture, but also celebrate the love by which employees at your schools accomplish their tasks for the benefit of the children?

How might SCJ Schools in Collaboration help teachers and staff to say at the end of the day, the end of the school year, and at the end of their lives, “I am loved, I belong, and I am making a difference”? If they can say that even in the midst of failures and disappointments, they will, in Fr. Dehon’s estimation, be the best mentors for youth who need to hear and believe that they are loved, they do belong, and they can make a difference.