

April 9, 2024

Dear Brothers,

In the first-century Greco-Roman world, women's voices were often muted and their contributions to society were neither highlighted nor acknowledged. I find it refreshing to see women in the New Testament exercising their spiritual gifts, including prophesying and evangelizing. The author of Luke-Acts, for example, portrays women positively, as seen in the birth narrative where Mary's role is



*Station 13 Jesus is Taken Down from the Cross* by Jen Norton

elevated or in the story of a poor widow giving two small coins to the temple. Then, in each of the Gospels, women were the first to witness the empty tomb and tell the apostles about it. Paul also recognized the mutual participation of women in spreading the gospel. In Romans 16, he mentions Phoebe as a “deacon” of the church at Cenchreae, Prisca (or Priscilla as she is known in Acts) as a fellow worker in Christ Jesus, and Junia as well-known to (but also can be translated as “in” or “among”) the apostles.

Considering the attention given to women in the New Testament, I have often pondered the contributions of women in the life and ministry of Fr. Leo John Dehon. Notably, his mother played a significant role in instilling his love for the Sacred Heart. As a priest, he served as a spiritual director to numerous religious communities and women religious, though it should be noted that some had questionable theology and visions that led Fr. Dehon into problems with church authorities. Additionally, when the school he founded faced financial difficulties, he relied on the support of several affluent female donors to sustain it.

While we have a comprehensive understanding of Fr. Dehon's life and his interactions with women, there is one aspect that I am particularly intrigued by and

would like to explore further. I am keen to learn how he collaborated with laywomen in preaching and disseminating the social teaching of the church, especially Pope Leo XIII's encyclicals. Equally, I am eager to understand Fr. Dehon's viewpoint on women in leadership and church ministry.

In a speech to members of the International Theological Commission in November 2023, Pope Francis emphasized the need for a more inclusive female presence in the church. For him, one of our great sins has been the masculinizing of the Church, and he asks us to now demasculinize it. Moreover, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, he reiterates: "The feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society; the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures."

I am proud of our province's collaborative experience with women in leadership. The first layperson to lead Sacred Heart Southern Missions as board president was Sr. Phyllis Vater, SSSF. The current board president is Sr. Cathy Bertrand, SSND. Sr. Maria Vincent Brocato, SCN, once served as executive director. The first woman to chair the Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology Board of Directors was Sr. Camille Kliebhan, OSF. Of course, we are grateful for the many years of service that Dr. Barbara Anne Cusack, Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, has devoted to Sacred Heart; she steps down as board chairperson this year. Throughout our province, women have played key roles in our schools, parishes, and other ministries.



*Women Arriving at the Tomb* by He Qi

While acknowledging this history, how can we, Dehonians, be more mindful of empowering women as lay leaders within our province and our congregation? How can we ensure that women are genuinely represented in the decision-making processes of our apostolates? These are questions I will continue to ask myself as I work with the council and you to lead the province.

Fraternally,