



A Year with Venerable Father Leo John Dehon

Preparing for the centenary of the founder's death in 2025

The second in a series of monthly biographical sketches as we prepare to commemorate the centenary of his death on August 12, 2025

Fr. Leo Dehon: The New Priest

Fr. Dehon had a distinguished and spiritually enriching seminary experience. Studying in Rome, he thrived while immersed in the Catholic environment, learning the richness of the faith, meeting influential theologians and being able to observe the lofty discussions of the First Vatican Council. His mentors had high hopes for where Fr. Dehon's first assignment would be, perhaps a seminary or university. But no. On November 17, 1871, Fr. Dehon arrived to his first assignment, as the seventh curate (somewhat like an associate pastor) in the industrial, crowded, working town of Saint-Quentin, France.



The new priest: Fr. Dehon

Saint-Quentin had long been a town of textiles and weaving, but with the French Industrial Revolution it had become a crowded town of factories and migrants. People left their ancestral villages and moved there in search of jobs. The workers faced long days, sometimes hazardous conditions, poor pay, and had little time for family or church. Children often worked in the factories with their parents or were left on their own. As a young priest from an affluent family, Fr. Dehon could have stayed inside the basilica where he was assigned, taking care of his sacramental duties and ignoring the messy world outside of the church walls. But Fr. Dehon did something very different for his time. His childhood and previous travels fostered his curiosity, so he went out to the streets to meet the people. Later in life he would often advise his priests to "Go to the people!" As he talked with the workers, he learned about their struggles and needs. Right away, he began to think about the larger picture: the economic, political and social structures impacting the life of the people of Saint-Quentin. Indeed, his time in Rome meeting priests and leaders from around the

world prepared him to think creatively about ways to meet the changing needs of the people in his local church. He believed there must be a way for the church to come to the service of the many people in Saint-Quentin.



Young factory workers

His first assignment might have been a surprise and a challenge, but it shaped Fr. Dehon's future ministry. One biographer wrote that Fr. Dehon "was always looking into the distance, carefully watching the horizon so as to

be prepared for whatever tomorrow would bring...in Saint-Quentin, he experienced what mission meant for a priest.”¹

Next month, we will learn how Fr. Dehon’s “Yes” to his ministry led to incredibly good pastoral works. For now, look at the smiles of these children from St. Joseph’s Indian School, part of Fr. Dehon’s lasting legacy.



Quote:

“Go to the people!”

Reflection Question:

Who are the people God is calling you to be present to?

**Learn more about the
Priests of the Sacred Heart
(Dehonians/SCJ) at:
www.dehoniansusa.org**



¹ Yves Ledure SCJ, *A Short Life of Leo Dehon, Founder of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of St. Quentin* (Great Britain: Dehonian Publications, 1998), 52.