



A Year with Venerable Father Leo John Dehon

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

As we prepare to commemorate the centenary of his death (August 12, 2025), these monthly biographical sketches will provide an overview of his life and legacy.

Leo Gustave Dehon: His Early Life

Leo Gustave Dehon was born on March 14th, 1843, in the French town of La Capelle. He was baptized March 24th. He was named Leo after a four year old son the Dehon family lost, who was named in honor of Leo XII. His middle name Gustave was in recognition of Leo's uncle and godfather. His family were prosperous landowners who raised livestock and specialized in racehorses. They were also influential. His grandfather was Mayor of La Capelle (a position his father and brother would also hold during their lives.) As a young boy, little Leo went to the village school and was a quick learner. He was described as lively, very gifted, and mischievous! He also spent time working on the farm and accompanying his mother as she did good works in their town. Leo's mother had a strong devotion to the Sacred Heart. It is said that "Leo discovered the Christ who was gentle and humble of heart, at his mother's knee."¹

Perhaps it was by his father's side that Leo discovered a much wider world. In 1855, Jules Alexandre Dehon took his twelve-year-old son to the World Exhibition in Paris. Leo's horizon of the world greatly expanded beyond what he knew from his village. He saw inventions, art and people from all over the world. Can you imagine how exciting that must have been for a boy of his age? The rest of his life would be full of exploration, curiosity and travel as he sought to learn more about the world in which he lived.

At the age of 16, Leo was sent with his brother Henry to college at Hazebrouck. The school was run by priests, and while Dehon described it as "early rising, little warmth, a lot of work and few days off"² he also viewed the time as one of his greatest blessings. It was at Hazebrouck that his future vocation as a priest was born and nurtured by being immersed in an environment of faith, prayer, and daily Mass.

After completing college, Leo Dehon returned home and told his parents about his call to the priesthood. His father was upset; Jules Alexandre Dehon was not a religious man and he had many worldly aspirations for his son. He could not understand Leo's call. Leo's mother was worried she would lose close contact with him. Both were wrong, but for the time being, Leo listened to them and moved to Paris where he studied law. He remained hopeful he could attend seminary one day. In the meantime, he joined St. Sulpice parish, volunteered in the St Vincent de Paul Society, found a spiritual director and taught the catechism to the underprivileged in the area. He graduated with a law degree in 1862 and received a Doctor of Law in 1864. He created a life that nourished his faith, remaining hopeful that one day he would be able to pursue his vocation as a priest.

¹ Yves Ledure, *A Short Life of Leo Deon*, (Cheshire: Dehonian Publications, 1998), 17.

² Ledure, 20.

After law school, Leo's father still did not support the idea of priesthood and sent Leo on a ten month tour around the world, hoping it would dissuade him. Travelling across Europe to Greece and Egypt, Leo visited many Christian sites, including the Holy Land and then Rome where he met Pope Pius IX. In the summer of 1865, he again spoke with his parents, and finally was able to enroll in seminary in Rome the following fall. He attended the Roman College for his courses, which is known today as the Gregorian College.

In Rome, Dehon met many people who would influence his formation and worldviews. One of his professors, Fr. Jean-Baptiste Franzelin was a Jesuit priest and papal theologian involved in preparing for Vatican I. He influenced Dehon's appreciation of the need for a strong theological foundation for priests. Dehon served as a stenographer at Vatican I during his time in seminary. The experience, combined with his travels, further opened his eyes to the universality of the Church and expanded his vision of what could be.

Fr. Dehon's ordination to priesthood had special significance. It was originally to be in June of 1869. His parents were visiting Rome for a few months, due to leave in February. One of the priests suggested moving the ordination up so that his parents could be present. His parents, whose hearts had finally opened to Leo's vocation, were in agreement. In fact, Leo's father presented the petition to Pius IX for Leo to be ordained before the conclusion of his studies. Leo Gustave was ordained a priest on December 19th, 1868, in the Lateran Church of St. John in Rome, with both parents in joyful attendance.

Dehon's six years in Rome were very fruitful. Not only did he receive doctorates in philosophy, theology and canon law, but his spirituality was deeply enriched, his view of the world and Church expanded, his familiar relationships restored, and he made many lifelong connections and friends. Now he needed to decide his path. On one hand, he felt called to be part of a religious community. On the other, he was drawn to higher education, specifically improving formation programs for priests. After prayer and discernment, he decided to put himself under the authority of the Bishop of Soissons, who appointed him as a priest to the basilica in St. Quentin.

Next month, we will resume his story as he begins his priestly ministry!

Quote:

"Lord, what will You have me do?"

Early in Leo Dehon's seminary studies, Leo took these words of St Paul (Acts 9:6) and made them his motto.³

Reflection Questions:

What is God calling you to do? How do you remain trusting and hopeful when plans are delayed?
Where do you find spiritual strength?

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



³ Henry Dorresteyn, SCJ, *Leo John Dehon: Priest of the Sacred Heart*, (Translated by the American Province, Milwaukee: Monastery Press, 1963), 33.