



# Fr Dehon's Faith Journey: His Life, His Words, His Work

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The man, the priest, and the founder of a religious community, whom we know as Fr. Dehon was given at baptism the name, “Leo Gustave.” Later, he chose the religious name, “John of the Heart of Jesus.” His name choice is significant because it points to his faith experience, in which the Priests of the Sacred Heart and Dehonian Associates are rooted.

“The open side and the pierced Heart of the Savior most meaningfully expressed for Fr. Dehon a love whose active presence he experienced in his own life. Fr. Dehon saw the very wellspring of salvation in this love of Christ, who accepts death as the ultimate gift of his life for people and as filial obedience to the Father. From the Heart of Jesus, open on the cross, human beings are reborn in heart, animated by the Spirit, and united with their brothers and sisters in the community of charity, which is the Church.” Dehonian Associates Rule of Life #2-3



Dehonian spirituality is equal parts “inspiration” and “perspiration.” Like every authentic spirituality, it has consequences that touch every aspect of one’s life, that make a difference in the way one lives, and that greatly benefit others.

“Fr. Dehon was very sensitive to sin, which weakens the Church. He was aware of social evils; he had carefully studied their human causes, both individual and social. But he saw the refusal of the love of Christ as the deepest cause of this human misery. Caught up in this often-unrecognized love, he wanted to respond to it by being intimately united to the Heart of Christ and by establishing his reign in individuals and in society.

“This union with Christ, which sprang from the depths of his heart, had to be actualized in his whole life, above all in his apostolate. This apostolate was characterized by the greatest care for people, particularly the most deprived, and by concern about actively remedying the pastoral inadequacies of the Church in his time.” Dehonian Associates Rule of Life #4-5





It would be a mistake, however, to think that Leo John Dehon was born with this spirituality or that he came to it on his own. His story is a journey of faith, gradually unfolding through both missteps and a deepening awareness of his vocation.

Leo Dehon was born in the middle of the 19th century, approximately 50 years after the French Revolution. In the 80 years following the revolution, France experienced the upheaval of seven different ruling governments as the people struggled between monarchy and democracy. This was also the time of the invention of the steam engine and the beginning of the industrial revolution.

# The Dehon Family Home



Cities with factories became more valuable than farmland. Although Dehon's family descended from rich landowners, this source of wealth began to decline. Leo's father, Alexander Jules Dehon, owned a farm and worked it himself. He married Adele Belzamine Vandalet and together they had three sons. They named their first son Leo, but he died at the age of four. Next came Henry, and then the youngest, whom they named after the child's godfather and their deceased son.



Like many adult children, Leo would look back on his parents and discover what they meant to him.



Adele Belzamine Vandalet Dehon

He credits his mother with the gift of faith. “To some degree, the beautiful soul of my mother passed into my own. I want to thank our Lord for having given me such a mother, for having initiated me, through her, in the love of his Divine Heart.”

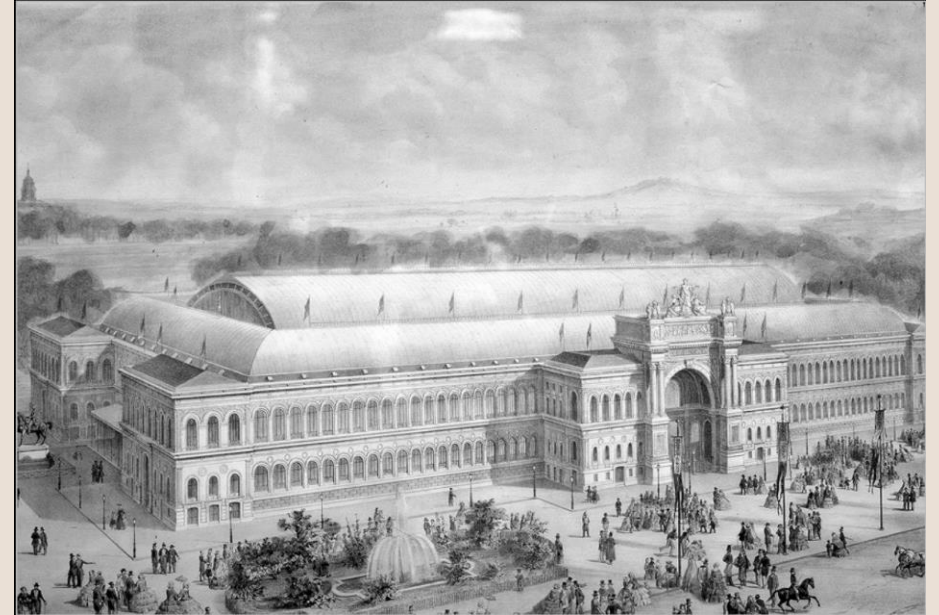
His mother was also very involved in charitable work among the townsfolk. It is said that “Leo discovered the Christ who was gentle and humble of heart, at his mother’s knee.”

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



Alexander Jules Dehon

“My father,” he wrote, “learned the spirit of fairness and kindness which characterized his whole life. In high school, he stopped practicing his Christian faith, but retained a respect for it.”



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. 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.



School at Hazebrouck: The Dehons sent Leo and his brother to a boarding high school. During his first year in high school Leo joined the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Dreaming about his future, Leo sometimes thought of being a priest and decided on this vocation in his second year of high school. “It was strengthened on Christmas night. What is astonishing is that since then my resolution was never seriously shaken.”





Leo graduated from high school at 16 years of age. “My success filled my father with delight. He was not ambitious for himself but he was for me. He wanted to see me attain some high position.” His father started dreaming about his son as an engineer, a mayor, or a diplomat and told him to put aside any plans for priesthood



His father insisted that Leo attend a technical school in Paris to prepare for an honorable career. Leo finally focused on studying law. He attended Mass regularly, once again became involved in the Vincent de Paul Society, and taught catechism to neighborhood children.

During the break following his second year in law school, Leo and his cousin spent three months in London learning English. Returning to school in the fall, he successfully passed the necessary examinations and received his first degree in law. He would continue studying until he obtained a doctoral degree.

Although his father was happy with his son's success in law, he was not ready to give permission for Leo to begin studying for the priesthood. A friend suggested a yearlong trip to the Middle East. Leo Dehon's father was more than willing to support this plan because he thought the worldly experience would finally change his son's desire to enter the seminary. Yet the opposite happened.

Although Leo's grandmother advised, "He will be happy if that's his vocation," her wisdom could not resolve the conflict. "I had to become hard of heart to resist all the storms of opposition I experienced," Leo recalled. "I told my parents that I was of age and expected to be free. It was finally agreed that I could leave, but tearful scenes occurred often."







When Leo Dehon arrived at St. Clare Seminary in Rome, after experiencing his parents' strong opposition to his dream of becoming a priest, he felt relief. "At last I was in my right element," he wrote, "I was happy."

In preparation for his study of theology, Leo spent his first year in Rome earning a doctoral degree in Philosophy. Returning to Rome for his second year, Leo began his study of theology. Privately, he read books on economics. In his free time, along with other seminarians, he once again taught catechism to children in a local parish.



Leo considered his third year of study in Rome to be “one of the best of my life.” He felt that Jesus was helping him, step by step, to grow closer to his divine Heart. Leo prayed he would do only what Jesus wanted him to do. He knew that the future was beyond his reach. “Right now,” Leo wrote in his diary, “all that God asks of me is to be the best student I can be.” He wanted to be holy and realized that this could happen if he did ordinary things with great love for God.



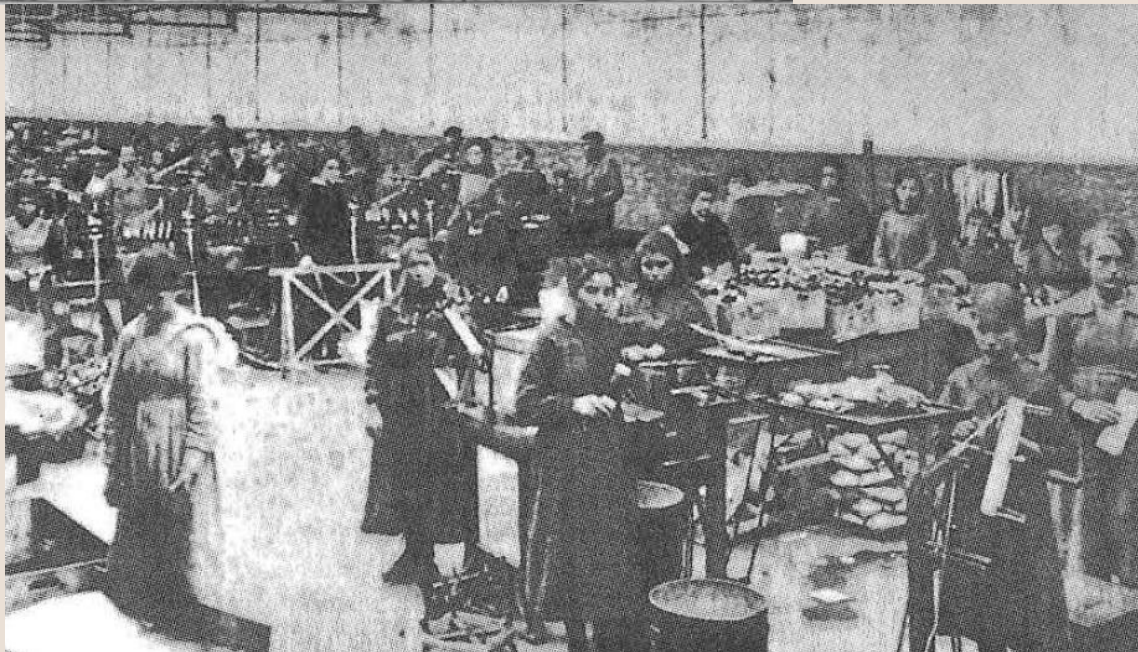
During his fourth year of study, his parents travelled to Rome and were present at his ordination. Recalling that special day, Leo wrote, “My good parents were behind me weeping. After the ordination ceremonies, my mother knelt at my feet to receive my first blessing. It was too much; I burst into tears. My father was completely won over. He promised to receive Holy Communion the next day at my First Mass at the seminary.”



Although ordained a priest, Leo still had another year of study. His fifth year at the seminary provided the opportunity of a lifetime. The Pope invited bishops from all over the world for a meeting called the First Vatican Council. Leo was one of twenty-three seminarians selected to be stenographers. Leo met many interesting people and expanded his limited vision of the Church. Reflecting back, Leo notes, “I was able to feel at my fingertips the very life of the Church, and I acquired more experience in one year than I could have in ten ordinary years of life.”

During the Vatican Council, Fr. Dehon received an invitation to join a religious community that was hoping to establish a university in France focusing on advanced studies for priests. It was an attractive offer, but for the moment, he decided to ask his Bishop for an assignment in his home diocese.





Thinking that he would receive an appointment as a teacher, he was quite surprised to be assigned as the seventh priest in a huge parish of mostly factory workers. “This assignment was absolutely contrary to what I had desired for so many years—a life of recollection and study.”

As a seminarian, Leo Dehon prayed to do only what Jesus wanted him to do. At this moment, however, God’s plans did not seem to match Fr. Dehon’s dream for his priesthood. With great faith he responded, “Fiat,” a Latin word that translates Mary’s response, “Let it be done,” to the surprising message she received from the angel Gabriel. Throughout the rest of his life, when his plans or dreams did not work out as he intended, Fr. Dehon faithfully replied, “Fiat.”



As the youngest assistant, Fr. Dehon was assigned the early and late Masses. In addition to the regular pastoral duties, his particular responsibility was the care of the schools. He attempted to visit parishioners in their homes, but there was little time. He was a bit overwhelmed. “In parishes of thirty thousand souls,” he complains, “no Christian community can be built up. It would be impossible—the shepherd must know his sheep. When the funerals are over, the day is almost done; and the unfortunate priest gets home dead tired.”







Within two weeks of his assignment, however, Fr. Dehon saw what the parish needed. “For the good of the apostolate in St. Quentin, we are badly in need of a Catholic high school, a youth center, and a Catholic newspaper.” It would take some time, but Fr. Dehon initiated all three projects. The first was the youth center, where boys could gather after school hours. Eventually, the youth center had rooms for recreation and learning, a gymnasium, a library, a bank in which to deposit savings, and a chapel. It even sponsored a band and a chorus.

He hoped to train the boys morally and spiritually, in their trades and in their religion. This would have no lasting effect, however, if the situation in the factories and workshops didn’t change. He warned employers, “You tear down, during those long dark nights of six workdays, what we so laboriously build up on these blessed Sundays. You do not behave as Christians should in dealing with the workers.”

To address this pastoral need, he organized a Workers' Union at the youth center for older boys, taught courses in social economy, established a study club for future employers, met regularly with present employers, and was instrumental in forming a Diocesan Office of Social Work. Active in regional conventions that focused on the rights of workers, he encouraged seminaries to include pastoral training for the pressing social issues of the day.

Indeed, Fr. Dehon critiqued a popular pastoral manual for priests that suggested focusing only on children, the elderly, the sick, and the poor because hardly nothing can be done for men and women of working age. "Those statements exasperate us," Dehon cried, "They distort the true Christ when they depict him as a timid apostle to children and the sick."

In all of this activity, Dehon consciously sought out the help of laity. From the financial support of donors and the work of volunteers at the youth club, to the promotion of social action on local, regional, and national levels, he praised the Catholic laity "because they have worked with so much zeal, consistency, and self-sacrifice."



Although he was doing good and necessary work, he felt something valuable slipping away. “My present busy life is too intense for me. The work is becoming too much for me to handle. I can no longer find time for solitude.” He was not afraid of work but wanted to balance it with a regular practice of prayer. He thought that joining a religious congregation might help him keep that balance.

He looked for a Congregation that was devoted to the Heart of Jesus and practiced a spirit of reparation. After some disappointing attempts, he wrote in his diary, “Finally, I began to wonder whether it might not be the plan of Providence that I should start something on my own.” He spoke with his Bishop, who responded, “You want to form a Congregation of priests; I would like to have a high school in St. Quentin. You could begin your Congregation in the form of a high school.

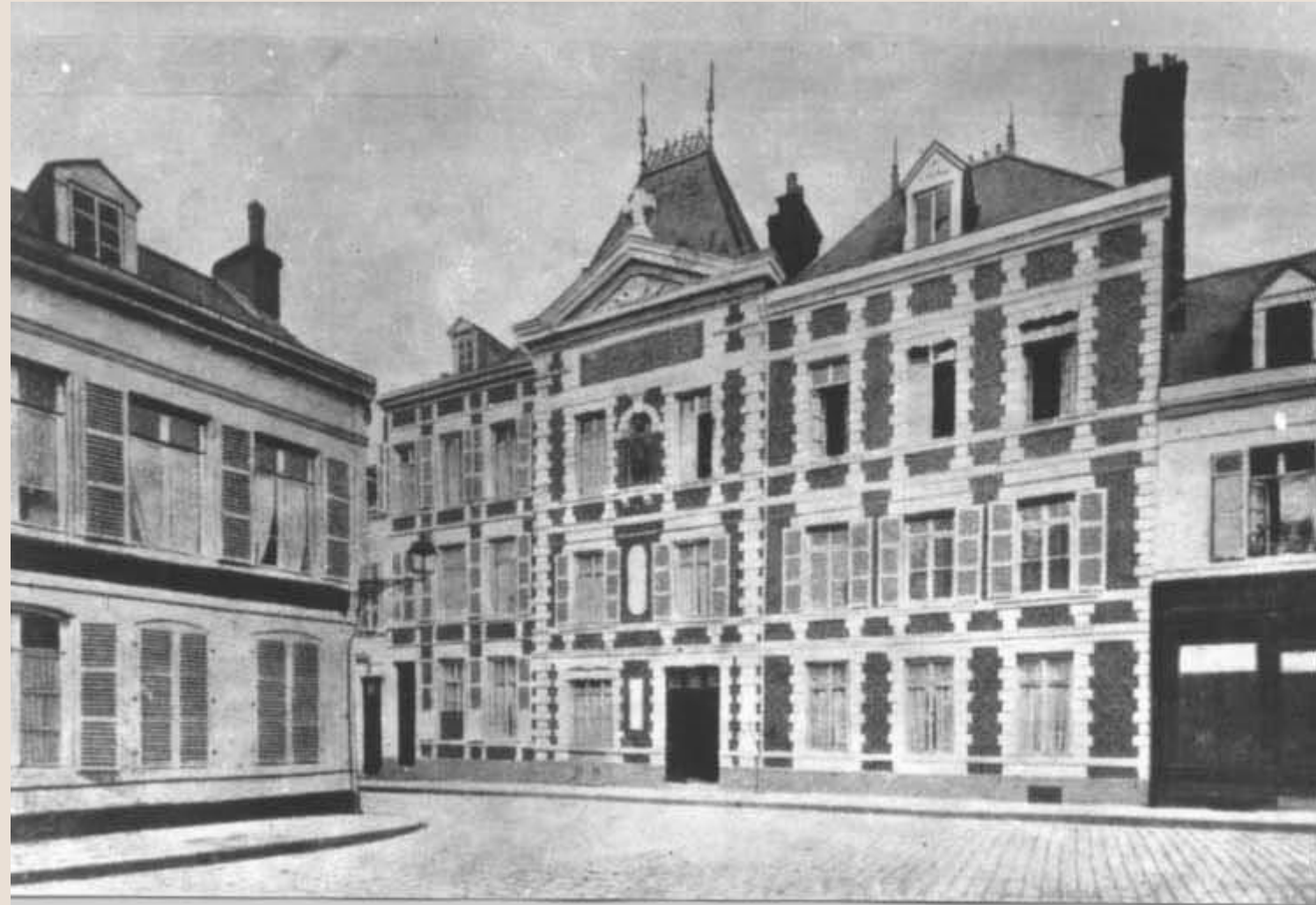




Fr. Dehon wrote the Constitutions for this new religious Congregation that he named, “Oblates of the Heart of Jesus.” After nearly a year of spiritual preparation, he professed his temporary vows on June 28, 1878, the Feast of the Sacred Heart. On that day, another diocesan priest joined him and began his yearlong preparation before professing his vows. Soon after, Fr. Dehon founded an association, which both men and women, and both clergy and laity could join in order to integrate the spirituality of the Oblates into their daily lives.

The first ministry of the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus was St. John's High School, which Fr. Dehon established on an act of faith and confidence. Over the years, Fr. Dehon spent eight hundred thousand francs of his own money on the high school. Both faculty and students alike had warm memories of Fr. Dehon as an "unforgettable educator."

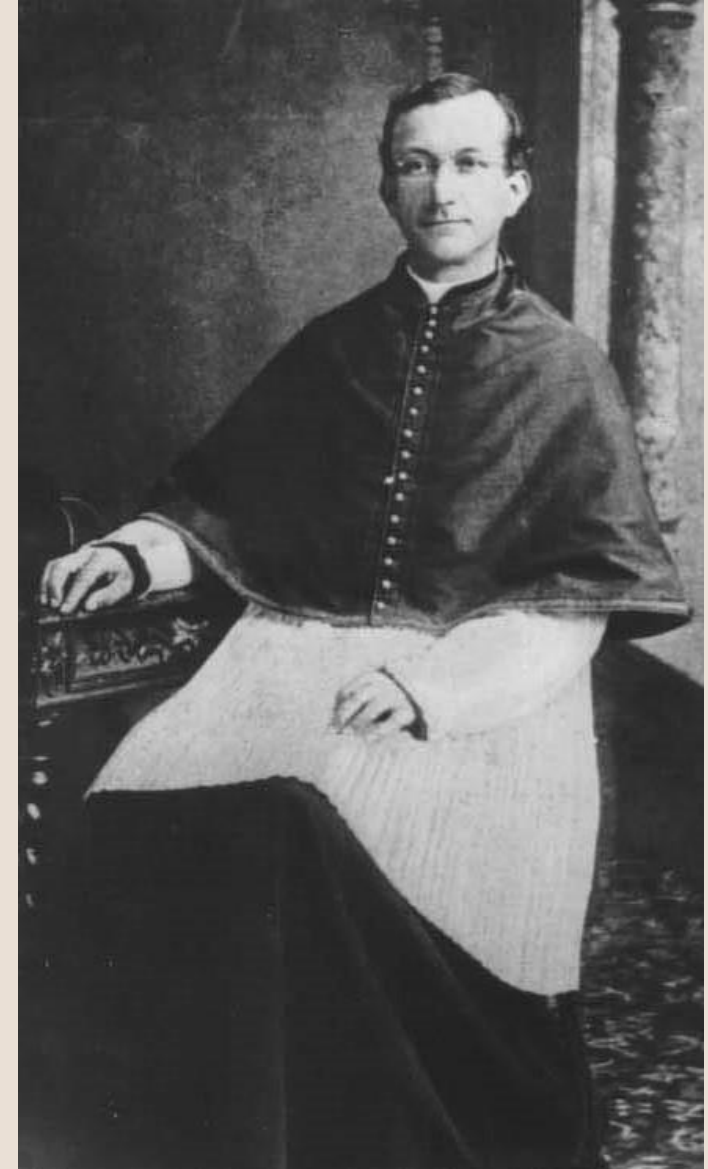
Although the Bishop greatly respected Dehon and his work at St. John's High School, he cautioned him regarding "the continually increasing sources of revelation from which you unfortunately derive such strength." The Bishop referred simultaneously to two very distinct issues. The first concerned some mystical graces that a religious Sister experienced, and which confirmed for Fr. Dehon the spirituality of the Oblates. The second focused on the delusions of a member of the Oblates, who in claiming that he received revelations from angels, justified his questionable behavior as superior of the minor seminary.



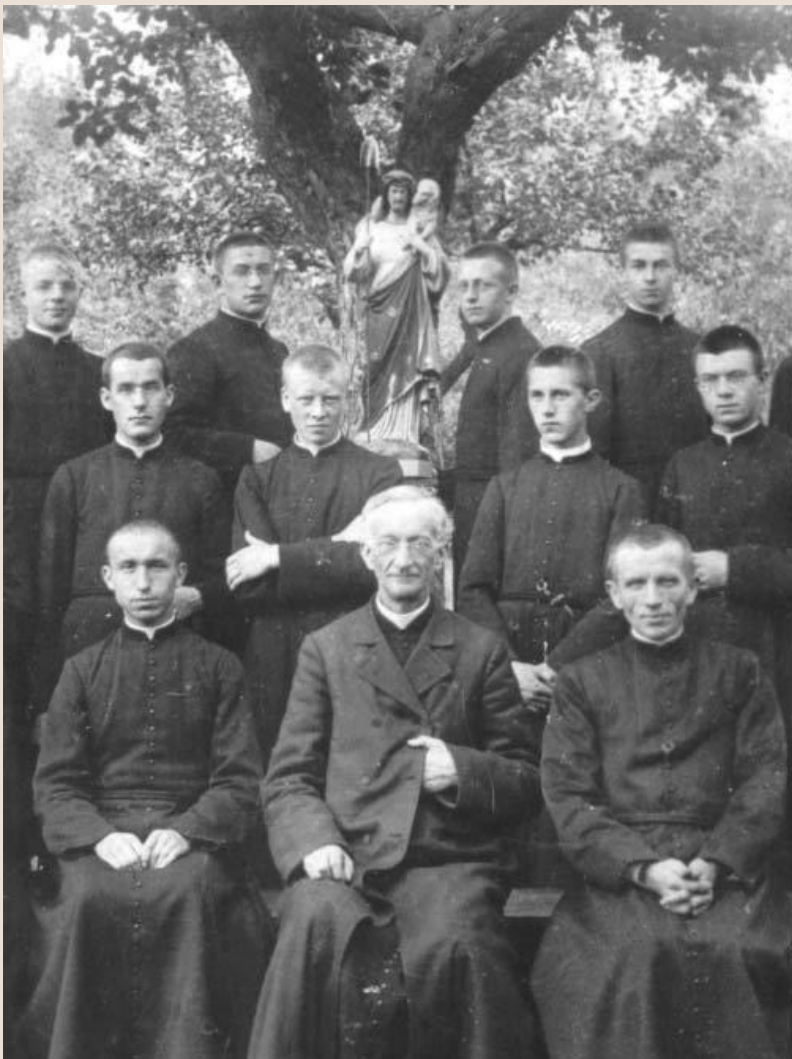
The more Fr. Dehon respected the spiritual insights of the religious Sister, the less he accepted those of the superior of the minor seminary. The Bishop asked the advice of experts at the Vatican and much to the surprise of the Bishop and the distress of Fr. Dehon, the Vatican dissolved the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus because it appeared that they were founded on “alleged revelations which cannot be considered authentic.”

In a letter to the Bishop, Fr. Dehon characteristically expresses the essence of his spirituality. “Your Excellency knows that I founded the Institute of the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus for the purpose of fulfilling God’s will and propagating his glory. The Master asks me now to destroy what he has asked me to build. I have not the slightest wish to resist. That would be foolish. It is a fiat. You know already how much it hurts me. Death would be a hundred times easier to bear. What torments me the most is this thought: the Master willed this work and through my fault it has failed.”

After more communication with the Vatican, the Bishop understood that he was able to resurrect the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus as a new Congregation under a new name. The Oblates became the Priests of the Heart of Jesus. With a new start, the Congregation began to flourish.







At a time when the French government stirred anti-Catholic sentiment, and priests ministered only to those who came to church, two Priests of the Sacred Heart began to walk the streets of St. Quentin. Dressed in cassocks, they were an unusual site. The people's distrust, however, gradually turned to deep respect. Members of the Priests of the Sacred Heart preached retreats throughout the diocese, became chaplains to factory workers, continued the work at St. John's high school, and remained involved in social issues.

Only four years after the Oblates became the Priests of the Sacred Heart, Pope Leo XIII acknowledged their growth with an official approval called the Decree of Praise. When Fr. Dehon travelled to Rome to thank the Pope personally for this affirmation, he took to heart the Pope's request to, "Preach my encyclicals." The Pope had been writing on contemporary issues of employment, the economy, and the need to protect the rights of workers.



For the next fifteen years Fr. Dehon was a tireless interpreter of Leo XIII's social teachings. He promoted Christian social values mainly through his publications, such as the periodical, *The Reign of the Heart of Jesus in Souls and Societies*, *Christian Social Manual*, and *Papal Directives on Political Questions*. He also participated in Congresses of Social Studies throughout the region, and was president of the Diocesan Committee for Social Studies. Dehon addressed particularly the clergy, writing, "Social activity is not opposed to priestly work; it is by means of it that we prepare the social reign of Christ."

The many commitments which the Priests of the Sacred Heart readily accepted became problematic. Those in training were cutting corners with their education, and financial demands resulted in overdrawn accounts. The bishop wanted Fr. Dehon to resign as rector at St. John's High School and affiliate his Congregation with another. Although painful, Fr. Dehon resigned as rector. He also inquired with several Congregations for a possible merger, but this never materialized.

The first foreign mission of the Priests of the Sacred Heart was in Ecuador, but political upheaval in this country quickly ended this work. Two of the missionaries, who returned from Ecuador, soon after went to the Congo, where the Priests of the Sacred Heart have ministered ever since.



St. Gabriel's Mission Station, Stanleyville, Congo



Fr. Dehon authored books, not only on social concerns, but also on spirituality. Among the meditation books are *The Month of the Sacred Heart*, *Life of Love Towards the Heart of Jesus*, and *The Priestly Heart of Jesus*.

By the end of the 19th century, the French government grew increasingly anti-Catholic and finally forced the closing of over 130 Catholic schools, the dissolution of several thousand religious institutions, and the confiscation of their properties. As a civil lawyer, Fr. Dehon fought back. In the end, he was able to maintain his personal property, but the Congregation was forbidden to exist in France.

The exiled members settled in Belgium. In the meantime, the Priests of the Sacred Heart had expanded to Holland, Germany, Brazil, Czechoslovakia, and Canada.





In 1910, Fr. Dehon travelled around the world. Several friends had insisted that he should attend the Eucharistic Congress in Montreal. This would present an opportunity for him to visit western Canada where he had just established a foundation, and make the return trip through Asia and the mission centers in India. From France, he sailed to the United States where he visited New York City, Philadelphia, the Booker T. Washington Institute in Tuskegee, New Orleans, St. Louis, Chicago, and Detroit before traveling to Montreal. After visiting his missionaries in western Canada, he toured San Francisco. From there he sailed to the Philippines, Indonesia, and India before returning to France.

About this trip, he wrote, “I am going about from mission to mission and everywhere I am greatly edified. The missionaries are very generous and devoted. We too, could bring a great deal of joy to our Lord and the Church if we had more missionaries.” Today, the Priests of the Sacred Heart serve in some of the places he visited, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and India.



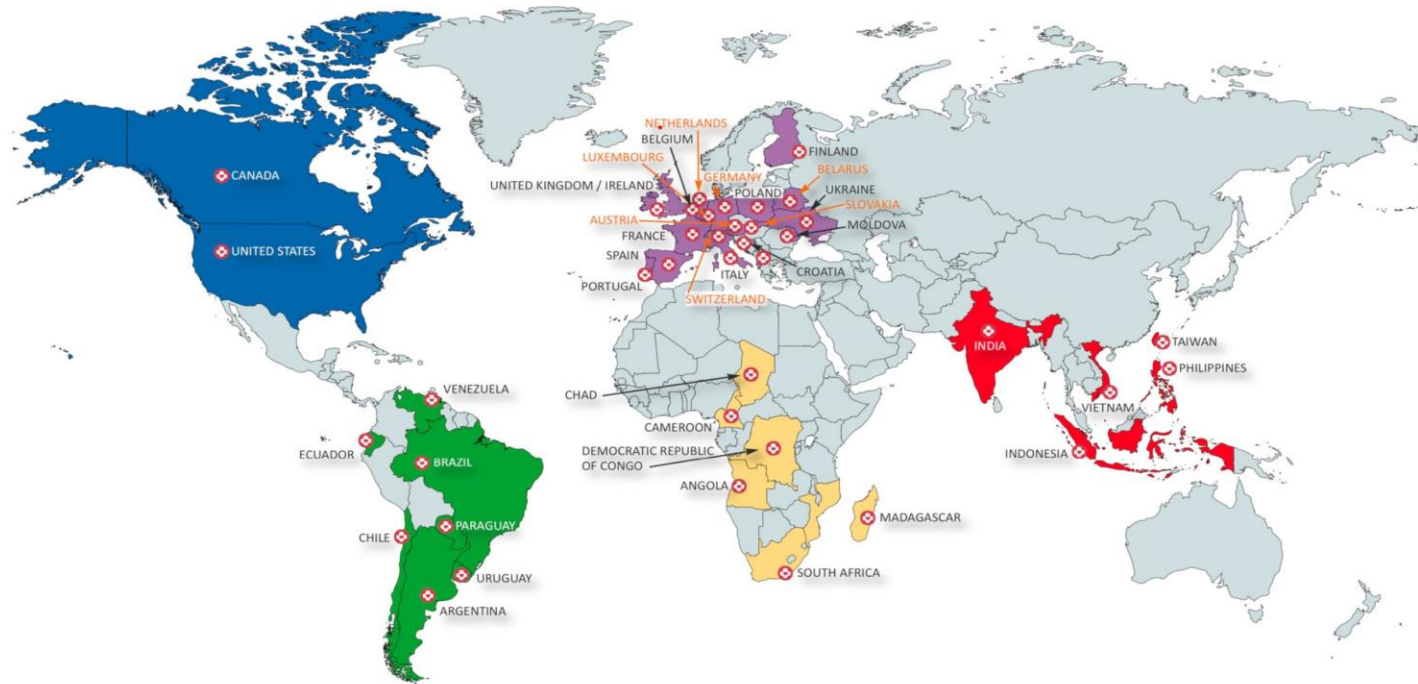
World War I brought devastating destruction to France and particularly the area around St. Quentin including the St. John Institute. Loss of life and property was a heavy burden for Fr. Dehon to bear. Once again, the Congregation was in debt and the training of students was in disarray. In spite of this, the Priests of the Sacred Heart continued to expand into Finland, Cameroon, Italy, and South Africa.



To his immense satisfaction, Fr. Dehon was able to see his great lifework completed when the Congregation obtained its final approval from Rome on December 5, 1923. Less than two years later, Fr. Dehon died at the age of 82. In his funeral sermon the bishop said, “Like all good priests, Fr. Dehon did not shut himself up in the ivory tower of his intellectual superiority, but threw himself wholeheartedly into work, especially in work among laborers. I wonder whether Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, ever knew a more zealous disciple.

“But Fr. Dehon’s best-loved undertaking was undoubtedly St. John’s High School. Young men went to him eagerly. With how much veneration, how much warmth and pious respect, Fr. Dehon’s former pupils speak of him. Must not one be very great of heart to merit so much love? And now, that great old man, with his ever youthful, ever confident, ever optimistic heart, has risen to the eternal youth of Christ, to whose Heart he had dedicated himself and had penetrated so deeply into the most sublime manifestations of the divine love of Jesus.”





The consequences of Fr. Leo John Dehon’s life and spirituality are still unfolding. Today, there are over 2,200 Priests of the Sacred Heart in more than forty countries on five continents. There are even more collaborators who work with the Dehonians, spreading the charism of Fr. Dehon.

The Church declared Fr. Dehon a “Servant of God” in 1952, and as “Venerable” in 1997. His legacy continues around the world with over 2800 members in over 40 countries who are bringing the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to those in need.



“Dehonian Associates enable more people to share on a personal and profound level the spirituality of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, founded at St. Quentin, France, in 1878, by Fr. Leo John Dehon. He received the grace and mission to enrich the Church with a community alive with his Gospel inspiration. This community and the entire Dehonian Family are called to make this inspiration live by responding to the urgent needs of the Church and of the world.” Dehonian Associates Rule of Life #1





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to David Schimmel, who produced 99% of the material!

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