



## A Year with Venerable Father Leo John Dehon

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

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

### Fr. Leo John Dehon: Social Questions of His Day

In 1871, Fr. Dehon started his first assignment as a priest, in the working city of Saint-Quentin, France. Going out and meeting the people in his parish, he found there were many social problems to be faced: migrants who moved from their ancestral villages and were now living in very poor and harsh conditions, factories that had hazardous working environments with long hours and low pay, insufficient educational opportunities for the poor, and a society becoming more and more secular. Fr. Dehon had imagined a life of intellectual and spiritual study, perhaps teaching at a seminary, instead, he found himself in the messiness of the daily struggles of people in 19<sup>th</sup> century France.



Fr. Dehon brought an open heart and mind to the situation. Within two weeks of his assignment, Fr. Dehon saw what the parish needed, writing: "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 took some time, but Fr. Dehon initiated all three projects. The first was the youth center, where boys gathered 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.



*Factory workers*

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.

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.”



*Fr. Dehon and parishioners*

Saint-Quentin was the beginning of Fr. Dehon’s many pastoral works as a priest. Although this was not what he planned, Fr. Dehon had great faith in God’s plans. He gave his “Yes” to God’s call just as Mary responded “Fiat” when the angel Gabriel gave her the news of God’s plans. The Gospel of Luke (1:38) recounts Mary’s words at the Annunciation: “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to God’s will”. Fr. Dehon, also with great faith, responded “Fiat.” Throughout the rest of his life, when his plans or dreams did not work out as he intended, Fr. Dehon would continue to faithfully reply, “Fiat.” “Ecce Ancilla” is a common phrase you will hear Dehonians say, and it refers to Mary’s “Fiat.” May we all live with such openness to receive Jesus into our lives.



*St. Joseph’s School*

Many priests of Fr. Dehon’s time saw religious life as a withdrawal from the world, but Fr. Dehon came to see ministry as an apostolic community supporting each other in the midst of the world. Next month we will learn about Fr. Dehon’s establishment of just such a religious community.

**Quote:**

*“May the disposition of my heart be a perpetual fiat and an unshakable peace!”*

**Reflection Question:**

How do we say “Yes” to God’s call in our lives?

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