



A Year with Venerable Father Leo John Dehon

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

The fourth 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: The Longing for Religious Community

At 33, Father Dehon found life smiling on him: his ministries were a success, he was esteemed by his bishop and he was welcome throughout the city. But 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. 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."

In July 1877, Father Dehon started the high school (St. John) 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" and he was so good to his students that they called him the "tres bon pere," "very good father" in French. He also began a year of intense preparation for his new religious congregation. Fr. Dehon wrote the Constitutions for this new religious Congregation that he named "Oblates of the Heart of Jesus." The following June on the

Feast of the Sacred Heart, he made his first vows. 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. Receiving the proper approvals of the Congregation from the Vatican would take many years, and with further discernment, the name of the order eventually evolved into the Priests of the Heart of Jesus, and today are known as The Priests of the Sacred Heart.

His congregation, modeled after the love of the Heart of Jesus, became the new means for Fr. Dehon to realize his dream of uniting himself to the love of God while sharing that love with others. The good works and deep spirituality of the order became widely known, and eventually missionaries were sent



to many parts of the world. The fruits of Fr. 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, who are bringing the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to those in need.

In all of his life, Fr. Dehon lived by Jesus’ words from Hebrews (10:7): “Behold I come to do your will, O God.” This is translated in Latin as *Ecce Venio*, and it was a motto he lived by. It starts with understanding Jesus’ offering to do God’s will, and then invites us to give our offering united with Jesus to do God’s will. *Ecce Venio* encourages us to have to a spirit of availability to do God’s will, just as Fr. Dehon did.

Quote:

“In difficulties, let us turn to the Heart of Jesus, and let us strive at every moment to do the will of God, even in little things, so that we may be able to do it in greater matters and become the instruments of his will.” – Fr. Leo John Dehon, SCJ, *Daily Notes*, January 28, 1868

Reflection Question:

Are we available to do God’s will?

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

