

The following is the text of an in-service presentation given to staff of Sacred Heart Southern Missions by Fr. Jim Schroeder, SCJ in February, 2025:

HEARTS OF FLESH AND NOT OF STONE: How Did I Get Here, and Where is This Leading Me?

Conference I: How did I get here?

God says to us: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” It’s the Prophet Ezekiel who tells us this in Chapter 36 verse 26. We talk about heart a lot among the SCJs and in the Sacred Heart Southern Missions. It is important to remember that when we talk about the heart of Jesus, we are not talking so much about the physical organ of his heart but about his person, his way of living among us. We do this regarding others. We might say, She is such a pure heart, or He has a heart as big as all outdoors. Pope Francis, in his new encyclical letter on devotion to the Sacred Heart, entitle “He Loved Us,” speaks of how we preserve all the precious memories of our childhood in our heart. We are talking about love: Jesus’ love for us as a human, his love for us as the Son of God, and his love for his heavenly Father. He always loves us first.

You who have raised, or are still raising children, know how easily little ones learn to love and say, “I love you, Mommy,” or “I love you, Daddy.” We humans, like dogs and other species, are pack animals. Even dogs and elephants know when one of their own, or a human is dead or in distress and show it. We naturally have feelings for others. In a hospital new-born unit, if one baby cries, others join in because they somehow feel the distress, too. This is what we call EMPATHY, the ability to emotionally understand what other people feel, see things from their point of view, and imagine yourself in their place. Essentially, it is putting yourself in someone else’s position and feeling what they are feeling. The term was first introduced in 1909 by the psychologist Edward B. Titchener, as a translation of the German term “EINFUHLUNG” —meaning “feeling into.” This is why meditation on the mysteries of the life of Jesus is so important, it gives us a share in the mind and heart of Jesus.

Now, just as we can get arteriosclerosis, hardening of the arteries, we can get sclerocardia, or hardening of the heart. Because as children we all have tender hearts we easily get hurt, and we can try to toughen up so we don't get hurt again. I remember once when I was in college I got emotionally hurt very badly in a relationship and I vowed I would never get close to anyone anymore. Now, that was rash, and I later decided to change my mind on that. Many of you have suffered all kinds of wrongs in relationships, in work, and with children. It is easy to get tough, but God calls us again and again to return to being tender-hearted.

When Leo Dehon got his first assignment as a priest, he said that pastors need to get out of their churches and go to the people, because he had a heart for people. Like Pope Francis today, he said that a shepherd needs to know his sheep, and the sheep their shepherd. Religion and prayer and spirituality are important, but there is a hierarchy of needs: We first have to attend to humans' basic physical needs and safety. How did Leo develop this HEART for others? He was named after an older brother who died at age 4, so his Mom Stephanie was very protective. He was a "replacement child," as they are called, and I think this contributed to his wish to make reparation. He said he stayed in the house with his Mom and followed her everywhere. She was the guiding force behind all the charitable works in their town. She called it the Work of St Joseph and supported it for 30 years. So, even as a young boy Leo, who was quite rich, met and cared for the poor and deprived. This gave him a new heart.

When he was 12 and went to boarding school, because his town did not have a good high school, he joined a Vincent de Paul Conference and became its secretary. Thus he got to know and help poor people there. Even in his young high school years the two main orientations of his life became clear: a spirituality of the Heart of Jesus and social action. In Paris for college and law school, he also joined a Vincent de Paul Conference and became its secretary. He cared for two impoverished old men who lived in a lean-to. He wrote about the Vincent de Paul Conference, that "You find in it the true spirit of the gospel, fulfilling the works of mercy. This organization is a grace from our century." He also taught catechism to poor children and got to know their parents. Through his parish of St. Sulpice, he got to know and meet several times with Frederic Ozanam, the layman founder of the Vincent de Paul Society. Leo wrote that "Charity is not enough; the underprivileged first of all have the right to social justice." For years in the

seminary and graduate studies in Rome he also taught poor children their religion.

When Leo was first assigned to a parish of 30,000 people, he was the 7th and youngest assistant priest, and he was introduced to all the dignitaries. But, on his own, he contacted the Vincent de Paul conference to discover how the people really lived. Those members would form the core of the youth club that Dehon would soon found.

When some of us SCJs were in Cuernavaca, Mexico for an immersion experience, there was a bishop there named Dom Mendez Arceo. When he first came, it is said that he was a kind of formal, pompous bishop but he changed radically. He was so allied with the poor and justice for them that some called him "The Red Bishop," meaning he was communist. We asked him what happened, and he responded, "Go to the poor, and the poor will convert you."

As for myself, I am the eldest of 7, and later of 11 after Mom died and Dad remarried. I knew we didn't have a lot of money, so I could identify with others like us. I saw Mom work so hard and felt moved to help with the babies, with laundry, etc. I helped elderly neighbors with errands or with their lawns, and so on. Grandma Schroeder gave me a statue of the Heart of Jesus for first Communion, and I developed a devotion to the love of Jesus. Mom always took food to those suffering illness or loss, and Dad always tried to help the poor get used appliances, or help them buy something on credit through the store. And he always volunteered his work for the priests and nuns. Both my parents were very tender hearted. I witnessed and shared in feeling for and helping others. In the seminary, I joined the Catholic Students' Mission Crusade, and we studied the needy people of the world. Because we SCJs were very poor then, we students did all the manual labor, working the farm, digging potatoes, shoveling coal, sending begging letters, etc. Also, other students would come to me with their problems, and I did my best to help. All of this shaped me and prepared me for later developments. When I was in college my mother died at 45 and I was very angry with God, and I thought God did not love me because he didn't keep my Mom alive. However, during a retreat I came to believe again in God's love for me and that gave me a tender heart. Then in third year I fell in love. Feeling really loved by another helped me have a heart of flesh also.

Journaling: I now ask you to take a little time of silence and journaling to reflect on your history of faith and prayer, your history of witnessing care for the needy and joining in that care. What affected you to have a heart of flesh for others? Please make some notes.

Conference II: Where is this taking me?

Leo Dehon said the church had left the workers for the rich, so the people had left the priests, and now the priests had to go to them. Sounds a little like today. Leo's goal was to reconcile the working class and the church. When he went among the laborers in their horribly poor dwellings, he discovered that there were many young men laborers with no family and no support, some were even sleeping on the streets. They worked every day for 10-12 hours for just a daily rate, their family life was disrupted and leisure was non-existent. They had no healthcare--if they were injured, they were just replaced. They had no vacation or time off. They were just used by the factory owners for economic profit and financial gain. His heart went out to them.

So, where did this take Leo? In 1872, Leo opened St. Joseph Center, or St. Joseph Club, for these young workers, using the same name of his mother's group, the Work of St. Joseph. First, he just gathered them for socializing and catechism but then he kept expanding. This was his main apostolic action for five years. He gave talks, and lessons on the social economy, he started a library, a savings bank and taught them how to save for their future, a choral society, a room for gymnastics and exercise and bought them equipment, and he bought a building to provide lodging for young workers, a number of whom were orphans. The youth put on dramas and comedies. He began an employment agency, and even started the Catholic Workers Union, to give them a bigger voice for their needs. The Sister Servants of the Sacred Heart provided meals. When he had Mass at the altar of the first chapel he built, he cried. He soon had 500 young men coming. He created a committee of important patrons to help guide it and fund it. He encouraged other pastors to start such a center in their parishes. Of course this cost a lot of money. As my friend Fr PJ McGuire used to say, faith is free, but religion costs money. All Dehon's life he spent his inheritance, which would be \$3.9 million in today's dollars, and he worked to raise money. He held various

fund-raising activities. He even had the young workers contribute something each week to the Vincent de Paul fund to have them help those poorer than they were. In his late 70's he personally wrote over 4,000 begging letters to build the Basilica of Christ the King in Rome. So, you in the development office also serve in Dehon's footsteps, ministering to those with resources to help the poor, and thus supporting the works for the poor.

Leo was not a communist; he did not want to pit workers against the rich. He founded an employers' organization that met twice a month to study the social questions and financial problems. As a man from wealth he could relate to them. He got the bishop to allow him to open the first office of Catholic Charities, and surveyed the parishes on what they needed and what they were doing for the workers. He was trying to get to the roots of the problems. He attended many congresses and assemblies and called them; he was trying to get priests and bishops to know the problems and address them. He became a known voice and writer on social issues. For three years in a row he held a huge conference in Rome, which was attended by some cardinals and many bishops. He started a newspaper to reach people on social issues, and got a circulation of 2,000. He wanted the interior life and social action to come together. We become holy by doing holy things. Then he started a magazine titled, "The Reign of the Heart of Jesus in Individuals and in Societies." He found that religion had been driven into the private sphere, and he wanted to reverse this "social atheism." He wanted to bring the reign of the justice and love of the heart of Jesus to every person and to every little organization.

He met Leo Harmel a great Catholic owner of a textile factory and got his priests to serve in that factory for 75 years. He held a high value on giving clergy a better education through Catholic universities, and for ten years he held summer sessions at factories for priests and seminarians so they could see first-hand what the social problems were. His book "Christian Social Manual" sold over 10,000 copies and was a popular textbook in seminaries. He challenged priests to "dive into the social scrum" of action for the poor and workers—a scrum is a struggle in rugby to get the ball.

Leo grew so attached to his social works there that he knew he could not leave St. Quentin. He took his bishop's bargain to start a high school for boys so he could

found his own religious order and stay right there. So he started the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus, later called the Priests of the Sacred Heart. He became known as "The people's priest." After he started the Congregation, the bishop took St. Joseph's away from him and put it under the leadership of one of his diocesan priests.

Now, we know that Father Dehon went way beyond all this once he founded the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus. Often his heart was battered and wounded, when his own men turned against him and wanted to throw him out as their superior, when the bishop made him give up St. Joseph Center and then made him move out of St. John's high school and give it over to the diocese, and when he saw his school and his house bombed and destroyed in the war. However, he did not get hard-hearted. He just kept accepting the hard parts of life as God's will and surrendered to God.

He wanted others to join him in proclaiming the love of God to the world. He wanted others to help him go to the neglected and forgotten, and to mission lands. He wanted to bring love and social action for justice to every group and every corner of the globe. He kept working to get our Congregation approved by Rome to be a free, international order and not just under a bishop in France. He achieved that in 1923, just two years before he died. He also worked on expanding our mission to the world. In 1883 he started the first house in Holland, then one in North Brazil, and one in Congo. When France suppressed all the religious orders, he was evacuated in a train box car as a refugee to Belgium. His works were all destroyed by the war or taken by the local bishop. He kept spreading, sending men to Finland, Italy, Canada, Cameroun, Spain and the U.S.

He was a man of great energy and of great vision. Even if you are not Christian or not Catholic, you can admire and imitate his life-long service for the good of people, especially the lowly and the humble, the workers and the poor.

As for myself, aside from the direct work I did with the poor in two jails, and in an inner-city parish, my heart for the poor took me in another direction. Dehon also had a special love for the spiritually and psychologically poor, the "consecrated souls," as he called them, the priests and religious and church workers who were troubled and causing troubles. The bishop sent a number of them to him for help. My fellow students were already coming to me. I went to Loyola University in

Chicago for six years to be a psychologist, and for 35 years I worked with some of the most tortured and pitiful priests and religious who were causing great harm to the church and to the people of God. These men and women came to our treatment center from all over the country and from all over the English-speaking world. That's where having a heart of flesh took me.

Journaling: Now I know that some of you, as is natural, are just with the SCJs to have a job and pay bills. Yet, I am sure that knowing what this is all about and working with it has affected you in some way. I now ask you to take a little time of silence and journaling to reflect on where your relationships and work here have led you. How has being with the SCJs affected you? How has it affected your faith life or your belief in God? Where has your heart of flesh led you? Please make some notes.

Father Jim Schroeder, SCJ

HOMILY FROM PROVINCIAL CONFERENCE:

This globe of ours “is like a garden for humankind. It has been adorned by a great artist and his students. The artist is God; his students are people—the artists of Earth. God, the great artist, sowed the wonder of his great art across this globe—the great sea which reflects the blue sky, the austere or delightful lakes, the snowy mountains, the dark forests, the volcanoes which rumble, the rivers which rush, the serene valleys, the mysterious grottoes.

“What immense depth has the ocean! What breadth! . . . What we have been able to explore is a mere nothing! And the Heart of Jesus is like that too!

“The ocean is the heart of the earth. It receives all the rivers with their filth, and it sends them back as rain to fertilize all the earth with its purified waters. One can see here a symbol of the Heart of Jesus, which receives all the rivers of our sins in its depths of reparation and expiation, and sends back to us all the currents of grace.

“Climates have an infinite variety: in the north, the endless hoar-frost, the great architectural forests, the pine whose needles bend beneath the winter snows. Southward from that lie the prairies, always verdant, the wheat which turns gold, the oak, young elm, chestnut, whose leaves—like a rich tapestry, adorned with the most vivid colors by the autumn sun—become a plaything of the winds in winter. Then comes the earthly garden: the vineyards, the olive, orange, and palm trees. Finally, the countries of the sun, in which there is abundant life in the prodigious forests.” “Contact with beauty beautifies the soul.” . . .

These rhapsodic reflections come from none other than our Founder, Leo Gustave Dehon, known in community as John of the Heart of Jesus. Yes, Leo Dehon wrote these. Dehon traveled widely and loved all creation. He taught this to his disciples. As followers of Dehon, how can we contemplate or condone the polluting of our Mother Earth. How can we tolerate and do nothing as God’s people continue to bask and destroy God’s artistry.

Although Dehon never heard the term “global warming,” or “climate disruption,” he lived in the pollution of the industrial revolution in Saint Quentin. And, worse than that, even though Dehon never heard of nuclear weapons, he knew the

horrors of war and what it does to creation. In the Franco Prussian war he worked as a chaplain, and wrote, “It passed like a long and terrible nightmare, filled to overflowing with anguish and sufferings.” And then in World War I, he wrote: “My Congregation is decimated”—33 SCJs died, San Quentin was on the front line and occupied for 31 months. Dehon laments, “We have been trapped here as one would be in a city under siege,” no newspapers, no mail, no travel.

“There is general panic. So many lives are being mowed down during these days. All the field hospitals are filling up. This is an agonizing time for me. Fears for my family, for my homeland, for my congregation. Resources will be lacking. Benefactors are holding back.” “A new scourge is being added to the war and to the hunger from which the people are suffering: typhus is beginning to overrun our field hospitals. . . . A . . . nurse has brought typhus into our house. What will come of this?” “Poverty is making itself felt. Provisions are becoming scarce and very expensive. Life is extremely difficult both physically and mentally. *Fiat!*”

Dehon was held prisoner there till February 1917 when the Germans evacuated everyone, and he was a refugee in a boxcar, on a train to Belgium where the Jesuits welcomed him. When he returned in two years later, he wrote, “The sight devastated me . . . It was a desolate pile of rubble. There was practically nothing left of St. John’s College or of Sacred Heart House, or of Fayet.

And now to us, what about us today: God urges us to not only give up our desire to kill, but also give up nursing our anger. God urges us to not only put our weapons of war aside, like keeping nuclear stockpiles, but to turn them into something that helps and feeds people. For God proclaims peace.

Let us thank God for the beauty of his creation, and may we commit ourselves to protect it from pollution and climate disruption, and from the “long, terrible nightmare” of war in any form.

Father Jim Schroeder, SCJ

Homily SCJs 10-9-24 Provincial Conference—Dehon on Creation and War
Readings: Micah 4.1-4; Matthew 5.20-24