

# To the Letter



Reflections on the letters of Leo John Dehon, founder.....February 2009, No. 76

**Father Paul Legay**  
14 November 1912

Dear son,

Your dear house at Mons, together with the one at Louvain, is the hope of the Franco-Belgian Province, of this great French work that the Sacred Heart wanted to accomplish.<sup>1</sup> I need to feel that you are in union with me, docile, truly filled with the spirit of the Work,<sup>2</sup> and dedicated to do all that you can for it. Your little group of priests and the one at Louvain have great duties and great responsibilities. Your vocation is to be saints and your mission is to make saints. These dispositions must overflow from your heart and penetrate your colleagues.

Is it so difficult to become a saint? Our rule is sufficient to make us saints, if we observe it. It is a framework for sanctity. You are the rector, you must require everyone to practice the rule in its entirety. Do not ask for this practice in a harsh or stern way, but gently and persuasively, "sweetly and mightily" (Wis 8:1).

Teaching is very distracting. Everyone should set aside time in the morning for a good meditation. A priest of the Sacred Heart should have a full half-hour of undisturbed meditation, apart from vocal prayer. You have the duty to see to it that everyone can do this. Our Work is a Eucharistic work. Everyone should make his half-hour of adoration each

day. A quarter-hour is permissible in those rare cases where there is a heavy workload. Adoration must be well organized. I would like to see a schedule of those making daily adoration posted on the door of your chapel. If possible, you should give prominence to this reparatory adoration either by exposition of the Blessed Sacrament or by opening the tabernacle door.

Reread No. 3 and 4 of our Constitutions and the entire Chapter on the Eucharist, page 23.

Sanctity is union with our Lord. It takes only two steps to attain this: to be detached from creatures and to be attached to our Lord.<sup>3</sup>

We should be detached from natural affections and from sensuality.

Let us go directly to our Lord at all times. Let us do everything in his presence, for his service and his love.

See to it that your confreres have everything

necessary for their daily reading: Holy Scripture and ascetical books. It is your duty to provide this.<sup>4</sup> As for recent books, I recommend *Sursum corda* by Fr. Lejeune. You can find it at the Redemptorists. It goes without saying that you should also make your students little saints, above all by forming them in obedience and in a good spirit. Also be sure that they have good little spiritual books to follow during Mass.

I am counting on you and I give you my paternal blessing.

*John of the  
Heart of Jesus*



Fr. Dehon celebrating the Eucharist

## FOOTNOTES

1 "I wanted to create a French Work, at the moment it is more Belgian and German. Fiat! God is leading us. I offer my exile to the good Master." Cf., NQT XVIII/1902, 32. Both Mons and Louvain are in Belgium.

2 He often refers to the Congregation as "the Work" (l'Oeuvre).

3 This is another instance of his use of the distinction between "operating grace" and "cooperating grace." Cf., *To The Letter* #75, footnote 1.

4 "The house at Mons said that they were lacking books for the priests" (Letter, 31 December 1910).

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## Herman Falke, SCJ

We rejoice in having a founder who was spiritual-minded and wished that all his followers would walk in his footsteps. We are also aware that that expectation is no longer realistic. It is becoming more and more difficult to identify with Fr. Dehon's over-the-top approach.

Already, the opening sentence of today's letter is for us a hurtful statement: "Your dear house is part of the great French work that the Sacred Heart wanted to accomplish." A footnote quotes Fr. Dehon as commenting, "I wanted to create a French work. At the moment it is more Belgian and German. Fiat!" We know what it meant to him when he uttered another "fiat!" It meant, "Oh God, what a heavy cross you put on me in having to deal with a diluted community. Give me the strength to bear it"

Not even French-speaking Belgians are good enough, let alone Germans and Dutch. This was so engrained into the French mentality that it led to the failure of the congregation in Western Canada a dozen years later: the French priests that Fr. Dehon sent to the west in 1911 were bent on establishing French parishes. As a result, the new diocese of Edmonton soon advised them to leave the parishes. They retreated all the way east to Montréal to do French work there.

Fr. Legay, superior of the house of study at Mons, is urged to make his students little saints, detached from natural affections and from sensuality. This has a special impact on me. I have spent half a century teaching and practising painting and sculpture. Early on in my training I had to overcome an instilled resistance to "the pleasures of the senses." I am not a scholar, but an instinctive lover of beauty and artistic design.

I wonder when for the first time our French seminarians were allowed to take a shower without some clothes on. Was it when there was a ghastly number of Flemish, Dutch and

German students in that diluted seminary?

So, Fr. Dehon was an unenlightened child of his time. But how often does that excuse have to be used to cover up unacceptable attitudes of his?

Cardinal de Berulle and the spirituality of the French school had a profound influence on Fr. Dehon. This included a certain disdain for the human and its capacity. We see in this a further development of an Augustinian pessimism regarding creation. (Fr. John van den Hengel brings this out clearly in *Faith in the One Who Loves Me*, p.36-7). That view doesn't sit well in our time. We prefer to look more at the positive elements of creation and consider ourselves as a glory of God, rather than mere sinfulness and nothingness.

To be truthful, I do not find any inspiration in letters like this. It makes me smile for a moment, and then it goes into the wastepaper basket. Even when I went through my seminary training some 60 years ago, this kind of sugar-coated pietism was barely tolerated, and swallowed only because it was part of the package.



## Richard MacDonald, SCJ

This letter carries a personal challenge; but it reverberates in the United States Province. Are we "in union with our congregation" and "dedicated to do all that we can for it?"

The words of Fr. Dehon from the beginning speak of our mission as SCJs.

Would this same letter that Fr. Dehon wrote to Fr. Paul Legay be received in the same way if Fr. Ornelas wrote it to one of our religious communities?

"To Fr. Superior of Sacred Heart Monastery or to you in Chicago, the formation community, you are the hope of the United States Province!!"

Or maybe it would be even more meaningful if you and I inserted the name of our own local religious community as the hope of our province. Wow! Do we dare think that way?

After reading this letter: why not think that way?

What impresses me about this letter is not only that Fr. Dehon identifies the community as the hope of the province but the simple reason given to "be saints and to make saints." "Our work is a Eucharistic work" says Fr. Dehon. Become holy and our province has a wonderful future. The discussions we have together in our province are very important whether they are chapters, assemblies or local community meetings. But certainly our Rule of Life clearly calls us to follow our MISSION and not our individual or collective projects. It is not about our age or the numbers of SCJs older or younger than 70 as much as it is about the mission as described above, which remains with all of us throughout our lives. Do we dare say that it is really about our holiness and our faithfulness to our religious profession, our calling to be holy?

I like very much the encouragement and directive that Fr. Dehon gives to Fr. Legay, the rector, to persuade and lead his community to a greater relationship with the loving Heart of Jesus Christ. Leaders in religious life walk with all their brothers, to encourage, correct, enable them to be better, and together to fulfill the mission we have received from the Church.



## Questions

The following questions may help you in your reflections:

1. In the U.S. Province and our local community we have a mission to be personally holy and evangelize others to know the love of the Sacred Heart. Do we see this as the hope of the U.S. Province? In what practical ways can we explain this to others?
2. Does the study of Fr. Dehon's private letters enlighten or inspire us over a century later or is it counter-productive? Would anyone still dare to hold such outmoded ideals out to teenagers and college students today?