

To the Letter



Reflections on the letters of Leo John Dehon, founder.....January 2009, No. 75

To the Students at Bergen-op-Zoom

2 February 1919

My dear sons,

Your kind letter brings me great joy. In it I can see your piety and your good spirit. I am confident that you will remain faithful to your beautiful vocation. What a beautiful mission we have!

We should give the Sacred Heart proof of the devotion that he has asked for, but in addition we should be apostles of the Sacred Heart. Our houses should be centers of this devotion. By every means of apostolate -- through books, through journals, through sacred ministries -- we should work for the reign of the Sacred Heart in families and societies. I do not know a more beautiful ideal than that.

For the past four years you have had the blessing of peace and work, we have had the blessing of suffering; these are signs of progress for all of us.

I saw the Holy Father and told him that your Province was prospering, he was delighted by this. He genuinely loves our Work, but he insists that we faithfully observe our rules and practices regarding exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and reparatory adoration. He strongly encourages piety and studies in our schools.

You have such loving and kind-hearted models in St. Louis [Aloysius] Gonzaga and St. John Berchmans. Do not lose sight of them. Each of you should read their biographies in the course of your studies.¹

Some of our missions have suffered, but your beautiful Province will help us to get them back on their feet. I am praying for all of you and I unite

my paternal blessing to that which the Holy Father is sending you.

Your devoted father,

*John of the
Heart of Jesus*



To some Scholastics

31 December 1919

To my dear scholastics,

I offer you my fondest wishes in the Sacred Heart. I am praying that he will give you a liking for study, together with piety and humility. Our Work is beautiful, but we must give the Sacred Heart what he expects from us. Learning alone is not sufficient, it can be harmful by giving rise to temptations of pride.

Our houses of study should be different from diocesan seminaries because we have our exercises of adoration and reparation.

Pray earnestly for the Work and in particular for the foundation in Rome which is very important but difficult to bring to completion.

Love simplicity. Avoid vanity and all concessions to modernism. Many have lost their vocation because of them.

I am counting on you. The harvest is great! (Mt 9:37). Prepare yourselves to become holy priests. I bless you paternally.

J.L. Dehon



To Novices² 28 December 1921

It has pleased the Sacred Heart to form a little entourage of friends who are making reparation and are offering him consolation; and He has chosen you from among so many others. It can be said of you what is said of the young man in the Gospel: "Jesus looked on him and loved him" (Mk 10:21). Our Lord has looked on you, He has loved you. Noblesse oblige!³ Be faithful and generous! Love prayer, obedience, poverty, modesty. Scrupulously observe all your daily practices. Learn how to endure times of spiritual dryness, weariness, and temptation, and to offer them to the Sacred Heart. St. John asked young men to have a piety that was manly and courageous: "I am writing to you, young men, because you are strong and the Word of God remains in you, and you have conquered the evil one" (1 Jn 2:14). Meditate on that. Pray, but each day also perform courageous and generous acts. I bless you paternally.

FOOTNOTES

¹ There is an excellent chapter on Gonzaga in James Martin, S.J., *My Life With the Saints*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2006, pp. 331-344.

² There is no manuscript copy of this letter. It appears in A. Ducamp, *Le Père Dehon et Son Oeuvre*. Paris: Éditions Bias, 1936, p. 738. It appears without salutation or signature.

³ The moral obligation of those who have been favored and blessed in life to help and serve those who are less fortunate.



Michael Burke, SCJ

In his letter to the novices in Asten, Fr. Dehon tells them that his wish is that they be saints. The way he tells the novices to accomplish this is to cultivate their union with Jesus. Union with Jesus was one of Fr. Dehon's favorite topics. In his writings he insisted that union with Christ was preeminently his aim and he urged all of his followers to make union with Christ in His love the source and center of their lives.

Fr. Dehon saw devotion to the Sacred Heart as the chief means of achieving this union because this devotion reminds us of God's tremendous love for all of us as we are. God is not looking for great accomplishments out of us, just love. That is why Fr. Dehon stressed that we "grow in holiness day by day" by "fidelity in little things."

When most of us were in the novitiate, I think we were filled with lots of idealism. We wanted to be holy. We wanted to make a difference. We wanted to make our lives count for something. Our emphasis was on what we were going to do. Fr. Dehon calls us back to our center and reminds us "Our congregation must above all pay attention to the interior life. That is our special grace."

Although we are involved in many things and can get lost in serving others, Fr. Dehon insisted that we take the needed time to pray and reflect so that we don't lose touch with our center. The busier we are, the more need we have to take this time. Fr. Dehon says to his novices, "Cultivate your union with Jesus" so that they might grow in the knowledge of the Christ they proclaim.

Fr. Dehon tells the novices to have patience. "Later on you will imitate St. Ignatius..." For now, he sees their work focused on deepening their union with Jesus for out of that union will eventually flow their apostolic

work – making Jesus' love more tangible in our world by reaching out to those in real need and touching them with Jesus' love and concern.



Leo Dehon, SCJ at age 22

Our Lord quickly took possession of my interior life and implanted the dispositions that would become the dominant characteristics of my life: conformity to his will, union with him, a life of love. I took notes almost every day about my impressions, which allowed me to accurately retrace his divine influence and plan for my poor soul.

I wished that nothing of my own will would remain in me and that it might be completely absorbed and inspired by the will of God living in me. The way to attain this is through union with our Lord who said: "Remain in me that I may remain in you. The branch cannot bear fruit by itself if it does not remain united to the vine. The one who abides in me and in whom I abide will bear abundant fruit, for without me you can do nothing. Abide in my love. Keep my commandments that my joy may be in you and your joy will be perfect."

These were the thoughts that our Lord used to win over my heart during this first year [in the seminary]. I had much to overcome; I was seeking union with God, sometimes with such intensity that I got headaches. I had to do violence to my evil nature and overcome long-established habits of indifference to the interior life in order to strive seriously for union with our Lord. This union was the goal that my saintly director, Father Freyd, constantly proposed to me in my struggles. I felt that our Lord approved of my desire in principle, but he set conditions for its realization, or rather he himself was doing the preparatory

work prior to taking possession of my heart. First of all, my heart had to be purified so that the appropriate dispositions and habits that are pleasing to the divine guest would be found there.

The work of purification was the special task of this year. Our Lord made me seek out the least faults of my past life. In each of my confessions I rediscovered some old forgotten debt that I had to account for. I was constantly living in an intense state of contrition; I cried often. I loved to make the way of the cross or perform some other mortification. These are the graces of every Levite who is beginning to give himself to our Lord. I thank you, O my God, for not having refused me, despite my unworthiness.



Questions

The following questions may help you in your reflections:

1. Fr. Dehon writes, "We should give the Sacred Heart proof of the devotion that he has asked for, but in addition we should be apostles of the Sacred Heart." Can our "proof of devotion" be found in action? Why do you think Fr. Dehon separates having a devotion to the Sacred Heart and being an apostle of the Sacred Heart? Or is he?
2. "Learn how to endure times of spiritual dryness, weariness, and temptation, and to offer them to the Sacred Heart," writes the founder. How does one LEARN to endure such moments? Is such knowledge only gained through personal experience? How else can one learn to "endure" the hardship we all face?

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