

To the Letter



Reflections on the letters of Leo John Dehon, founder.....March 2009, No. 77

To Brother Blandin¹ 21 January 1903

My dear friend,

It was good for you to write me such a long affectionate letter of friendship. This is a friendship that God desires, if that were not so we would not want it, would we?² By calling us into the pious society of his Heart, our Lord has made us brothers and friends. Among the apostles Peter, James, and John had a liking for each other that was encouraged by our Lord (cf., Mk 9:2).

Since you are affectionate, grateful, and attached to the poor Peter of our dear little society, then you are somewhat like James and John.

This friendship of the apostles was lasting and it still endures because it was founded in God and according to God, even though it had a human basis which had been made supernatural through grace.

Bossuet speaks of "the illusion of earthly friendships which disappear with the passage of time and change in interests." Ours is not earthly, it will not fade away.

To truly love someone is to wish him well. In Italian they do not say "I love you," rather they say "I wish you well, ti voglio bene." I truly wish you well.³ I wish that you may become a saintly priest of the Sacred Heart, a pillar of the little society that should give our Lord consolation and repara-

tion, if it is faithful to its mission. Let us make a pact as faithful servants to lead the Work⁴ to its true goal, whatever the sacrifice that this might require of us.

This vocation demands a genuine interior life. And so I wish you the graces of interior prayer, not extraordinary graces which run the risk of

being illusions, but progress in union with God. We can desire and ask for these graces of union. St. Teresa, St. Bernard, and so many other saints invite us to ask for them. St. Ignatius said: "We should wish for these precious gifts, insofar as we can -- with their help -- obtain a greater glory for God." A pious seminarian can easily arrive at affective prayer, and a little beyond. The means?

Great purity of conscience and tenacity to do all these exercises well and to submit to all the little sacrifices of the rule.

I desire a great many graces for you because "ti voglio bene."

Some news: the cross is very heavy to bear. At Lille they are hounding us for so-called subscription taxes. Pray earnestly for me. Come to Fayet, let us hope that we will not yet be expelled from there. Let Fr. Mathias know you are coming. Let me know the date at once, so that I'm not in Brussels at that time. All the best to dear Brother Philippe.

I bless you and embrace you.

J. L. Dehon



FOOTNOTES

1 Émile Blandin made his first profession of vows on 14 September 1899. Fr. Dehon recognized that he was a very sensitive boy and wrote many brief letters to encourage him and express his affection for him. When the young man expressed his dismay over the blatant antipathies he witnessed in the community, Dehon replied: "Our Lord often permits this so that we may be detached from creatures." Then he added: "Here with me I have some very good priests who can't stomach me (excuse the colloquial expression): Fiat! I humbly put up with it." Blandin was ordained at a time when Religious communities were banned in France and eventually he was incardinated in the diocese of Verdun. But he never lost his affection and gratitude for Fr. Dehon. He sent a warm and gracious letter after learning of his death and in 1954 sent the archives the 22 letters that he had received from the "très bon Père."

2 Benedict XVI describes friendship in a similar way in *Deus caritas est*. Quoting the Roman historian Sallust -- *idem velle atque idem nolle* -- the love of friendship is "to want the same thing and to reject the same thing" (n. 17).

3 "It belongs to the nature of love that the lover wills the good of the one he loves." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, ch. 91.

4 He often referred to the Congregation as "the Work" ("l'Oeuvre").

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Fr. Dehon never missed a chance at what we would call today a “teaching moment,” and this response to Br. Blandin is no exception. Blandin had written “a long affectionate letter of friendship” to Fr. Dehon, and Leo takes the opportunity to comment on friendship in the Lord. We’re reminded in this letter that by virtue of community membership “our Lord has made us brothers and friends.” He mentions, too, that three of the apostles “had a liking for each other that

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was encouraged by our Lord”. Cleary Fr. Dehon wanted to hold up that model of friendship to Blandin (and to us!). But, we know that even brothers and friends sometimes find that disagreements, anger and hurt come between us. Even a genuine, long-held friendship doesn’t stop the equally genuine pain when a relationship

becomes broken. In this season of Lent, we are challenged to recognize that friendships need to be nurtured with care if our brotherly affection is to “endure...founded in God and according to God.”

Fr. Dehon calls on Blandin to become a leader of “the Work (of the Congregation)” to bring the community to its true goal. I wonder if Leo had some particular trouble in mind; all of us are given some measure of leadership ability to use to change our little corner of the world for the better. Leo

notes that it won’t happen without sacrifice (another Lenten theme, and one that our founder sees as constitutive of a Priest of the Sacred Heart).

And, how do we best ensure that we are prepared to nurture our relationships and bring to light our leadership gifts? Our “vocation demands a genuine interior life.” The genuine interior life isn’t marked by the “extraordinary,” but rather by “progress in union with God.” Fr. Dehon was keenly aware that the very greatest work that the community might hope to achieve was (is!) dependant on each member becoming the very best pray-er he can be. As brothers, as friends, each of us will interpret how best to attain that progress, and, we may not always recognize the progress in one another. We need to honor each others’ faith journey, saying to our brothers “ti voglio bene.”



Peter Sanders, SCJ

This is one of the few letters of Fr. Dehon in which I find that he shows a “mellowness of heart.”

His other letters are much more business-like. He talks about the work, the business of the congregation. They are letters of a leader, the leader of the congregation.

In this letter we see Fr. Dehon being a friend to Br. Blandin. A friend who, as Fr. Dehon says, he “truly wishes well.”

What does that mean to wish him well? There is a lightness to the phrase, but in wishing him well, Fr. Dehon is trying to be an active friend, “telling him,” how to be well.

It is a sign of the times. Spiritual direction in the early 1900s was much more directional, in this case perhaps paternal. Fr. Dehon is telling his friend how to “be well.” He is telling

him how to have an interior life and why it is important.

Nowadays, direction would be more of an accompaniment. The director walks with the other as he seeks his course of action from within. He is a spiritual accompanier, he helps the person take responsibility for his life.

As a friend, one who accompanies doesn’t tell another necessarily what to do, but supports that person in seeking his course of action through inner reflection.

What does it mean to be a friend? What does it mean to love as a friend? It means that one wishes the best for the friend, but more than that, it means being available to that friend as he seeks direction.

Another sign of the times is that Fr. Dehon’s understanding of holiness is in the doing of the spiritual exercises well, and following the rule. This is also reflected in the original Constitutions. The present Constitutions invite the members of the congregation to be inspired by them, to be animated by the Spirit, the charism of the congregation. Quite a different approach.



Questions

The following questions may help you in your reflections:

1. Fr. Dehon writes: “I wish you the graces of interior prayer, not extraordinary graces which run the risk of being illusions, but progress in union with God.” How has your interior life evolved and matured? As a young religious did you have what Fr. Dehon referred to as “extraordinary graces” that were often “illusions?”
2. How does Fr. Dehon’s line “To truly love someone is to wish him well” speak to you?