

# To the Letter



Reflections on the letters of Leo John Dehon, founder.....June 2009, No. 80

## The Novices at Asten 30 December 1912

To my dear novices at Asten. My dear sons,

I was deeply touched by your very affectionate and devout letter. Always remain united to the one who represents our Lord for you in the Congregation.

This is a precept of the Lord: "The one who hears you, hears me" (Lk 10:16). This is also the teaching of Saint Paul: "Obey your superiors as you would our Lord" (Hb 13:17). All this is easy when we truly love our good Jesus, and we must love him. This is the duty of every Christian, and this is the special mission of religious of the Sacred Heart. Oh! how easy it is to love the One who is kindness itself! You should consider Jesus in all of his mysteries: in the crib, at Nazareth, in his public life where he sowed his acts of kindness, on Mount Tabor, in the Upper Room, in Gethsemani, everywhere that he gave himself on our behalf. For us and for our salvation he descended from heaven. He loved us even to the folly of the cross (cf., Gal 2:20). Oh! Make every effort to love him. May all your exercises have this goal.

No doubt we should also pray for souls and for ourselves, in keeping with the common obligations of all Christians; but in meditation, thanksgiving after Communion, and adoration, we should prefer to direct our efforts to acts of praise, love, thanksgiving, and reparation. Let us think of our Lord, and he will think of us. St.

Gertrude is a great model for the devotion to the Sacred Heart. You should have copies of her prayers and exercises, and you will draw enormous spiritual benefit from them. If these little books don't exist in Dutch, translate them, and your superiors will have them printed and then will put them on sale. The Way of the Cross, when made properly, is one of the best exercises to train oneself in pure love. I am counting on your prayers to obtain many vocations. "Ask the Lord of the harvest" (Mt 9:38). Pray, not for the human satisfaction of having a large Province, but so that Jesus may have many friends who will make reparation. We must always forget ourselves, and seek the glory and the consolation of the Good Master.

May you have a good and holy year, I bless you most paternally.<sup>1</sup>

*John of the Heart  
of Jesus*

## To Father Govaart 9 April 1924

My dear Father,

It is all well and good that your house is growing, but the most important thing is the spiritual formation of everyone in your little group.<sup>2</sup> If your house takes on the air of a public school, you will be greatly disappointed. The older boys will not go

to the novitiate or will not persevere there. The large number of your students is becoming a danger, pay attention to this. If the spirit of the house takes a turn for the worse, there will be no remedy for that. I am praying for you and all your intentions.

Devotedly yours,

*J.L. Dehon*



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The copyist added this note: "We had wished that the Congregation would become great, in quantity and quality, like the Jesuits."

<sup>2</sup> On 21 April 1881 he told the novices: "[Your] desire to increase in numbers should be motivated only by the desire to increase devotion and reparation to the Heart of Jesus . . . This zeal for vocations . . . could have natural motives, such as, the joy of being numerous or the satisfaction of seeing one's friends join . . . to prevent this and to sanctify this desire it is worthwhile to point out a motivation that is truly pure: to have no other reason for increasing in numbers than to increase the number of those making reparation." *Cahiers Falleur*, V, 86-87, STD 10/1979, 188.



## Ben Humper, SCJ

While reading this letter of Fr. Dehon to the novices of December 30, 1912, I could not help but be impressed with his deep spiritual love for Jesus. He wanted the novices to have this same deep love for God, which is symbolized in the burning Heart of Christ.

He first speaks of the obedience that Jesus had to do the will of God out of love for his Father and for all of humanity. He tells the novices to be obedient to their superiors, and he quotes a passage from the letter to the Hebrews. Fr. Dehon then goes on further to tell how much Jesus loves us from birth all the way to the cross. I couldn't help but think of St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians 13:1-13. Love is always patient, kind, not proud, forgiving and seeks the good of others. Fr. Dehon wants those who are dedicated to the Love of God to be living examples of the love that Jesus had.

How do we attain such a lofty goal? I think the answer comes through our daily prayer and meditation. Fr. Dehon points out those saints who are good examples for us in living out our spiritual and religious life. Another excellent help comes from meditation on the passion of Jesus, the Stations of the Cross. If we combine our prayer life with our ministry then others should be able to see this evident in our life.

In his letter of April 9, 1924, Fr. Dehon writes to Fr. Govaart and tells him that most important is spiritual formation. It is always easy to get caught up in the traps of a secular society, especially in regards to money, possessions and power. I remember being in the Vocation Office and people always asked us how many we had. It isn't the numbers that count but the quality of the individuals who are coming to us that is more important and how they can benefit our congregation and province through their gifts and spiritual life.



## Greg Murray, SCJ

Fr. Dehon, in these two letters, stresses the importance of the life of praise and devotion within houses of formation. What better time, one could say, to learn the lifelong practice of praising the Lord, than in one's first few years of community life. The object, of course, is to experience the richness of the spiritual life from the beginning of one's training, so that when one is involved in ministry the lesson of seeking first the Kingdom of God will be the prime motivation and the source of all that one does to build up the Body of Christ in the world. The standard by which Father Founder

judges the success of his congregation is not numbers or visibility, but rather holiness of life and a true desire for

the spiritual well-being of others. He believes that this, and only this, is the road to real success.

The formation of religious priests and brothers is, of course, meant to translate into an active and devoted communal reality, one which always seeks the source of its unity and fecundity in the Lord who has called it into being. One who is led to put the life of devotion first in his formative years will seek to do so in whatever situation he may find himself. No matter how busy he may be, he will seek his strength and enthusiasm for the apostolate in the quiet of a heart opened and longing for the one who has called him.

Our modern society lauds the self-made man or woman, and the qualities of individual initiative and success. Unfortunately, we too get caught up sometimes in the attitudes of the world around us and measure our lives by its yardstick. Fr. Dehon reminds us that it is all the Lord's work and that we must always seek its purpose in Him. We do so in 'praise, love, thanksgiving, and reparation.'



## Questions

*Before answering the following questions please read the reflections on the reverse side.*

1. Do you have a dedicated time each day for meditation and personal prayer?
2. Do you reflect on the passion and suffering of Jesus through his way of the cross?
3. How do others recognize you as a religious and do they see your life as one of prayer and service?
4. Reflect on Fr. Dehon's concern: "The large number of your students is becoming a danger, pay attention to this."