

To the Letter



Reflections on the letters of Leo John Dehon, founder.....October 2009, No. 84

To Brother Blandin¹

21 May 1904

Dear friend,

I know that you are upset because some of our students have left. Have they left for the better? No. Most of those who have left have turned out bad because they have abandoned their vocation: e.g., Dussaussoy, Weppe, Riedmuller . . . Those who die with us die in sanctity.

Our missionaries who have been exiled from Saint Quentin have left behind fond memories. Clearly our vocation demands fervor and a certain degree of the interior life. Our Lord forsakes those who obstinately refuse this.

Let us also acknowledge that sometimes we have been too lax in our admissions at Fayet and elsewhere. Let us correct that. Many also left our Lord: "Many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer walked with him" (Jn 6:66). Was our Lord discouraged by this? No. He said to the true disciples: "Do you also want to leave?" (Jn 6:67) This is the question I put to you.

Let us give our Lord what he expects from us, this is the most beautiful of vocations. Do not scandalize the little ones (Mt 18:6). The infidelities that are troubling you arise from the times we live in, from the family upbringing, and the sensuality of the prevailing environment. If you only knew how much our young secular priests are . . . imperfect. Poor Jesus! He is so little loved and so badly served.

I bless you paternally.



L. Dehon



An aerial view of Saint Quentin, France.

To Brother Bodin

8 July 1909

Dear Friend,

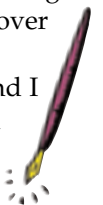
Come back to your simple ways. Vanity has harmed you, it is even seeping out of your hair. It is a fault that withers the soul. Your friend Camus was brought down and lost because of his vanity. We have dismissed him from Sacred Heart. His director was getting fed up with him and was going to get rid of him. This boy had all the cards in his hand. Everyone wanted the best for him because of his father, now he rejects everybody. Nothing good will come of him.

I saw Hénin, he has gotten over his old vanity. He always has the rosary in his hand. He lives in the presence of God and his conversation is always edifying. He's won over for the Work a soldier from the Vendée who has already completed his third

year, he will be coming back with him.

Turn back to humility and the interior life, then instead of losing your vocation, you will win over two or three others.

I am going to Lourdes and I will pray for you. I bless you paternally.



L. Dehon

FOOTNOTES

1 Cf., To The Letter #77, March 2009, for a brief profile of this student.

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Context is always behind the story lines of our lives and our history. Without properly examining it and taking time to understand it, we and others may jump to either the wrong conclusions about an event or make a bad decision that will affect our own personal life or the lives of others around us. Particularly in religious life, knowing context allows us to be good leaders when managing issues with individuals or with the congregation as a whole.

The context behind these two respective letters to Blandin and Bodin helps us understand Fr. Dehon's leadership qualities, particularly in the how and why he responded to these two men. In Dehon's era, the contextual issues were centered in part on the ongoing anticlericalism of many government politicians of the Third Republic who continued to expel religious priests from France, and who mandated a military service draft for all men, which included clergy.

Apparently, in the midst of the expulsions, Fr. Dehon was trying to encourage Blandin to stay with the congregation. However, Blandin had obvious concerns about having to go to a foreign mission away from his beloved France. Blandin eventually left the order but remained good friends with Fr. Dehon and the community.

To Bodin, Fr. Dehon is concerned about how having been away serving in the military has affected his spiritual life and religious behavior. Bodin must have appeared to still possess and express the vanities of the world—some things never seem to change. Fr. Dehon uses a seminarian by the name of Hénin as a success story for one who seemed to be able to regain his interior spiritual life, to obtain humility and recapture fervor for his vocation upon reentry back into the community.

Aside from Fr. Dehon's harsh criticism about men who "abandoned their vocation" or his pleas for endurance, sanctity, fidelity and humility, Fr. Dehon's communications remind us again of his positive leadership skills of commitment, frankness, caring, being personally involved, knowing the facts

and contextual background, having patience, admitting short-comings, and thinking from a spiritual perspective.

So, how do we compare to these qualities when we lead, communicate, make decisions or resolve conflicts? What is at the heart of our actions and resolutions—fraternal caring and spirituality? As we know, spiritual centeredness allows us to act ethically and fairly. It then guides us to always examine the context and facts of problems so that effective decisions are made methodically not rapidly or irrationally. Similarly, these attitudes direct us to being personally involved, with as much human presence as possible. A sense of trust, confidentiality, and fraternity is fostered.

Without these positive qualities of leadership, communication, decision making and conflict resolution skills, negativity and lack of trust exists. Consequently, decision makers and leaders are viewed as insensitive and distant. Furthermore, such persons may be seen as those who avoid conflict and who are poor listeners. In all likelihood, such people are viewed as persons who push off problems onto someone else to manage and resolve. And in today's age of high speed technology, there is the danger of sending quick impersonal email to try to manage situations.

Overall, then, Fr. Dehon's letters remind us of what it takes to be a good leader, brother and communicator, which requires the knowledge of context. The letters also remind us that we are not disconnected from the rest of the world that affects our daily lives and relationships; that we are flawed men who have to constantly seek out God's help and forgiveness in everything that we do; that we need to seek the interior spiritual life and to examine our relationships and our vocations with each other on a daily basis.



Questions

1. What are your sources of strength and consolation during the difficult moments of your religious life?
2. Have you been asked by someone in formation for advice about religious life? How did you respond?



Vien Nguyen, SCJ

In founding the Oblates of the Sacred Heart, Fr. Dehon desired that his congregation grow in its service to the Church, especially its ministry to the lowly and the humble, the workers and the poor (Cst. 31). He also wanted its members to be deeply rooted in a life of union with the oblation of Christ. For Fr. Dehon, the success of the congregation in its service to the Church depends on men who draw light and strength from the Eucharist and who live a life of faith and contemplation (*Leo John Dehon and His Message* by Giuseppe Manzoni, 566). As our SCJ *Rule of Life* puts it, "...the fruitfulness of our apostolate...depend[s] upon our devotion to prayer" (Cst. 76).

As a paternal figure Fr. Dehon encourages the two brothers in formation — Brother Blandin and Brother Bodin — to "turn back to humility and the interior life." For Fr. Dehon, living in the presence of God and being in intimate union with Christ was what sustained him during the years of founding the congregation and its subsequent trials. His deep interior life gave him the courage to accept and carry on his crosses in a spirit of reparation and expiation, and with complete "Fiat!" He hopes that by encouraging the two brothers in formation to foster a deep interior life, they will be able to sustain their vocation and overcome their own trials and disappointments.

In reading and reflecting on these letters, I feel that I too need to take to heart Fr. Dehon's advice — turn back to the interior life. By fostering a deep interior life and by living a life in union with Christ, may I seek to renew my religious vows daily and celebrate my vocation with gratitude to the God who has called me. Through this life in union with Christ, may I grow in awareness of God's presence in the lives of the lowly and the humble, the workers and the poor. And through this life in union with Christ, may I surrender myself completely to God and be more available for the service of our brothers and sisters.