

To the Letter



Reflections on the letters of Leo John Dehon, founder.....September 2009, No. 83

To Fr. Joseph Paris¹ 17 September 1912

Dear friend,

We are entrusting you with the course in moral theology. You should take care to be eminently practical. Génicot is always Génicot.² You can divide it up according to the number of treatises to be covered in the year. Explain Génicot thoroughly, without lengthy digressions, whether Thomistic or otherwise. Every day, several numbers of Génicot thoroughly explained.

Find a collection of cases of conscience to have some examples to use in connection with the course. Above all no petulant outbursts. Patience and gentleness.

Guard against your irritability. Use much tact in your relations with the students. No hurtful words. Forget the little faults of the past.

From the first class, tell your students that you will give them a course that is practical and simple, so as to prepare them well for their ordination exams and their ministry. I know that I can count on your docility. The Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph will help you.

Devotedly yours,


L. Dehon

To Fr. Joseph Paris 31 October 1912

My dear friend,

Be careful! The students are saying: "Fr. Paris is galloping along and

we are having trouble keeping up with him." Take care not to ruin everything. The teachers are for the students and not the students for the teachers. Proceed calmly and sensibly. The students have to be able to follow, to remember, and to prepare themselves for the exams. Conduct a monthly review. Don't wear out either their health or their good will.

Pay attention to your character. No outbursts! No hurtful words! I am not saying that this is happening, but I know your past and your temperament. Be polite with everyone. Courtesy is the flower of charity.

Pray for me.

Devotedly yours,


L. Dehon

To Fr. Joseph Paris 15 May 1913


Dear Father Joseph,

A little humiliation should not get the best of you. This is the life of a victim. Say to Jesus: "It was good for me to be afflicted" (Ps 119:71). You are not at all in conflict with your superiors. It is not a sign of conflict to be transferred from a house. There are many reasons for the change. One of these reasons is a tribute to you because you were needed at Quévry; you will do much good there. Without you, they would no longer have anyone to preach and there would be no pastoral activity in the area.

Other reasons pertain to your character, but character arises from nature and is corrected with great difficulty. It was said that you were barely cordial with your confreres and that the students (wrongly or rightly) did not appreciate your course very much.

Accept these little humiliations. The cross is our life. One cross is worth 500 rosaries. Everyone respects your piety, even while considering it a bit eccentric. But I love you anyhow, and I would, for nothing in the world, want to see you leave me. Help me carry the cross and don't grumble like Simon of Cyrene (cf., Mt 27:32).

I bless you paternally.


John of the
Heart of Jesus

FOOTNOTES

1 He was 20 years old when he entered the novitiate in 1879. Fr. Dehon said of him simply that he was "hardworking and regular," although he also had a quick temper and a forceful nature. He spent most of his ministry as a teacher, first at St. John's and Clairefontaine, and later at Louvain. He died in 1941.

2 Édouard Génicot, S.J., held the chair in moral theology at Louvain from 1889 until 1900. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* said that his teaching was "marked by great clarity, the avoidance of subtleties, and the pursuit of principles to their legitimate conclusions." His book on moral theology became the standard text in seminaries. Fr. Dehon seems to be unaware of his other popular text "Casus Conscientiae."



Joseph Dean, SCJ

On one level, Fr. Dehon's three letters can be read as the 1912-1913 version of tough love. As such, they are not easy to read. When it is deserved, as it seems to be here, dealing with fraternal correction is a challenge. There is something all too practical in our Constitutions' lines about "fellowship even above and beyond conflicts" and "letting... [oneself] be called into question by... [one's] brothers" (Nos. 65, 67).

That it was "good... to be afflicted" feels true only with hindsight. And the hindsight comes only with serious reflection, prayer, and personal transformation. Especially if we correlate the verse with another psalm: "ears open to obedience you gave me;" "to do your will, O God, is my delight" (Ps. 40:7, 9).

Fr. Dehon's word, "practical," can grate. It smacks of old classroom battles. On the other hand, if we retrieve his idea by using the word "experiential," there may be more to his vision than we imagine. From teacher to pastor to minister to ordinary Christian, after all, we are called "to give an explanation to anyone who asks... [us] for a reason for... [our] hope... [and to] do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pet. 3:15-16).

And as the New Testament word means "argue," the call includes thinking things through. And, whatever our "state in life," and whatever the forum (study, pulpit, conversation, etc.), doing theology can be seen as "a low grade form of prayer" which probes "the mystery of faith" and asks from faithful love: "how can these things be?" (Breviary, Vol. 4, p. 1778). It also seeks to know "the thoughts of his heart" (Ps 33:11), who, "in a certain way has united himself with each... [human being]"

(GS, No. 22).

Or, it can be seen as another way of dwelling "on the love of Christ in the mysteries of His life and in the life of people" (Csts., No. 77) and being transformed by the vision.



Questions

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

1. How do you deal with (justified) fraternal correction?
2. How do you give an explanation for the hope within me?
3. Does dwelling on "the thoughts of his heart" change my vision and life?
4. If a superior told you, as Fr. Dehon did, to "Guard against your irritability," would you tend to want to do just the opposite? How would you address such issues with a member of your community? How does one honestly deal with difficult personality concerns without seeming hurtful?
5. Fr. Dehon notes Fr. Joseph's "eccentric piety." What does it mean to be "eccentrically pious?" Do you know anyone in your community who fits such a description? In what way?

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Fr. Dehon with early students in the community.