

To the Letter



Reflections on the letters of Leo John Dehon, founder.....December 2009, No. 86

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 the 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.

J.L. Dehon



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.



Dominic Peluse, SCJ

In New Zealand, in the city of Waitomo, there is a fascinating tour through a cave that has three splendid levels. The tour concludes with a boat ride through the Glowworm Grotto. The boat takes you underground where the only light comes from the tiny glowworms creating a blue sky of living lights. There's a hushed silence as your eyes begin to pick up the reflection of the blue lights on the water's surface.

The guide warns the people in the boat to remain silent. With any harsh noise, the glowworms will literally turn off and you'll find yourself in a sea of darkness.

People can be like that.

This was something that Fr. Dehon certainly understood — if you use harsh noise, people will turn off and there will be that sea of darkness instead of what should be the glow of the Sacred Heart reflected in our lives.

In reading and re-reading these two letters, I couldn't help but notice so many gentle, encouraging words used by Fr. Dehon such as "Great Joy," "Great Spirit," "Beautiful Vocation," "Beautiful Mission," "Beautiful Ideal," "Blessings of Peace and Work," "Blessings of Suffering," "Piety," "Kindhearted," "Fondest Wishes," "Prayer," "Adoration," "Reparation," "Love Simply," and "I am counting on you."

These very words come from a person who certainly "had the blessing of suffering." In the previous year that these letters were written, World War I had ended. In Saint Quentin the institution at St. John had suffered significant damage. Manzoni quotes a passage that describes the devastation at Sacred Heart House, St. John's and St. Martin's Church: "All the statues in our chapel are damaged, the altars in pieces. At St. John's there are no more steps, the walls are demolished, a good part of the roof is waiting for a

gust of wind to bring it down. As for the furnishings, what can I say? the entire city is pock-marked. Bombs have fallen in every street; the explosions have scraped away the facades. Some streets have been cleared; others are still impassable."

Despite this devastation, Fr. Dehon lived the words he spoke to the scholastics: "Our work is beautiful, but we must give the Sacred Heart what he expects from us."

Fr. Dehon would write on November 23, 1919, "The Sacred Heart will bless the workers of the last hour as he blessed those of the first hour... St. Jean will live again!" [Traid d'Union – Bulletin de Guerre 191501919, p. 361s.)

In the same way, our work is beautiful — but, as Fr. Dehon lived his own vocation, the foundation must be prayer.



Jim Walters, SCJ

Serving on the Admissions Board at Sacred Heart School of Theology has given me a greater appreciation for the discernment process of a man aged 30 to 60 as he begins to sense a call to the priesthood. As I read autobiographies of the students applying for admission I continue to be struck by references to devotion to the Sacred Heart as a foundation of their faith experience and a source of spiritual strength in the challenges of daily life.

Recently I was talking with a fellow SCJ and was moved by his acknowledgement of the deep impact that the devotion of the Sacred Heart has had in his family life as well as in his religious life. It saddened me to hear that he does not always feel accepted for his traditional expressions of devotion to the Sacred Heart.

It is clear in his letter to the students at Bergen-op-Zoom that Fr. Dehon sees devotion to the Sacred Heart as central to working for the

reign of the Sacred Heart in families and societies. With the impact of the teachings of Vatican II in the past 40-plus years it seems that we still struggle to find adequate expression of Sacred Heart devotion in our communities and provinces. Eucharistic adoration, although central to our way of life, may not always reflect the traditional devotions with which many of us grew up with in our families.

The question I would raise, in light of a perceptible movement within the U.S. Catholic Church toward more traditional devotional practices, is simply this: how do we recapture the essence of Sacred Heart devotion which continues to animate and enliven the faith of so many? It would seem that we who claim to be sons of Dehon would see this as a particular medium for leading others to discover the love of the Sacred Heart and to live this love in acts of oblation and reparation. Lest we throw out the proverbial baby with the wash basin, I propose that we revisit the devotions that first formed our relationship with the Sacred Heart and invite and respectfully listen to the voices of those who may be calling us to a deeper understanding of who we are as SCJs in the Church and the world today.



Questions

1. What practices of Sacred Heart devotion do you find enriching?
2. In your opinion, how do traditional devotional practices enhance faith — or do they?
3. Who to you is a "loving and kind-hearted model?"

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10731 W. Rawson Ave.
Franklin, WI 53132, (414) 425-3768
Editors: P.J. McGuire, SCJ
and Wayne Jenkins, SCJ